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Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus

Edited by
Ansgar Jödicke

Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus

In the Caucasus region, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and their powerful neighbours Russia, Turkey, Iran and the EU negotiate their future policies and spheres of influence. This volume explores the role of religion in the South Caucasus to describe and explain how transnational religious relationships intermingle with transnational political relationships. The concept of 'soft power' is the heuristic starting point of this important investigation to define the importance of religion in the region.

Drawing on a three-year project supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the book brings together academics from the South Caucasus and across Europe to offer original empirical research and contributions from experienced researchers in political science, history and oriental studies.

This book will be of interest to scholars in the fields of post-Soviet studies, international relations, religious studies and political science.

Ansgar Jödicke is a senior lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences, University of Fribourg, Switzerland. His areas of research are religion and politics, in particular political religious education (politics) in Europe and the relationship between religion and politics in the South Caucasus. Together with Alexander Agadjanian and Evert van der Zweerde, he recently edited the volume *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (2015). Ansgar Jödicke has coordinated several research projects in the South Caucasus and in Switzerland. Among them, the SCOPES project 'Religion and Soft Power. Religious Communities in the South Caucasus as Objects of External Influences' (2014–2017) led to the results published in this volume.

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Contributors

Fuad Aliyev studied at Azerbaijan State Economic University, the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Central European University (Budapest, Hungary). He is currently an adjunct professor at ADA University, Khazar University and Azerbaijan University in Baku. His fields of expertise are Islam in post-Soviet countries and Islamic political economy. Fuad Aliyev was the 2011–2012 Fulbright Scholar at the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies' Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. He was also a Hubert Humphrey fellow in 2005–2006 and was affiliated with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as well as the Brookings Institution. Fuad Aliyev is the author of several publications on Islamic economics and finance, political economy of transition and Islamic activism in Azerbaijan and abroad.

Eiki Berg is a professor of International Relations at the University of Tartu, Estonia. His research has focused on critical geopolitics and particularly the studies of borders and border regions. Among his recent research activities, most prominent have been studies about territoriality and sovereignty issues in contested states. He has published widely in leading peer-reviewed journals on bordering practices, identity politics and power-sharing in post-conflict settings. He is co-editor of *Routing Borders Between Territories, Discourses and Practices* (2003) and *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic–Russian Relations and European Integration* (2009). During the years of 2003–2004 he served as a Member of Parliament in the Estonian Parliament and observer to the European Parliament in the EPP-ED faction, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, Common Security and Defence Policy. In 2012, he received a National Science Award in the field of Social Sciences for his research on 'Identities, Conflicting Self-Determination and De Facto States'.

Lia Evoyan holds a PhD in World History and International Relations. She obtained her BA and MA from the Turkish studies department at Yerevan State University, Armenia. Evoyan specializes in Turkey–Azerbaijan political relations and has more than ten academic publications. She has more

than five years of extensive academic research experience in both local and international environments. Currently, Evoyan is employed as an officer in the International Relations Office at Yerevan State University. She is fluent in Armenian, Russian, English and Turkish.

Mariam Gabedava is a researcher with the Georgian Institute of Politics. Mariam obtained her Master of Public Policy from the Hertie School of Governance (Berlin, Germany) and her MA in political science from Central European University (Budapest, Hungary). She also holds a BA in international relations from Tbilisi State University, Georgia. Mariam has worked in Georgian civil service and civil society organizations. Her research interests include corruption and corruption control, minority policy and religion.

Kamal Gasimov is a researcher from Azerbaijan, specializing in Islamic social movements and contemporary Islamic thought with a focus on political theorizing. His research has concentrated on Salafism, particularly its quietist trends and their interaction with Islamists or jihadis, and on the transnationalization of Salafism and its connection with local (post-Soviet) actors. He holds BA and MA degrees in Oriental Studies (Persian language and literature) from Baku State University, Azerbaijan. In 2007–2008, he studied Arabic language and literature at Kuwait University. He has been a visiting lecturer at the University of Fribourg and a visiting scholar at George Washington University.

Ansgar Jödicke is a senior lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences, University of Fribourg, Switzerland. His areas of research are religion and politics, in particular political religious education (politics) in Europe and the relationship between religion and politics in the South Caucasus. Together with Alexander Agadjanian and Evert van der Zweerde, he recently edited the volume *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (2015). Ansgar Jödicke has coordinated several research projects in the South Caucasus and in Switzerland. Among them, the SCOPES project 'Religion and Soft Power. Religious Communities in the South Caucasus as Objects of External Influences' (2014–2017) led to the results published in this volume.

Alar Kilp has been a lecturer in Comparative Politics at the University of Tartu, Estonia, since 2004. His research specializes in religion and politics as well as church–state relations in post-communist Europe. He obtained his PhD in political science at Tartu in 2012 with a dissertation titled 'Church Authority in Society, Culture and Politics after Communism'. He has co-edited a special issue on 'Religion, the Russian Nation and the State: Domestic and International Dimensions' (*Religion, State and Society* 2013) and published articles in *Religion, State and Society, Studies in Church History*

and *Proceedings of Estonian National Defence College*. His recent papers on religious nationalism and legal regulation of same-sex relations have appeared in volumes published by Brill.

Andrey Makarychev is a guest professor at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Science at the University of Tartu, Estonia. His areas of expertise are Russia–EU relations, post-Soviet countries, issues of biopolitics and mega-events in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. His record of previous institutional affiliations includes George Mason University (Fairfax, VA), the Center for Conflict Studies (ETH Zurich), the Danish Institute of International Studies (DIIS) and Nizhny Novgorod Linguistic University. He is a co-editor of the book *Changing Political and Economic Regimes in Russia* (2013) and author of numerous articles published by *Global Governance*, *International Spectator*, *European Regional and Urban Studies*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, *Demokratizatsiya*, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, *Europe–Asia Studies*, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, *Turkish Foreign Policy Review*, *Welttrends* and other international journals, as well as book chapters in edited volumes published by Ashgate, Palgrave Macmillan, Nomos, etc.

Tatevik Manukyan is a research fellow at the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, specializing in the Kurdish issue in the Middle East. She teaches in the Chair of Turkish Studies of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Yerevan State University and in the Oriental Studies Department of the International Scientific Educational Centre of the NAS RA. Manukyan is the author of more than ten scientific texts regarding the historical background, formation and development of the Kurdish conflict in the Middle East; Kurdish policy in Turkey; the Kurdish elements in Azerbaijan; etc.

Salome Minesashvili is a doctoral student at the Berlin Graduate School for Transnational Studies at the Free University of Berlin, Germany. She received master's degrees in International Political Theory from the University of Edinburgh and in Transformation in the South Caucasus from Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. For her dissertation, Salome is working on national identity change contextualized in similar foreign policies of Georgia and Ukraine. Her research interests include international relations theories, foreign policy analysis and transformation processes in the former Soviet Union.

Tatevik Mkrtchyan is a PhD student and junior researcher at the Centre for Civilization and Cultural Studies, Yerevan State University, Armenia. She was a lecturer in Arabic language at Yerevan Brusov State University of Languages and Social Sciences, Armenia (2011–2014). Her PhD thesis focuses on Shi'a religious doctrine and discourse in the Nahj al-Balagha. Her field is

Arabic and Islamic Studies, with her most recent research interests being the Shi'a religious political governmental system of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iran's relations with the South Caucasus.

Vahram Ter-Matevosyan is the head of the Turkish Studies Department at the Institute for Oriental Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, and assistant professor at the Department of Political Science and International Affairs at the American University of Armenia. He holds postgraduate and graduate degrees from Bergen University (Norway), Lund University (Sweden) and the Institute of Oriental Studies (Armenia). He was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, and a visiting professor at Duke University, NC. His main research interests include political Islam, Kemalism and Turkish domestic and foreign policy issues as well as regional security problems. His previous work has been published in *Turkish Studies*, *Middle East Studies*, *Insight Turkey*, *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *Iran and the Caucasus*, *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines*, *Turkish Review*, *Caucasus Analytical Digest* and *Contemporary Eurasia*. He authored the award-winning monograph *Islam in the Social and Political Life of Turkey* in 2008 and co-authored *History of Turkish Republic* in 2014.

Koba Turmanidze is the director of CRRC-Georgia, a non-profit research organization. Koba earned a Master of Public Administration from American University (Washington, DC) and an MA in political science from Central European University (Budapest, Hungary). He also holds a diploma in history from Tbilisi State University, Georgia. Currently, Turmanidze is a doctoral candidate in comparative politics at Central European University. Before joining CRRC-Georgia, Koba worked in several civil society organizations, as well as in civil service. His research interests include authoritarianism, regime change and voting behaviour.

Anar Valiyev is an assistant professor at ADA University in Baku, Azerbaijan. He received his bachelor's (1999) and master's (2001) degrees in history from Baku State University. From 2001 to 2003 he studied public policy at the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University in Bloomington, where he received his second master's degree. In 2007 he successfully defended his dissertation at the Department of Urban and Public Affairs of the University of Louisville, Kentucky. From 2007 to 2008 he was working as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. Dr. Valiyev is the author of numerous peer-reviewed articles and encyclopaedia entries. His areas of expertise are democracy and governance, public policy of post-Soviet republics and urban development and planning.

Alexandra Yatsyk is a visiting researcher at the Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies of Uppsala University, Sweden, and the director of the Center for Cultural Studies of Postsocialism at Kazan Federal University, Russia. She is an author and editor of works on post-Soviet nation building, sports and cultural mega-events, biopolitics and art, including *Celebrating Borderlands in a Wider Europe: Nation and Identities in Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia* (2016), *Mega-Events in Post-Soviet Eurasia: Shifting Borderlines of Inclusion and Exclusion* (2016), *New and Old Vocabularies of International Relations After the Ukraine Crisis* (2016) and others.

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Religion and soft power in the South Caucasus

An introduction

Ansgar Jödicke

For centuries, the region today known as the South Caucasus has been on the periphery of bigger and more powerful neighbours, such as Byzantines, Ottomans, Persians and Russians, who all competed for influence. The South Caucasian kings, landlords, khans, etc. were often forced into submission and joining coalitions with only limited possibilities for total independence. In continuation of their brief assertion of national sovereignty in the early twentieth century, the three countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were able to create independent states in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the region is still contested, geopolitically speaking. Their peripheral position makes these countries sought-after objects of external influence and causes them to be dependent on alliances with external powers. These external influences are backed by military and economic dominance and dependencies. Excluding the conflict between Georgia and Russia in South Ossetia with a second front line in Abkhazia (2008), no direct military conflict with the surrounding powers has disrupted the development of sovereign states in the South Caucasus; however, the armed conflicts in Abkhazia (1992–1993, 1998), South Ossetia (1991–1992) and Nagorno-Karabakh (1992–1994, ongoing) included military support from outside the conflicting parties. During the last 25 years, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have independently established domestic political and economic structures, civil societies and bilateral relations with foreign states. The enduring influence of their powerful neighbours has been primarily a matter of economics, diplomacy and culture rather than of military action.

The contributions in this volume focus on religion as one basis, component or factor of external influence. Religion, together with culture and language, can have a transnational dimension that affects the way nations gain influence in foreign countries. Organizational, cultural or emotional ties among religious groups create trans-border bonds with a political impact on foreign and domestic policies.

In political science and foreign politics, non-military intervention in transnational relations has been discussed for more than ten years as a question of soft power. This concept can help to shed light on the religious

involvement in transnational relationships. The original concept addresses state actors that, for different reasons, may want to avoid military confrontation in international relations. According to Joseph Nye's famous definition, soft power:

> [I]s the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced. (Nye 2004, p. 12)

Religion, as social action (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013), can function as one cultural force that—without restriction to national territories—supports attraction, identification and solidarity. Transnational religious relationships or transnational religious proximity can enhance a country's attractiveness and spill over into political issues.

The concept of soft power has led to numerous discussions in political science and among policymakers. However, it has often been criticized for its ambiguous meaning (Kearn 2011). The contributors to this volume have agreed to use the concept in an investigative sense and with a heuristic purpose, to identify a variety of constellations in which religions play a political role in transnational relations. Hence, the concept of soft power is the starting point of our inquiries and not the result. Consequently, the case studies presented here do not intend to advance conceptual work on the term "soft power", but rather enrich the discourse on soft power with examples from religion. The consequences and prospects of thinking about soft power in political science will be elaborated by Andrey Makarychev in the concluding section at the end of the book.

The overall aim of this volume is to describe and understand the political role of religious groups in transnational relations in the South Caucasus. We scrutinize the interplay between religious and political actors, focusing on the particular configurations of this region's transnational political relationships. To that end, the concept of soft power is helpful because it combines the national and domestic with the transnational dimensions of the religious groups' political role. The application of the soft power concept contributes to two broader theoretical discussions: the significance of religion in politics and the analysis of religious transnationalism.

In the first place, this volume contributes to the broader discussion about the rising political significance of religion on both a national and transnational level (Bruce 2003). Both types of religious actors, domestic and transnational, have provided examples for the role of religion in politics. Meanwhile, the national and transnational dimensions of religious involvement in politics can be interwoven. Transnational religious organizations act on a domestic level and religious politics treat them as domestic groups, while domestic religions can hold transnational relationships with enormous consequences for bilateral relations. Emotional ties created by religious proximity can influence domestic and foreign policy. Thus, trans-boundary religious relations are significant

in the realm of transnational relations, and can create tensions with national identifications. The contributions in this volume ask how transnational religious relationships intermingle with transnational political relationships. How do competing national and transnational loyalties translate into political positioning? Our examples of religious groups' political significance include transnational movements that gain national meaning and domestic religious groups that maintain transnational relationships.

Our analysis also contributes to and widens the perspective of research on religious transnationalism. As regards domestic politics, transnationalism has mainly been researched as a precondition and consequence of migration (Vertovec 2009). Moving beyond the national perspective, globalization has provided a sociopolitical frame for the emergence of transnational religious actors that challenge national sovereignty and the order of international relations. Researchers in international relations have emphasized that globalization affects the social forms of religious groups and fosters transnational organizations and movements. These emerging transnational actors intervene in international relations (Haynes 2009a, 2011, 2013, Hurd 2008, Juergensmeyer 2003, Snyder 2011). Early publications of international relations literature on religion emphasized the increasing role of religious transnational actors (Fox 2001, 2009, Fox and Sandler 2004, Shani 2009) and their challenge to national sovereignty (Haynes 2003) and international order (Haynes 2009b, Toft 2013). The authors agree that religious transnational actors should be considered a serious part of the international system, especially in the realm of security. Further studies focused on deconstructing the concepts of "religious" and "secular" by analyzing how transnational religious groups intervene and participate in international relations (Fitzgerald 2011, Lehmann 2013). In our context, Jeffrey Haynes' book *Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power* (2012) is most relevant. His examples are primarily of powerful and well-organized actors including the Catholic Church and al-Qaeda. Haynes situates the topic in the context of security, assuming that religious actors in (international) politics are still an unexpected factor. These transnational actors have achieved a status equivalent to that of nation states in terms of autonomy; thus, they have the capacity to 'influence international relations' (Haynes 2012, p. 6). Nevertheless, Haynes mentions that smaller and less centralized actors and networks can also contribute to the transnational civil society (Haynes 2012, p. 7–9). Overall, research on religious transnationalism has identified groups with different social forms that have been relevant in international relations. The examples of religious groups in this volume cover a variety of forms, from strongly organized and transnational movements (e.g. the Gülen movement) to small groups with financial support from an external country (some Salafi or Shi'a groups).

The ten chapters of this volume are based on empirical case studies of specific configurations of external and internal forces in the South Caucasus. The next section of the introduction will clarify a couple of the general methodological and theoretical aspects of using the concept of soft power

to analyze transnational religious and political relationships. This will be followed by a historical sketch of the region's transnational interconnectedness with an introduction to the subjects of this volume's chapters. Finally, this introduction will outline two comparative categories for future studies on religion, transnationalism and soft power: the size and power of the religious group and the proximity of the transnational relationship.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

Three theoretical and methodological factors are most relevant to the analysis of religious involvement in soft power policies: first, the meaning of "soft power" in this context; second, the inclusion of religious actors in the framework of the analysis; and finally, the normative implications of interactions between politics and religion.

First, though used heuristically, the concept of soft power requires some clarification. We can roughly distinguish two structures of religious soft power: religious groups wielding soft power and religion as a basis for the state's soft power. The research on the first group describes religious actors as specific actors that are limited to soft power instead of military power (Nye 2004, p. 94). These studies focus on religious actors' positioning in international relations; Yannas (2009) analyzed the soft power of the Ecumenical Patriarchate while Sommeregger (2011) found the Holy See in Rome applying a particular soft power policy in its international relationships. However, the political involvement of religious actors in the South Caucasus is more complex. While the Holy See in Rome acts like an independent state in international relations, the religious groups in our research act as non-state actors: they may wield soft power themselves, but they are a basis, platform or means for the soft power of states. These religious groups maintain relationships with domestic state institutions, foreign religious groups and sometimes even foreign state institutions. This constellation opens up a variety of interrelationships. Foreign state actors can use religion in their soft power policy to emphasize the religious identities that are responsible for trans-boundary attractiveness. However, they have to manage the religious actors' own political ambitions. Domestic politics can undermine, support or simply use religious groups' transnational relations. Though it is mostly assumed that only state institutions can instrumentalize religion, it is worth noting that instrumentalization can happen both ways. Religious actors, especially organized ones, reflect and arrange their transnational relationships as states do. They negotiate with their foreign partners and they profit from taking their own power into account realistically.

Given that soft power is 'attractive power' and 'in terms of resources, soft-power resources are the assets that produce such attraction' (Nye 2004, p. 6), the question is how religion serves as a component of attraction in transnational relations. The case studies in this volume draw on an action-based and communicative understanding of power. Consequently, soft power is

grounded in intersubjective communication as a means of engaging other members of international society in cross-border exchange and influencing their perceptions and discourses. This very broad concept allows us to examine religion as a cultural, symbolic and emotional sphere that provides a basis for attractiveness. This attractiveness is linked to perceptions of cultural proximity, distance, friendship, etc., and these perceptions are continuously constructed as clusters of emotions, values, customs and symbols. Translated into political categories, these dimensions include national branding, cultural leadership and the legitimacy of influence beyond state borders.

Religion is one of the major cultural factors that can be used for the legitimization of influence, and this kind of communicative influence based on religious proximity is more difficult to identify and evaluate than military action. Any attempt to measure soft power is difficult. Social theory in the tradition of Max Weber has mostly understood "power" in terms of chance or potential. Thus, any observed successful action could be evidence of soft power at work. Nye proposes referring to opinion polls in order to measure soft power (Nye 2004, p. 6). Still, the empirical basis for soft power remains difficult. The observations in this volume will concentrate on discourses, foreign policies or bilateral negotiations in which religion has successfully reinforced the plausibility or legitimacy of political action.

The *tertium comparationis* in this volume is not a specific soft power policy but the religious factor in trans-border political relations. On the one hand, we widen the range of application, transferring the soft power concept from liberal states into a geopolitical area where political liberalism is weak or absent. This transfer is risky. Soft power seems to change its character when used outside a liberal political context. Do these states really rely on attractiveness or do they just use threats based on economic or military power? On the other hand, not all the states under research approach soft power in the same way. Russia has explicitly adopted soft power in its foreign policy, but Iran has not; Turkey has its own history with this concept (Benhaïm and Öktem 2015). The concepts of soft power used by the countries under research are different, especially when comparing EU human rights policy and Russian soft power policy. By applying the soft power concept to all these relationships, we intend to draw attention to the extent to which the state's bilateral relations are influenced by religious attractiveness or connections.

Second, introducing religion into the analysis of politics and transnational relations requires attention to religious actors in addition to state actors. State actors sometimes refer to religion as a basis of national identity, historical tradition or societal values. However, for sociological rather than epistemological reasons, religions are different from other factors of identity such as language or ethnicity. Religious groups have established organizations and forms of leadership that are able to act like state institutions. Though normally more powerful and equipped with other legal rights, state actors can meet religious actors as partners, competitors or opponents. Religious actors can cooperate, but they decide independently and are able to include transnational dimensions

in their policies. This contrasts with the point of view of Scott M. Thomas, who was convinced that 'formulating foreign policy is an arena of public life beyond their [religious groups'] expertise and technical competence' (2005, p. 110). We include religious actors as part of the framework of transnational relationships, although depending on their size and power, religious groups are often willing to abstain from politics. Generally, any actor can be politically used by others to reach specific aims that may not align with their own. The analysis of political actors' use of religion in international relations must include the religious communities' ability to take part in these power struggles (Haynes 2006). Consequently, the religious contribution to foreign policy and international relations should not be underestimated although I will conclude in this introduction that religions are not the central factor in the political evaluation of friendship and hostility in the region under research.

Using the category of "religious actors" in academic analysis goes along with an actor-centred approach, though the role actors play in the general analysis of power relations is still contested. The autonomy and power of state actors has been questioned in globalization theory (e.g. Brenner 1999, Rudolph and Piscatori 1997, Sassen 1996). Likewise, Sylvia Walby argued that the existence of powerful transnational religious actors restricts the power of nation states (2003). Responding to Walby, however, Bruce and Voas (2004) insisted that nation states are still powerful units in both international relations and the creation of national frameworks for religious groups. The chapters in this volume are therefore organized around nation states, as we think of them as the most powerful units in terms of foreign politics and domestic religious politics (Bruce 2003, p. 41–93). Nevertheless, "the religion of a country"—a notoriously vague expression—is not only a religious actor, and state actors are not the only form of political authority (Walby 2004). Religion is a multidimensional phenomenon (Sheikh 2012) composed of the religiosity of individuals, individual leaders, organizations and other social actors, all of whom engage in the construction of their own "religion".

The focus on actors in this volume comes with a clear distinction between religious and state actors, at least as an emic distinction used in the field and a social construction (Baumann 1999, Bosco 2009). Thus, all contributions draw on the political dimension of these religious actors rather than unveiling religious components in politics (May *et al*. 2014).

Third, there is the normative dimension of religious politicization and the inclusion of religion in political analysis. Under the aegis of secularism, the emergence of religious actors in domestic and foreign politics calls for governance. It is widely acknowledged that a state's religious policy involves domestic regulation of religious groups, although how strong state actors should cooperate with religious actors is contested. State actors directly collaborating with religious actors or referring to religion in political issues is frequently seen as "misuse" of religion—an obviously normative expression. Any assumed relationship between political and religious institutions is explicitly or implicitly the subject of normative implications. Western secularism

(Rorty 2002, 2003), with its separationist and assimilationist logic, is not an analytical tool but a particular political solution to the problem. Recent scholarship emphasizes that secularism itself is extremely diverse (Hurd 2008). There is also the paradigm of post-secularism (Habermas 2008), which lacks coherence (Beckford 2012, Cerella 2012) and has not yet provided a widely accepted model for the integration of religion in modern societies. Some proponents try to integrate religious actors into a secular framework (Habermas 2008, Wilson 2014), while others understand post-secularism as the move beyond secular principles in domestic politics and international relations (Berger 1999). One attack on the standard model of secularism draws on the insight of Talal Asad (2003), holding that existing conceptualizations of religious affairs and their relation to politics have a great deal to do with Western–Eastern imagery and Western hegemony. However, the application of this debate to the post-Soviet space is difficult because of the ambiguous nature of Soviet inclusion in the West and its specific secularism (Clardie 2016). The political solutions in the region under study are heavily influenced by both Western concepts and the Soviet legacy.

We do not impose a particular and agreed normative concept in this volume, but the authors are aware of the underlying normative concepts and implications. With respect to the relationship between politics and religion, we cannot presuppose the predominance of any one normative model, whether the claim be that religions are forced to abstain from political activities by modernization or that political actors increasingly renounce the use of religion as a political tool.

Religion, transnational relations and soft power in the South Caucasus

The aim of this section is to provide a historical and political framework for transnational religious relations in the South Caucasus. It will start by viewing the entire region and move on to each country, introducing the volume's case studies.

The South Caucasus is a region with complex transnational relationships and highly asymmetric dependencies from powerful neighbours and foreign forces. Historically, the South Caucasus has often been a geographical area where the surrounding powers' interests met in military conflicts. The region was located far away from the imperial centres in Byzantium/Constantinople/Istanbul, Isfahan, Tehran, St. Petersburg or Moscow. It became an object of alternating invasions and the independent rulers were mostly forced to accept changing arrangements of protection and alliances. Since the late eighteenth century Russia has been the major force in the region; the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828 finally established a stable border in the southeast and southwest, and this is still the border today. The only exception was the chequered history of the Adjara region in southwestern of Georgia, which finally came under Soviet rule only in 1921. Nationalism in the late

nineteenth century fostered the formation of independent states in the early twentieth century after the fall of the Russian empire. However, the creation of the Soviet Union again absorbed the South Caucasus until 1991, when its dissolution allowed Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to declare their independence.

The new states have gained international acceptance, though the status of the regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh remains disputed. All three countries have developed strong relationships with Europe and the West. This common political orientation demonstrates their ambition of renouncing the Soviet legacy. Nevertheless, the factual political and economic development has taken a different direction in each of the three countries. So have their relationships towards Russia, Iran, Turkey and the EU. Within 25 years of independence, the old asymmetry of power between the South Caucasian states and their neighbours has regained prominence. The three South Caucasian states do not possess the same military and economic resources as Russia, Iran, Turkey and the EU. Alliances have been necessary to stabilize the region. However, the initially preferred strong alliance with the West has turned out to be unrealistic. Georgia's most ambitious plans of joining the EU dissolved, although the country at least signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2016 and became an official aspirant for NATO membership. The governments in all three countries keep a balance between their desired and necessary alliances, including complex political, economic and cultural relationships. How do religions develop under this *long durée* of asymmetrical constellations of power?

The political dependency on powerful neighbours influenced the history of religion and especially the development of religious diversity in the South Caucasus. Shifting external dominance has changed the religious landscape several times. The schism between the Armenian and the Catholic Churches in the sixth century was the result of the competing political loyalties of the Georgian and Armenian rulers towards Byzantium and Persia (Aleksidze 2008). In the realm of Islam, a radical religious change happened under Safavid rule from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, when the Muslim part of the South Caucasus became predominantly Shi'ite. Moreover, forced and voluntary migration has enriched the mosaic of religious minorities. The peripheral character of the region made it an attractive place for religious dissenters fleeing from the imperial centres of control or avoiding minority discrimination, like the Armenians who moved from Persia to Yerevan in the early nineteenth century. The imperial powers themselves enacted displacement policies, especially for dissenters or ethnic minorities. Safavids and Ottomans resettled Kurds in the region in the sixteenth century; so did the Russian empire with Russian sects (Molokans, Dukhobors and others) in the early nineteenth century. The Ottoman empire also forced the displacement of Armenians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Overall, writing the history of religions in this region from the perspective of centre-periphery power relations would be a revealing undertaking.

Religiosity in the contemporary South Caucasus has often been described in terms of secularization or revival (Zedania 2011). This theoretical framework has been imported from Western European and US–American debates. It only partly fits the post-Soviet situation, where secularization was more radical than in Western Europe and more state-imposed even than in France. Furthermore, this so-called revival has been perceived as a political threat to democratization, modernization and Western orientation (Janelidze 2015), while authors writing about revival or "desecularization" in Europe observed the political role of religion either outside any political framework or as politically constructive (Casanova 1994 on Poland). Obviously, private and public interest in religion has risen from the 1980s on and religious institutions have thereby been strengthened. Nevertheless, the role of religion in domestic policy and society remains complex.

After independence in 1991, the liberal religious policy in all three countries presented opportunities for all kinds of religious groups. All social groups participated in the vivid—and, of course, controversial—struggle over political and social order. Among them, the religious groups with the strongest institutions were the most powerful (Jödicke 2015). Religious groups fought for the consolidation of their own organization and the new nation. In all three countries, the contribution of the powerful major religious institutions to national identity formation was high (Agadjanian 2015), particularly in Georgia and Armenia. All the religious forces in all three countries were nationalist, in the sense that they supported national independence and tried to publicly demonstrate their contributions to their nation. Besides their obvious involvement in domestic politics, the powerful religious actors used their position to comment on bilateral relations and even fulfilled functions in international diplomacy and foreign affairs. The Georgian Patriarch opened a channel of communication with the Russian state during the Russian–Georgian war in 2008, and Allahshukur Pashazade used his international reputation to talk with the Iranian and the Russian governments when those official relationships were cold in the late 1990s.

The following short overview of the structure of this volume will describe how the contributed case studies go into more detail. The first section of the book contains three chapters on Georgia. Religion in Georgia is dominated by the strong Georgian Orthodox Church, which includes the vast majority of the country's population. According to the 2014 population census, the most numerous minorities are Muslims (around 11 per cent) and Armenian Christians (around 3 per cent) followed by several smaller religious minorities. The Georgian Orthodox Church often draws on its long history and contribution to Georgian identity. The strength of this institution has been growing since the 1980s, partially owed to the long-lasting leadership of Patriarch Ilia II, who has lead the church successfully since 1977 during a period of extreme political and social change. Conscious of the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church annulled the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1811, and did not acknowledge it until 1943, the relationship

between the two churches is ambivalent. However, a friendlier relationship has dominated the discourse in recent years, contrasting with the more hostile political relationship between Russia and Georgia. The religious policy in Georgia balances granting enormous privileges to the dominant Georgian Orthodox Church on one side and adopting the EU policy of religious freedom and pluralism on the other. The strong ethno-religious nationalism of Georgia's minority policy in the early 1990s changed to Western-oriented pluralism during the Saakashvili government (2003–2012). Today, there are ambivalent signals between support for and restriction of religious pluralism.

The three contributions in this first section are about external influences on Georgia from Turkey (Vahram Ter-Matevosyan), Russia (Salome Minesashvili) and Iran (Mariam Gabedava and Koba Turmanidze). While the Iranian activities directly address the Georgian Shi'ite minority mainly living in the region of Kvemo Kartli, Turkish policy tries to balance its interests in supporting the Sunni minority spread throughout the country (with a core area in Adjara), on the one hand, and keeping good bilateral relations with Georgia in terms of economy and strategic partnership on the other. This constellation reflects the geopolitical situation. Iran has not been an option for partnership with Georgia because of Georgia's strong orientation towards the EU and USA. The situation with Russia is more difficult, as the involved religious institutions represent majorities of believers in the respective countries. In fact, the powerful position of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia and the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgia enables a complex interplay between these religious actors and the respective state actors.

The second section is dedicated to Azerbaijan and the influence of three external forces: Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. While Armenia and Georgia are shaped by their respective (separate) Orthodox Churches, Azerbaijan has an overwhelmingly Muslim population divided into Shi'a, Sunni and Sufi branches with sometimes diffuse boundaries because of the strong secularization during Soviet times. Consequently, the character of the major religion in Azerbaijan has often been described as secularized with unclear and idiosyncratic profiles falling between syncretism, "cultural religion" and ignorance. Furthermore, this Muslim "majority" has not created its own representational institution and depends on the state-created Caucasus Muslim Board, with a complex history going back to the nineteenth century. The Caucasus Muslim Board has, however, never been able to fully represent Islam in Azerbaijan. The religious field has constantly been challenged by smaller and more distinct Islamic groups (Jödicke forthcoming), especially those supported by foreign countries. A stronger division between these distinct groups and the state-accepted version of Islam has grown and overlapped with questions of internal security. Thus, religious policy has gradually changed from a very liberal laissez-faire policy towards stricter control and restrictions. Tensions between smaller non-Muslim minorities and the state appear periodically, without rising to the level of national questions. The main challenge for the state's policy of control remains the field of Muslim groups.

In Azerbaijan, the influence of the Iranian government has led to the revival of Shi'a Islam among the Shi'a population (Anar Valiyev). Moreover, Iranian influence has targeted the major religious group in the country and thereby threatened Azerbaijani political stability as a secular and independent country. In contrast, the Gülen movement was perceived by the state as supportive, particularly as a friendly Turkish policy, and was dominant starting from Azerbaijan's independence (Fuad Aliyev). After 2013–2014, the strong relationship between the Gülen movement and Turkish state authorities broke down and led to hostility between the movement and state-supported Islam. Consequently, the strong Turkish influence in Azerbaijan led to the closure of several Gülen institutions in 2016 when Erdoğan started to persecute Gülenists in Turkey. According to widespread public opinion, the Saudi Arabian influence on Salafi groups in Azerbaijan is the most destabilizing. However, Kamal Gasimov's contribution demonstrates that the issue of Saudi Arabia's influence on these groups is quite complex and that even these religious groups emancipate themselves from the state's doctrine and adapt to local circumstances.

The third section is about Armenia. Like Georgia, Armenia has an overwhelming religious majority organized in the powerful Armenian Apostolic Church. There are several religious minorities in Armenia, but all of them are small in number, with evangelicals and Yezidis being the most prominent. While the Georgian Orthodox Church is part of the Eastern Orthodox family of churches, the Armenian Apostolic Church is a non-Chalcedonian, Oriental Orthodox Church. This church is independent and maintains transnational relationships in two ways: on the one hand, the worldwide Armenian diaspora often upholds strong ties to the domestic Armenian population; on the other hand, there is a struggle for leadership between the Holy See of Etchmiadzin near Yerevan and the Holy See of Cilicia in Lebanon, although the current Catholicos in Etchmiadzin, Karekin II, acts as a *primus inter pares*. The relationship with the diaspora mirrors the internal quarrels. None of these problems have spilled over into the political dimension during the last 25 years, although a smaller diaspora community in Abkhazia did become politically relevant (Matsuzato 2011).

The two contributions on Armenia are not about the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church but about the external influences on Kurds/Yezidis in Armenia (Lia Evoyan and Tatevik Manukyan) and the Iranian influence in Armenia (Tatevik Mkrtchyan). The situation of the Kurds/Yezidis is directly related to their ethnic and religious identifications. Obviously, ethnic group-building is a transnational phenomenon. However, the Armenian Kurds/Yezidis have emphasized both their religious and national identity. In both Armenia and Turkey, the Kurds are a minority without any formal relationship to the state power. While Turkey distrusts the Kurds for several reasons, the Armenian government's recognition of the Kurds/Yezidis as a religious minority is politically significant for the credibility of Armenia's minority policy. The second chapter in this section analyzes the Iranian influence in

Armenia. This influence does not rely on a Shi'a minority, but Iran nonetheless uses a kind of cultural religion to enrich its bilateral relations with Armenia.

The last section in this volume compares the soft power foreign policy of the two most powerful external actors in the South Caucasus: the European Union (Eiki Berg and Alar Kilp) and Russia (Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk). Berg and Kilp analyze how Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia react to the EU's soft power, which is mainly based on its human rights policy including the freedom of religion and the promotion of pluralism. In particular, this is a case study in how soft power works when religion is an object of legal regulation without a particular religious target group. Thus, religious regulations are the object of negotiations between the EU and countries in the South Caucasus. The authors believe that the religious values of the local population impede the EU's soft power policy. Makarychev and Yatsyk present a study on the complex relationship between religion and politics in Russia's foreign policy in the Caucasus. "Soft power" is a conceptual approach used in Russian foreign policy, but profoundly at odds with the USA's understanding of the concept. The authors explain how religion is partly integrated into this concept, although the religious actors keep some distance from the state. Furthermore, this final chapter provides a lucid analysis of the soft power concept in Russian foreign policy.

Comparative parameters

We can summarize that religion plays a remarkable role in many bilateral relations between the South Caucasian states and external forces, both state-run and autonomous. The case studies in this volume show that there is no single mechanism for the use of religion in soft power policies, and that there are a variety of configurations in which religion becomes a transnational political factor.

By comparison, we can identify at least two main factors shaping the politicization of religion in transnational relations: the sociopolitical power of the involved religious groups and the proximity between religious groups in different countries. The following comparative analysis will briefly outline these two analytical tools for future studies on the political role of religion in transnational relationships.

First, the opportunity for developing soft power on the basis of religion depends greatly on the sociopolitical power of the religious groups in question, both as target groups and as domestic groups. Their power is related to their size and their role in national politics, which can be either more oppositional or more supportive.

Interestingly, no political alliance between an individual South Caucasian state and one of its neighbours is essentially based on religion. The most stable coalitions are not religiously based. In contrast, those countries with the highest proximity in terms of religious doctrine—Georgia and Russia as well

as Azerbaijan and Iran—maintain the most hostile political relationships. Religious proximity in these cases interferes, on the one hand with the general political aims of Georgia's Western orientation in contrast to Russia, and on the other hand with Azerbaijan's secular orientation in contrast to Iran. The religious axis between Russia and Georgia and between Iran and Azerbaijan is publicly debated as a question of national political interest since the religious majorities are involved.

Consequently, any soft power policy that favours a powerful majority on the basis of religious transnational attractiveness then supports the oppositional role of the religious group against the government's policy. The Georgian Orthodox Church is a large organization derived from the population's major religion and with influence on domestic politics. External soft power influence on this institution by Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church touches on questions of national identity and sovereignty. The situation in Azerbaijan is different than in Georgia. While the Georgian and Russian Churches are able to negotiate and formulate official positions, the Iranian influence is not able to address the whole Shi'a community in Azerbaijan due to the vague Shi'a identity and state-controlled organization of religion. Iranian-influenced Shi'a groups only comprise a limited number of followers, moulded by specific Shi'a religiosity. Nevertheless, Iranian influence has the potential to spread to the whole Shi'a population in Azerbaijan or even to Sunni Muslims. Though the Iranian religious influence could potentially address the Azerbaijani Shi'a majority, it is de facto only influencing a minority that is reshaping and challenging the religious majority. Similarly, Turkish Diyanet activities address Sunni groups in the country but hold the potential to influence local Sunni Islam and others. In sum, Azerbaijan is a more complicated place in terms of religion than Georgia and Armenia because religious power there is less centralized and more disputed.

If the target group is a religious minority, the attractiveness based on religion is only efficient in a small part of the country. Turkish Diyanet or Iranian activities in Georgia are examples for this kind of configuration. A liberal policy of diversity allows minorities to refer to external countries or communities as their religious partners. However, external states wielding soft power towards minorities have to balance support for these minorities with other political goals. In the case of Turkey, support for a small minority is less important than the more general objectives of economic and political relations. Religious attractiveness is weighed against economic attractiveness when Georgian Shi'ites decide whether to take their education abroad in Iran or in Turkey. In these cases, religion remains just one factor among others in transnational relations. From the perspective of the domestic country, an external soft power policy towards small religious groups can challenge a liberal religious policy of recognition, freedom of religion and integration.

Besides these examples addressing small and large religious groups, soft power policy can depend on the power of the dominant religious group when it touches on religion through legal regulation, such as the EU Neighbourhood

Policy in the South Caucasus. In this case, the soft power policy addresses the governments' legislation but not a direct target group. However, the religious groups in the country are directly affected and the success of such a policy depends on the reaction of the dominant religious groups.

Second, as a precondition, soft power based on religious groups requires transnational religious relations with a modicum of religious proximity. However, "proximity" is a slippery concept that partly accounts for an actor's attractiveness. Describing proximity as a shared religious identity is misleading and too imprecise. Rather than being a fixed tie, this proximity depends on a genuine mixture of several sociological factors, at least including organizational structure and the religious concepts of authority and community. Gülen activists in Azerbaijan are connected with Gülen activists in the US through a well-elaborated organizational structure. In contrast, the organizational ties between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church are weak, though they are bound together by the theological concept of a united Orthodox Christianity.

Furthermore, the transnational proximity of religious groups on either side of a national border depends on the interpretations of both religious groups and state actors. As the case of Yezidis in Armenia demonstrates, groups are able to manoeuvre between religious, ethnic and national identities (Hastings 1997, Baumann 1999). Armenian Yezidis have put more emphasis on their religion, Yezidism, than on their ethnic Kurdish identity. This identification is, however, disputed between the respective groups. Furthermore, it is a matter of political interpretation. The disruption of transnational Kurdish connections creates a chance for national integration into the Armenian minority policy. Shi'a communities in Azerbaijan and Georgia refer to Shi'a religious authorities in Iran (and Iraq), but the consequences for their political positioning in Azerbaijan remain an object of political interpretation.

Obviously, the political interpretation of religious transnational proximity is one of the factors that determines the politicization of religion. Since national religious identity seems to guarantee stability, transnational religious connections are viewed suspiciously, as potential or real support for political opposition. Consequently, the governments in both Azerbaijan and Georgia tend to overestimate and exaggerate the religious proximity and ideological coherence between domestic and foreign religious groups for political reasons. However, religious proximity does not automatically translate into political proximity. Depicting religious groups as the puppets of external governments' soft power policies is often a political backlash against these groups and their external supporters.

Proximity, however, is not the only basis for attractiveness. Iranian soft power policy in Armenia uses religion as part of a cultural policy without any target group in the targeted country. It is not proximity but precisely the unfamiliar shape of Islam that is the basis of soft power in this case. It's worth

noting that this strategic offer comes close to the original understanding of soft power.

Conclusion

The creation of the independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia has produced a complex international relations framework in the region, which supports viewing the region as a whole. Strategic alliances between the three South Caucasian states and external forces guarantee the stability of this fragile order. Beyond military action, the exchange of goods, people and culture has opened a field of transnational relationships accompanied by—from the perspective of the South Caucasian states—external influence. This external influence has sometimes been supportive, in terms of nation building, security issues and economic cooperation. However, it has also been a channel for the external forces' soft power policies, which have often been perceived as ambivalent or threatening to national sovereignty. This holds true particularly for external cultural influences based on feelings of religious proximity or friendship beyond the scope of bilateral political negotiations.

The following chapters of this volume scrutinize this additional component in international relations: the involvement of religious groups in soft power policies. Religion in the South Caucasus is not a single and uniform factor throughout the whole region, but is highly diverse; the following case studies are therefore restricted to specific historical and political constellations of target countries and external actors between which religious groups maintain transnational relationships.

Overall, these case studies contribute to a better understanding of the link between the national and transnational dimensions of religious–political interactions. Religious groups are not limited to a transnational, national or subnational level of political action. They can use their transnational attractiveness to turn themselves into players in international relations. International politics can serve as a platform for their interests, with corresponding consequences for their domestic political positioning. As religious groups bear enormous potential for emotional bindings, cultural attraction, identity formation and solidarity, they can function as both the means and the targets of states' transnational political action and soft power. However, religion also includes political actors rather than being a passive cultural basis of political action. Powerful and independent religious actors can be either the long arm of a foreign state's interests, an additional/alternative channel of communication between states or a supplementary and independent actor with a proper plan of action and the power to support political opposition.

Moreover, the religious factor in transnational relations and soft power policies should be analyzed in the context of other cultural and non-cultural factors. The soft power capacity of religion is embedded in other tools of soft power, like language or culture. Furthermore, security concerns or economic

claims will often come before the religious factor in the construction of bilateral relationships. Religion establishes its political potential inconspicuously rather than acting as a dominant political player in society. The possibilities of religious groups depend strongly on states' religious policies, although small oppositional groups can be strengthened by external support. The extent to which observers understand this external religious soft power as a severe threat to political stability and to the nation states' power depends on their political view.

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Part I

The case of Georgia

1 Turkish soft power politics in Georgia

Making sense of political and cultural implications[1]

Vahram Ter-Matevosyan

Introduction

Until recently, relations between Turkey and Georgia attracted relatively little scholarly attention. Most studies mainly concentrated on the geopolitical, bilateral and regional dimensions of those relations, paying little or no attention to the soft power politics that Turkey has been exercising since the beginning of the 2000s. Georgia interests Turkey for various strategic and political reasons, although there are equally important cultural, religious and social factors that play a significant role in shaping Turkey's policy towards Georgia. It is the combination of these policies that shapes the essence and objectives of Turkey–Georgia relations.

To unveil the defining features of those relations, this chapter looks upon them through the lens of soft power politics. Primarily, it discusses various projects that a number of Turkish governmental and private institutions have carried out in economic, religious, cultural, educational and humanitarian spheres. It also touches upon the practical implications and the cultural and social perceptions of these projects in Georgia, as exemplified by the findings of in-depth interviews conducted by the author. In examining the religious dimension, this paper argues that the religious component of Turkey's soft power politics cannot be properly understood without considering the specific political and religious features of Georgia's domestic context. The study of Turkey's religious interests in Georgia needs to be contextualized in order to unveil its limitations.

Turkey's political priorities and their reception in Georgia

The research on Turkish foreign policy in the South Caucasus (Yavuz 1998, p. 19–41 Aras 2000, p. 53–68, Davutoğlu 2001, Kotchikian 2004, p. 33–44, Çelikpala 2007, p. 25–30, Davutoğlu 2008, p. 77–96, Kirişçi 2009, p. 29–57, Aras and Akpinar 2011, p. 36–58, Balci 2014, p. 43–52) can be divided into several groups. According to some experts, Turkey has elaborated and is carrying out a clear-cut and comprehensive regional policy in the South Caucasus, which has enabled it to become a key regional actor. Another group of researchers

claim that Turkey pursues different interests vis-à-vis each South Caucasian political entity, and thus there is no unified and integrated Turkish foreign policy in the South Caucasus: the three UN member states, two partially recognized states and one non-recognized de facto state have different rankings in Turkey's list of policy priorities. Yet another group of analysts posits that Turkey still lacks a long-term policy towards the states of the South Caucasus and that local processes alone define Turkish political objectives. Some even argue that the major obstacle for Turkey's all-embracing policy in the region is the absence of diplomatic relations with Armenia, the establishment of which would lead to Turkey's full and complete geopolitical presence in the region.

In particular, Michael Cecire argues that Turkey 'is visibly ascendant as a Caucasus power' and 'Turkey's Caucasus system' already functions in the region, where Turkey is perceived as a 'merchant hegemon'. Moreover, in his opinion, Turkey–Azerbaijan–Georgia trilateral cooperation has been a challenge to the common perception of the region being under Russian dominance (Cecire 2013, p. 111). According to Mitat Çelikpala, Asbed Kotchikian and Bayram Balci, Georgia's role is indispensable and profound as it provides the most direct and stable land route from Turkey to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Moreover, Georgia's engagement in Caspian energy projects as a transit country and Turkey's investments in the Georgian economy have made the two countries irreversibly interdependent (Kotchikian 2004, p. 43, Çelikpala 2007, p. 27–28, Balci 2014, p. 49). In addition to the energy security factor, Bülent Aras and Pınar Akpınar, in discussing Turkey's policy in Georgia, also pinpoint significant implications for regional stability and border security (Aras and Akpınar 2011, p. 63). Thus, most analysts are of the common opinion that Turkish policy in Georgia is dominated by the key role the latter plays in exporting Caspian and Central Asian energy resources to Europe. In other words, Turkey's and Azerbaijan's ability to successfully implement geopolitical projects is directly proportional to Georgia's foreseeable stability as a state.

In the research on the subject, there is also emphasis on the economic aspects of Turkish interests in Georgia, which suggests that Turkey's policy should be determined by Georgia's open and comprehensive economic policy. Based on this logic, tense relations between Russia and Georgia have left the latter with no alternative but to build even closer relations with Turkey, which is seen as either the inevitable alternative or as the nearest and most suitable bridge to Europe. Reiterating the statements of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili (Chveneburi.net, n.d.), Balci argues that Turkey is a window towards Europe for Georgia, which may allow Tbilisi to fulfil its aspirations beyond the Caucasus (2014, p. 50). Cecire is right in mentioning that to grasp the essence of Turkey–Georgia relations one must consider them within the context of the Turkey–Georgia–Azerbaijan trilateral format, acknowledging that Turkey–Georgia relations have for the most part stemmed from Turkey–Azerbaijan relations (2013, p. 119, 123). In any case, it is important to note that in analyzing Turkish policy in Georgia, many experts

do not pay much attention to the religious, social and cultural implications which influence their bilateral relations to various degrees. Nor do they care to discuss how exactly Turkey, which has its own seemingly insurmountable problems with the EU, can serve as a bridge between Georgia and Europe.

A set of complex and systemic factors has influenced the development of the Georgian political elite's perceptions of Turkey. In elaborating policy approaches towards Turkey, the attitudes of the Georgian leadership (both under Mikheil Saakashvili and later under the Georgian Dream coalition) seem determined by a number of geopolitical, economic, infrastructural and simply pragmatic factors. For instance, former Georgian President Saakashvili referred to Turkey–Georgia relations during his presidential term as a 'golden age' (Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili 2013, p. 21). Indeed, his administration was an outspoken supporter and protagonist of an even deeper Turkish presence both in the Georgian economy and in the whole region. During his presidency, Saakashvili spoke several times about the glory of Turkish history, culture and political system (Civil Georgia 2006). He also famously named Mustafa Kemal, the founder of modern Turkey, as one of his main political role models (Ackerman 2004). He was known for opening the doors of the Georgian economy to Turkish investors, who brought capital and opportunities to Georgia. In speaking about Turkey's interests in Georgia and in the region, he said: 'for Turkey specifically it is important to create a zone of stability with peaceful and friendly nations around it. Georgia was, maybe, the best case of the famous policy of "zero problems with neighbours"' (Civil Georgia 2006). During his term this thought was voiced more than once, perhaps reiterating similar remarks from the Turkish political elite. For instance, Ahmet Davutoğlu, former advisor to the prime minister, noted in an interview with *CNNTürk* on 2 January 2008: 'Turkey's "zero problem policy towards its neighbours" has been successfully implemented for the past four years. The most striking examples of Turkey's success in the region are its relations with Georgia'.[2] Nigyar Göksel also holds the opinion that 'Turkey and Georgia appear to present a model of integration in Europe's East' (2013, p. 2). Cecire furthers his argument that the Georgian direction has been successful by noting that, unlike many countries where Davutoğlu's much-quoted "strategic depth" doctrine was judged exceedingly negatively, the Caucasus became the policy's top beneficiary and its only success story (Cecire 2013, p. 113–115). It is important to add that when considering Turkey's Caucasian policy, analysts have rarely contextualized Turkey's policy towards Armenia nor have they problematized the implications of Turkey's fractured policy towards the Caucasus. Although Turkey was quick to recognize Armenia's independence in 1991, it refused to establish diplomatic relations with it and hermetically sealed the border by imposing a political, economic and communicational blockade on Armenia. Turkey's unilateral and unconditional support to Azerbaijan not only undermined the credibility of many of its regional initiatives but also raised several concerns about the long-term implications of Turkey's actions in the region.

Eka Tkeshelashvili, Georgia's former minister of foreign affairs and former secretary of the National Security Council, mentioned during an interview conducted by the author that 'in order to get the complete idea of the Turkish policy in Georgia one should clarify Georgia's pursued interest too. And only in combining the interests of those two we could thoroughly comprehend the policy objectives of the sides'. She also defined Georgia's interest as follows: 'to take advantage of Georgia's geographical position in the region, to become a "regional hub" and apply the key elements of economic liberalism in that process' (Interview with Eka Tkeshelashvili, 7/10/2014). Both Turkey and the Turkey–Georgia relationship were assigned a key importance in Georgia's National Security Concept for 2005 and in its revised version from 2011 (both documents were adopted during Saakashvili's presidency). In between the two versions, a few differences appeared. For instance, in the 2005 version of the document, Turkey was distinguished as a 'strategic partner', 'a leading regional partner', 'an important trade partner' and 'a valuable strategic partner' (National Security Concept 2005). Meanwhile, in the revised version of 2011, Turkey is characterized as 'Georgia's leading partner in the region', 'Georgia's largest and economic partner', 'a regional leader' and 'an important military partner' (National Security Concept 2011). Thus, in the revised version, the 'strategic partner' formulation is gone; the government at the time did not elaborate on the changes.

The things started to change, however, in the lead-up to the 2012 elections. While campaigning for the elections, a number of single-seat candidates from the Georgian Dream coalition (then in the opposition) for the Batumi, Shuakhevi and even Gardabani districts, as well as party leaders, artists and TV anchors, promoted anti-Turkish sentiments at election rallies. Most vocal among them was Murman Dumbadze, a former associate professor at Adjara State University and a former member of the conservative Republican Party, who built his reputation on being an ardent opponent of rebuilding mosques in Adjara. He was expelled from the Republican Party but was handpicked by the leader of the Georgian Dream coalition, Bidzina Ivanishvili, to be nominated as a coalition majoritarian candidate (Civil Georgia 2012). He was elected to Parliament and later became a deputy speaker. Beka Mindiashvili, an official at the Georgian Ombudsman's office, claims that since 2007 all election campaigns have been known for their 'electoral xenophobia', because of a calculatingly constructed 'image of enemy' and other phobias. He particularly underlined the fact that during the 2012 elections, the Georgian Dream coalition conceived of Turkophobia and 'a new "enemy" of the country was identified—the Aziziye mosque and the smell of chorba and doner kebab on Batumi Boulevard' (Mindiashvili 2012).

Following the change of power in 2012–2013, Georgia's new leadership, the Georgian Dream coalition, gave in to the concerns of some public circles. At the same time, it was also forced to recalibrate its anti-Turkish rhetoric following backlash from Azerbaijan and Turkey. Some statements in the first months of Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili's new administration

caused anxiety both to the previous administration and inside the Turkey–Azerbaijan alliance. Some statements made after the elections questioned the financial and economic expediency of some regional projects, most strikingly the Kars–Akhalkalaki railway which was initiated in 2007 to connect Turkey and Azerbaijan through Georgia. Turkish entrepreneurs in Georgia followed suit and voiced their fears about different bureaucratic obstacles that they had started to face. However, after visiting Baku and Ankara, Prime Minister Ivanishvili made a few remarks which eased the tense atmosphere. The following statement by former Georgian Minister of Defense Irakli Alasania, whose party was a member of the Georgian Dream coalition, reflected Tbilisi's position towards Turkey under the new leadership:

> At the meeting point of powerful countries and resource-rich regions, an adaptive and reality-oriented Georgian foreign policy is not only desirable but a strategic necessity. We embrace and cherish our European identity, but neither can we ignore the realities of geography and geopolitics. (Alasania 2013, p. 7)

In the same vein, Alasania marked Georgia's relations with Turkey as 'exemplary and accelerating as our interests increasingly intertwine' (ibid.).

During the interviews conducted by the author, respondents were asked whether the new leadership (Prime Minister Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream coalition) had adopted a different policy towards Turkey than the previous administrations. The dominant trend in the answers was that even though there was some continuity, the new leadership showed more circumspection and less enthusiasm towards certain Turkish projects. Professor at Caucasus University and former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergi Kapanadze notes that the change of power was followed by increasing anti-Turkish moods in Adjara, a semi-autonomous region with a large Muslim population, and in some other territories (Interview with Sergi Kapanadze, 7/10/2014). Overall, it can be noted that even though the new administration continued relations with Turkey, compared to the Saakashvili government, the new administration is less enthusiastic towards Turkey.

Turkish economic policy in Georgia

In addition to the political and geopolitical gains that Turkey has pursued in Georgia there have been considerable efforts from Ankara to promote Turkish business and economic projects.

Turkey and Azerbaijan have interchangeably taken the lead in foreign trade with Georgia since the mid-2000s. Naturally, statistics show the import and export of considerable volumes of energy resources, but Turkish investments and turnover in a number of spheres indicate that during recent years, Turkey has noticeably increased its economic presence overall. Analysis of the data provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia describes

the change and the dynamics over the last two decades (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2014b). While the trade volume between 1995 and 2003 did not exceed $200 million, from 2004 to 2007 the volume almost doubled. This was not only thanks to the Georgian leadership's economic policy after the Rose Revolution, but also a result of Ankara's active economic policy. In July 2006, the Russian market became almost inaccessible for Georgian products because Russia partially closed the Upper Lars border gate, the only checkpoint between the two countries, for renovation purposes. Turkey was quick to react, and a number of new initiatives were launched. As a result, Georgia and Turkey signed the Free Trade Agreement in November 2007, and as soon as it was put into force, the volume of bilateral trade drastically increased. Evidently, this was stimulated not only by the agreement but also by the closed Georgia–Russia border resulting from the South Ossetian war, a complete start-up of energy programs and other relevant factors related to Turkish economic performance.

One can observe a similar increase when analyzing Turkish foreign direct investments (FDI) in Georgia (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2014b and 2014c). In the case of both foreign trade and FDI, certain patterns emerge. For instance, between 1997 and 2003 Turkish total investments barely reached $103 million, however in the following nine years Turkish investments saw sweeping growth up to $864 million. Turkish investors in the Georgian economy are predominantly interested in the textile industry, agriculture, construction and energy. Dozens of Turkish construction companies, with a working volume of over $1 billion, are engaged in various projects including the construction of hydropower stations, roads and railroads (Chkhikvadze 2011, p. 6). In 1999, ten Turkish entrepreneurs founded an association of Georgian and Turkish businessmen called *Gürcu ve Türk Işadamlari derneği* (GÜRTIAD), which aimed to protect and promote their interests in Georgia. Now its governing body has 66 members, representing one executive from each Turkish company operating in Georgia (Gürtiad 2009).

Thus, the period between 2006 and 2007 was a turning point in enhancing trade and economic relations, after which the Georgian market became more open to Turkish capital and investments. That period also coincided with the Turkish "green capital" and business elite, the so-called Anatolian Tigers, looking for new markets. As a result, a number of Turkish enterprises actively penetrated the Georgian market. Most visible was the construction of new terminals in the Tbilisi and Batumi airports by TAV Urban Georgia, a subsidiary of TAV Group (Tepe-Akfen-Vie)[3], which was also able to obtain the long-term exclusive agreements for management of the airports and flight services[4]. The Georgian leadership, particularly Ivanishvili's administration, periodically criticized the high fees fixed by TAV for running these airports as they affected the ticket prices (Göksel 2013, p. 4). TAV's appearance in the Georgian market led five Turkish airline companies to be more actively engaged in Georgian air transportation (Turkish Airlines, AtlasJet, Pegasus, AnadoluJet and BoraJet). Turkish airline companies carry out regular flights

from two Georgian airports to Ankara and Istanbul. The latter has also become an important transit hub for travelling in and out of Georgia. More notable is the agreement signed between Turkey and Georgia on 14 March 2006 regarding the joint operation of the Batumi Airport, which enabled the small Turkish city of Hopa—on the coast just 10 kilometres south of the border and without an airport—to be included in Turkey's domestic flight system. In other words, the Hopa Airport mentioned in the Turkish versions of various Turkish airlines' websites is in reality the same as Batumi Airport[5].

The branches of two commercial banks, T.C. Ziraat Bankası and Türkiye Iş Bankası, operate in Tbilisi and Batumi. The first bank was established in Tbilisi in 1998, initially under the name Emlak Bank Tbilisi Branch, and in 2001 was registered as JSC Ziraat Bankasi A.Ş. Tbilisi Branch. It should however be noted that the Turkish name "T.C. Ziraat Bankası" is written at the entrance of the bank. The second bank, JSC Turkey Işbank A.Ş. Batumi Branch, was opened in Batumi in July 2012, and has the same status as a bank branch in Turkey would have (National Bank of Georgia, Financial Indices, n.d.). Each of the banks has only one office and no other service centres on Georgia's territory. Moreover, reports prepared by the bank indicate that financial and credit transactions are relatively modest in comparison to other commercial banks operating in Georgia. This rather modest presence in the Georgian banking industry is explained by two factors: (a) Georgia's small economy is already over-banked, and (b) these branches simply followed their business to Georgia to perform services to a restricted number of clients (Patsuria 2012).

The enhancement of economic cooperation after 2004 and the growth of Turkey's macroeconomic figures stimulated the Georgian labour force to explore employment opportunities there. Especially after 2006, due to the cancellation of the visa regime between the two countries, an unprecedented number of people left for Turkey. In the following years, Turkey became one of the most important destinations for Georgian labour migration (ERGEM 2013). Remittances from Turkey to Georgia have shown some interesting patterns too. Those data show that just like in the cases of trade turnover and foreign investments, 2004 was a turning point for money transfers as well. Between 2004 and 2007, remittances from Turkey totalled $46.7 million; after the Free Trade Agreement was signed (21 November 2007), they reached $179.4 million in 2008–2013 (National Bank of Georgia, Statistics, n.d.).

Nonetheless, it is thought in some Georgian public and analytical circles that despite the Georgian leadership's work in engaging Turkish investments, the results fell short. As Alexander Rondeli, president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, put it during an interview: 'the Turkish great capital never came to Georgia' (Interview with Alexander Rondeli, 6/10/2014). Most of the interviewees shared that idea and agreed that the efforts to attract Turkish capital did not go hand in hand with the observable results. In their thinking, no matter how open the Georgian market was

for Turkish (or any) capital, it was not flexible and could be no more attractive than its actual size allowed.

Though the political forces in Georgia are for the most part positively oriented towards the expansion of Turkish capital and business, some political figures openly express their concern over Turkey's growing role. On top of the negative position taken by members of the Georgian Dream coalition during the pre-election campaign and following the elections, there are some political forces outside the parliament, namely the nationalist Free Georgia party and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, which have been particularly outspoken. For example, the head of the Free Georgia party, Kakha Kukava, mentioned in an interview:

> We certainly welcome the investments, but there are a lot of cases when the Turkish entrepreneurs' behaviour is obscure. For example, people selling shawarma in Batumi and Tbilisi central avenues and highways put Turkey's flag next to it. Their motivation is incomprehensible; what is the need for sticking the Turkish flag beside shawarma? Such actions are not perceived amicably in Georgia. (Interview with Kakha Kukava, 11/10/2014)

He added that his party perceived Turkey as a threat to Georgia's national interests, but also explained that he was against extreme measures and was of the opinion that Turkey's expansion to Georgia must be prevented by diplomatic means (ibid.).

Cultural–religious implications of Turkish soft power politics in Georgia

In parallel with the economic expansion, Turkish leadership has also attached a particular importance to religious, educational, cultural and humanitarian initiatives. Some interpreted the advancement of these initiatives as purposeful steps to shape a positive attitude towards Turkey in Georgian society; others saw a lack of synchronization among these policies, questioning whether they were systematically designed and implemented from one centre. The fact remains that just like in dozens of other countries, Turkey started to apply leverage to spread its religious, ideological and cultural influence in Georgia. By and large, those initiatives are coordinated by three increasingly influential state institutions attached to the Turkish Prime Ministry: the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (*Türkiye İşbirliği ve Kalkınma İdaresi*, TİKA), Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centres (Öktem 2012) and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet).

TİKA has implemented a number of large-scale projects in Georgia since 1994. The programs completed in recent years have included the improvement of social and economic infrastructures and services, repairing and furnishing educational centres, organization of educational programs (vocational,

language teaching, etc.), health care and improvement of drinking water and sanitation. It should be noted, however, that the Georgian beneficiaries of TİKA are mostly the Muslim-populated territories, and only a few programs have been implemented in Tbilisi and Gori. According to the 2012 annual report, Georgia has received 4.23 per cent of TİKA's overall financial, vocational and technical support, which made Georgia the seventh largest TİKA beneficiary by spending size (Yıldız p. 24–25, 158–165). Georgia is also the second largest beneficiary in the post-Soviet space, after Kyrgyzstan. The 2014 annual report, which was published in late 2016, however, shows that Georgia's share from TİKA budget has significantly decreased as it was the sixth in the list of seven countries in the Central Asia and Caucasus region receiving assistance from TİKA (TİKA annual report, 2014, p. 28–31).

In 2007, Ankara decided to set up Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centres worldwide, which aimed at balancing the influence of the Gülen Schools and promoting the Turkish language, literature, history, culture and art. These centres have been established based on the model of the Goethe-Institut, British Council, Instituto Cervantes and other similar institutions (Kaya 2013, p. 56–59). Bülent Arinç, the Turkish deputy prime minister, inaugurated the Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre in Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University in May 2012. The chairman of the Yunus Emre Foundation, Ali Fuat Bilkan, mentioned in his opening address that the political and economic relations between Turkey and Georgia 'had attained a perfect level, thus the establishment of Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre in Tbilisi would be a bridge between the Turkish and the Georgian languages, culture and arts and would heighten the cooperation between the two countries' (The Tbilisi Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre Opened 2012). At the opening ceremony the president of the university noted that the centre would be 'of great service to the educational and cultural life of Georgia' (ibid.). According to the Embassy of Turkey in Georgia, the Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre has also opened departments of Turkish Studies in Akaki Tsereteli State University in Kutaisi, the second largest city in Georgia, and in the State Educational University of Akhaltsikhe, a city in the southeast of Georgia which is largely inhabited by Armenians (Dışişleri Bakanlığı 2012).

The activity of the third state institution, the Presidency of Religious Affairs or the Diyanet, has focused on a couple of spheres in Georgia which predominantly relate to religious and spiritual issues. Unlike the previous two institutions, the Diyanet has been active in Turkey since 1924, and has expanded its activity abroad since the 1980s. Subsequently, it has significant experience in dealing with Muslim communities abroad. According to the 2014 national census, only 10.7 per cent of the Georgian population identified as Muslim (2014 Census). However, the leaders of Muslim organizations claim that the real number is at least twice that, as many people don't feel comfortable declaring their religious identity. The Muslim populations in Georgia live primarily in the regions of Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and Adjara and comprise followers of both Shi'ism and Sunnism. The Diyanet and its consultants

provide various religious services in Georgia: helping Georgian nationals in organizing the hajj, teaching imams, training theologians and providing scholarships for post-graduate studies. It also coordinates financial support and advising in the restoration of mosques and the building of new ones (Korkut 2010, p. 117–139). The Turkish consulate in Batumi supports the Diyanet in spreading Islamic literature in Georgian in Adjara, and sends Turkish religious leaders there to preach in various mosques (Balci and Motika 2007, p. 349). The Diyanet leadership visits Georgia regularly and holds meetings with the leaders of Georgia's muftiates. It was also behind the initiative to open the second biggest madrasa in Georgia in the village of Meore Kesalo in 2000 (Ganich 2011). In 1995, the Presidency of Religious Affairs established the Eurasian Islamic Council (Avrasya Islam Şurası, EIC), which has become an important factor in promoting Turkey's interests among Muslim communities in the Balkans and former Soviet states (Öktem 2012, p. 89). So far, the EIC has organized eight conferences which have been attended by Georgian Muslim community leaders, including muftis from Adjara.

Despite the Diyanet's seemingly widespread involvement, Balci and Motika argue that its impact is far less significant than that of religious brotherhoods, Turkish transnational religious movements and missionary organizations and their local partners, which lack the Diyanet's means but are more efficient in promoting Islam and the re-Islamization of formerly Muslim people in Adjara (2007, p. 348–349). Thus, a number of religious brotherhoods and schools of Sufism, which are officially banned in Turkey since 1925, were quick to open branch offices in Adjara and in Tbilisi. For instance, there are at least a few dozen unregistered madrasas and convention centres in Adjara which allegedly belong to the Naqshbandi, Süleymancı, Nurchular and Fethullahcı religious movements and orders (Ivanov 2011, p. 93–94, Mkrtchyan and Khutsishvili 2014, p. 254). The informal operation of these organizations oftentimes collides with the activities of the Diyanet. In addition, Vladimir Ivanov claims that Turkish citizens of Georgian origin contributed to the spread of Islam in Georgia, particularly in Adjara (Ivanov 2011, p. 94). It is believed that Turkish businessmen operating in Georgia also support these movements (Balci and Motika 2007, p. 348).

In addition to the above-mentioned state institutions, a number of Turkish educational institutions belonging to the Fethullah Gülen network also operate in Georgia. Before the rift between the Turkish ruling party—especially Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—and Fethullah Gülen in December 2013, that network provided significant support to many Turkish policy initiatives. As long as the Turkish government and the Gülen network peacefully coexisted in Turkey, many of their activities in Georgia, and elsewhere for that matter, complemented each other and were mutually supportive. As independent actors the two groups have sometimes challenged each other and engaged in fierce competition, but by and large the government and the Gülen network have contributed to creating a positive image of Turkey among many Georgians.

The Gülen schools in Georgia are widely known as "Turkish schools" and operate under the auspices of the Çağlar Educational Institutions (*Çağlar Eğitim Kurumları*, ÇEK), established in February 1993. Since then, the ÇEK has established seven schools and one university in Georgia[6]. With the exception of the first two schools and the university, the other five were established after the Rose Revolution during Saakashvili's presidency. Turkish citizens are largely responsible for both administrative duties and the teaching at the Gülen schools. These schools are known for state-of-the-art facilities and advanced technical solutions. They pay special attention to participation in the Turkish Language Olympiads (*Türkçe Olimpiyatları*), which allow students to visit Turkey, be acquainted with the program organizers and establish contacts. Notably, a flexible and complementary system has been established between the schools and the university. Pre-school and middle school graduates receive tuition fee discounts when studying at university. During their university years, students also have the opportunity to periodically take part in Turkish cultural events and often visit Turkish educational and academic institutions. Even though these schools were established by the Gülenists, according to a professor at the International Black Sea University, there is no overt propaganda for the Gülen movement or for Turkey in the curriculum (Interview with Nika Chitadze, 10/10/2014). Meanwhile, the Turkish flag flies alongside the Georgian flag in front of all the buildings, and both flags, shaking hands with each other, are imprinted on the logos of all the schools. At any rate, students and teachers encounter Turkey-associated symbols every day. In fact, Balci and Motika claimed in 2007 that the Fethullahi schools 'contribute to balance the poor image of Turks in Georgia, and over the medium term they will certainly educate some of the country's new elite' (2007, p. 348). The Turkish Embassy in Georgia also carries out programs not listed in the embassy's website. For instance, Alexander Rondeli said that his organization had implemented the Atatürk Lessons in Leadership program with the assistance of the Turkish Embassy in Tbilisi. During the program's four months of operation, around two dozen officials from different ministries delivered lectures on different topics, and in the last week of the course a Turkish diplomat gave a series of lectures titled 'Atatürk's Role in Establishing the New State'. Tens of thousands of Georgian Laris were allocated for that program (Interview with Alexander Rondeli, 6/10/2014). In light of the various Turkish outreach projects in Georgia, the next important question is whether they are having the desired effect.

Emerging disapproval towards Turkish policy

A public opinion survey conducted every year between 2009 and 2013 by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) (n.d.) shows a notable tendency among Georgians (cross-country data sets 2009–2015). Two questions were asked to gauge public opinion about the Turks: (a) what people thought of doing joint business with Turks and (b) what they thought of Georgian

women marrying Turks. The following table (Table 1.1) reflects the change in public opinion throughout the last five years.

The president of the CRRC noted that the Georgian public is in fact predominantly in favour of developing interstate relations with Turkey, rather than enhancing inter-societal and interpersonal relations (Interview with Turmanidze).

Taking the above-mentioned facts into consideration, what is the reason for the observed differences in perception between the Georgian public and the political leadership regarding the Turkish presence in Georgia? Which groups (public, political or institutional) are expressing opinions that differ from those of the authorities in regards to Turkey's growing influence? One of these, of course, is the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has been an important factor in shaping Georgian identity and has often played a major role in domestic political discourse. Although 'its impact on Georgian foreign policy can best be described as marginal' (Jones and Kakhishvili 2013, p. 22), it has nonetheless been instrumental in shaping and disseminating anti-Turkish sentiments within Georgian society. With apparent endorsement from the Georgian Dream coalition, the church grew more outspoken about its religious objectives, which included defending the exclusive rights of the Orthodox Church in Georgia, re-Christianization in Islamic communities and defying rising Islamist tendencies.

As a matter of fact, Georgians' attitudes towards Turkey and the Turks also continue to be shaped by specific historical factors. Primarily, the memory of conflicts and encounters during the Ottoman period is still vivid in the general Georgian public perception (Djikija 1947, Paičaje 1989). Some analysts contextualize the historical factor of public opinion within modern influences. Rondeli argues that '[without] Turkey's support in the first years of independence, it was quite possible that Georgia might not even exist' (Interview with Alexander Rondeli, 6/10/2014). Çelikpala similarly stresses that 'Turkey prevented Georgia from turning into a failed state by supporting

Table 1.1 Public opinion about Turks in Georgia

Date	*What do you think of doing joint business with the Turks?*	*Do you approve of Georgian women marrying the Turks?*
2009	75% Yes	19% Yes
2010	66% Yes	19% Yes
2011	66% Yes	21% Yes
2012	65% Yes	20% Yes
2013	72% Yes	23% Yes
2015	61% Yes	27% Yes

the efforts to create a strong and efficient state' (Çelikpala 2007, p. 28). 'At the same time', Rondeli goes on,

> [T]he historical memory is, in any case, alive, and a great part of the population is still vigilant against the Turks. The public perception about the Turks may be divided in two groups: those, who mostly approve a Russia-oriented policy, do not acknowledge the Turks a priori, and those who are more realistic, are for the Turks. When you are under Russia's pressure, then you naturally have to look at both Turkey and Iran differently. Of course, a large [anti-Turkish] propaganda is carried out for most of the part by circles closely related to the church, sometimes they deserve it and sometimes not. Anti-Turkish propaganda has always existed, for example, if it comes to the Turkish brothels, then the Georgian mass media trumpets on and on, but in case of Georgian brothels, not a single word is said. (Interview with Alexander Rondeli, 6/10/2014)

Kapanadze comments that 'the roles of Russia and Turkey have been often discussed in public debates. And in this comparison it is being pinpointed that Turkey in fact has occupied more territories from Georgia than Russia did, so what is the difference?' (Interview with Sergi Kapanadze, 7/10/2014).

For his part, Saakashvili regrets not having sent many young people to Turkey for travel and studies during his term.

> Very few people in my country actually know Turkey. This explains why some old prejudices remain. There are many prejudices left behind. But they could be easily overcome. It was overcome at the government level. But (…) we did not realize that prejudices prevailed among some parts of the population. (Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili 2013, p. 20–21)

As Göksel puts it, the Turkish–Georgian economic and strategic integration projects have not been accompanied by the development of ties between opinion shapers and analysts/strategists in the civil society, think tank or media communities. Strikingly, neither the strategic setting as it affects Georgia–Turkey relations nor the ups and downs in bilateral relations have received much attention in public debates (Göksel 2013, p. 5). In Kapanadze's view, Turkey's cultural policy is not visible in the public, despite all efforts. It does not push the public to become pro-Turkish, and Georgian traditions are not being replaced with Turkish ones. He claims that Turkey does play a significant role, but not as much as the EU and the US do (Interview with Sergi Kapanadze, 7/10/2014). On the other hand, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, director of the Institute for Eurasian Studies, claims that because of Turkish 'cultural expansion' to Georgia, 'an image of Turkey is cultivated in Georgia, as a very advanced nation, which as it turns out, had done only positive things during its history' (Mikhaylov 2015).

Turkish organizations run a variety of humanitarian, cultural and educational programs, which have attracted wide attention in Georgia. Those projects are serving their purpose and generally a positive rather than negative image of Turkey has been slowly but steadily taking shape in Georgia. Simultaneously, different political and social groups are trying to reach out to the public and communicate what they see as the "true nature" of the Turkish presence in Georgia, with various negative implications. Religious and historical arguments are widely used to back up their opinions, which still seem to be quite dominant among the Georgian population.

Adjara: questions of cultural and religious heritage

Besides achievements in bilateral cooperation, certain complexities still exist between the two countries. We will focus here mostly on the emblematic and revealing case of Adjara.

The National Statistic Office of Georgia has published a report on the population of Adjara, which reveals some interesting trends. First, the population in the administrative region of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara has grown by more than 26,000 people between 2004 and 2014, reaching 396,000 (National Statistic Office of Georgia, 2014a). Besides internal migration, the growth in the population is due to several thousand Turkish citizens of Georgian origin being granted Georgian citizenship (the circulated figure is 20,000); they are assumed to have settled mainly in Batumi. As was argued in various interviews, only Turkish nationals who were able to prove their Georgian origin were granted citizenship.

The Turkish economic and cultural presence is more visible in Adjara than in other parts of Georgia. According to data from 2002, more than 120,000 Muslims lived there, amounting to 30 per cent of all Georgian Muslims. The figure is likely to be higher today. Their main places of residence are Batumi, the mountainous regions of Keda and to a lesser extent Khulo, Kobuleti and Shuakhevi (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, p. 107). A 2013 report also explains that the socioeconomic conditions in the mountainous regions of Adjara are harsh, and the local Muslim population undergoes various manipulations from the Turkish side in addition to facing discrimination by the local self-governing authorities (ibid.).

Turkish religious organizations have a few dozen boarding schools in Adjara where children from poor families get free education, after which many go to Turkey for religious studies. Notably, since 1993 thousands of Georgian citizens—mostly from Adjara and Kvemo Kartli, a region of southeastern Georgia with a large Muslim population—have left for Turkey for religious education (both higher and vocational) and Quranic courses (Aslamova 2014). Most of them have returned and enlisted for service in mosques in different Georgian settlements. It is worth noting that besides Turkey, some Georgian Muslims also leave for Iran and Saudi Arabia (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, p. 119). According to May 2014 data, there were 311 mosques in Georgia

(Diyanet 2014), although most of them are prayer houses officially registered as mosques. Based on data from 2009, 184 of those mosques are in Adjara, 140 of which have been built in recent years.

In the past few years, debates over a number of programs implemented by Turkey in Georgia have become especially intense, particularly concerning the restoration of mosques or construction of new ones. The Georgian Orthodox Church is resolutely struggling against the Turkish presence in Georgia, fighting for the conversion of local Muslims to Christianity and the reconstruction of Georgian churches on Turkish territory. A number of Georgian clergymen who preach about Adjara's de-Turkification have been most renowned for their anti-Turkish hard-line stance. They organize mass baptisms administered 'for the sake of getting people back to their ancestors' religion' (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, p. 122–123). One of the priests, Father Theodor, states that 'Islam came to Adjara with blood and violence (…) Those who adopted Islam stayed pure-blooded Georgians and refused to mix their blood with the Turkish blood' (Aslamova 2014). The construction of a huge Orthodox church right in the centre of Khulo, a predominantly Muslim town in Adjara, is a vivid instance of the Georgian Orthodox Church's efforts. The local population saw that step as provocative and conflictual (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, p. 121). Other notable actions include the dismantling of mosques and minarets in a number of Muslim-populated settlements (Chela, Samtatskaro, Nigvziani and Tsintskaro), burning down a mosque (in the village of Mughanlo, Gardabani region) or even protests against the Friday prayers in some mosques, which some may argue are directed by the Orthodox Church.

Crucially, some analysts and political circles hint at the development of potential hotbeds of tension based on religious identity. Some people claim that Turkey's activity in Georgia and its support to Georgian Muslims is targeted at creating a stronghold in Georgia. However, it is Georgian Muslims, and to an extent Muslims of other ethnic groups, who find those claims unacceptable, because those accusations paint them as incomplete Georgians and alienated citizens. In addition, they insist that Turkey pursues economic interests in Georgia at large, and Georgian Muslims lack effective tools to become a fifth column for Turkey (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, p. 128). The last few years have seen more and more reports filed about confrontations, threats, intimidations, verbal offences and warnings between the residents of communities in Guria, Kvemo Kartli and especially Adjara. There were reports of Christian villagers referring to their Muslim neighbours as 'Tatars' and 'followers of some foreign religion', which were perceived negatively and in a pejorative light by Georgian Muslims (Sutidze 2013). Emerging instances of minor conflict prompted many young people in Adjara to reconfigure their religious identities 'in order to be perceived as more legitimate members of the Georgian nation' (Liles 2012, p. 2).

Another controversial issue in the relations between Georgia and Turkey involves the maintenance and disposition of the cultural heritage of both countries. Alongside the development of interstate relations, particularly

since 2005, the Georgian Orthodox Church has been consistently posing the issue of reconstructing a few churches and monasteries in the northeastern part of Turkey (Oshki, Ishkhan, Khandzta, Otkhta, Ardashen and Khakhuli) (Pravoslavie.ru 2013). Although the authenticity of the Georgian Orthodox Church's claim to those sites is regularly questioned by the Armenian Apostolic Church and some Armenian historians and art historians, at this point the Georgian Orthodox Church is more persistent in pressing the reconstruction of those churches. Simultaneously, the Turkish side insists on the reconstruction of the Aziziye Mosque in Batumi and the repair of the Kvirike Mosque in Kobuleti and the Ahmadiya and Jakeli Mosques in Akhaltsikhe. It should be noted that the conditions put forward by the two parties and the lists of religious structures on the table periodically change (Mindiashvili 2012).

Georgian religious leaders insist that before talking about building a new mosque or repairing one in Adjara, one should seriously address the issue of preserving the churches of the Tayk-Kgharjk (Tao-Klarjeti) diocese, located mostly in northeastern Turkey. They also argue about their inalienable right to administer religious ceremonies and services there. The Georgian clergy demands that just like Armenians, Greeks and Jews, Georgians should be granted minority rights in Turkey, which will provide them with legal status and which they believe will be followed by the return of churches and monasteries to the Georgian Orthodox Church[7]. The Turkish side counter-argues that even if the Georgians living in Turkey were granted religious minority status due to their growing number, it would have no retroactive effect on the return of the supposedly Georgian church estates and inventory seized in 1936.

In discussing the realities in Adjara and the status of Georgian religious buildings in Turkey, one might get the impression that the whole Georgian public disagrees with Turkish policy either silently or audibly. In fact, the following argument by Eka Tkeshelashvili reflects the mindset of Saakashvili's presidency:

> [F]rankly speaking (…) Turkey has never played any deconstructive role in Adjara and has done nothing which might cause anybody's discontent. For those living in Adjara, Turkey's neighbourhood is very beneficiary in essence; active cooperation in economic, touristic and trade spheres creates no uneasiness at all. (Interview with Eka Tkashelashvili, 7/10/2014)

She also criticized those organizations and public circles which condemn Turkey but glorify Russia, calling them 'deconstructive and anti-democratic forces' (ibid.).

Conclusion

Georgia's importance for Turkey is more than evident and the annually growing economic influence proves it. The analysis of political and economic

dynamics indicates that in deepening bilateral relations, Turkey and Georgia pursue different objectives deriving from different (geo)political realities and ambitions. If Turkey aspires to a geopolitical, economic, religious and socio-cultural presence in Georgia, then Georgian policy towards Turkey is based primarily on trade, economic and social factors. Most Georgian public and political figures, as well as the vast majority of the research community, is positively oriented towards Turkey's presence in Georgia's economic and strategic spheres. Nevertheless, there is visible and growing resistance from some political forces, the Georgian Orthodox Church and church-affiliated circles. Due to the importance of these groups for Georgian society, a sizeable part of the population supports the resistance. The people debate about the inherent problems that Georgia faces when it allows a strong Turkish presence in Georgia's strategically important domains. Since 2004, Turkey's growing influence in the Georgian economy, Georgia's engagement in the energy programs directed from the Caspian region to the West and the ongoing ambiguity in relations between Georgia and Russia have created a systemic opportunity for Turkey to extend its political influence in Georgia.

Religion also plays a role in Turkey's policy towards Georgia. Unlike the economic and political dimensions of Turkey's soft power politics, the religious component faces certain difficulties and hurdles. The criticism and counteractions by the Georgian Orthodox Church and different sections of Georgian society have visibly limited the options for Turkish religious influence. In spite of that, a limited number of communities in Georgia are poised to cooperate with Turkey in religious affairs. For now, Turkey has not been able to completely rely on these groups for two reasons: their number is small and cooperation could lead to conflict with the religious majority organization in Georgia. This indicates that the religious part of Turkey's soft power policy towards Georgia remains subordinated to the general goals. As manifestations of soft power on religious groups have become more visible, the distinction between the religious aspects and the cultural and economic aspects of soft power has grown.

Notes

1 Certain ideas and approaches of this research have been discussed in my previous works 'The Kars-Akhalkalaki Railway Project: Why Armenia Should Revisit its Position', *Turkish Review*, 6 (3), 2016, p. 130–135, and 'Cooperation Paradigms in the South Caucasus and Beyond: Making Sense of Turkish–Georgian relations', *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines*, 4, 2014, p. 103–125.
2 This argument was made by Davutoğlu as an advisor to the prime minister. The script of the interview was published as an article: *Davutoğlu* 2008, p. 80.
3 The latter has built more than 20 airports both in and out of Turkey.
4 The Batumi Airport is to be administered by TAV until 2027, and the Tbilisi Airport exploitation contract was prolonged from predetermined 2027 to 2037.
5 Passengers departing from Hopa check-in at the Turkish Airlines Office situated at the Hopa port, and then they are taken to the Batumi Airport by HAVAS company buses. That journey takes about 30 minutes, and what is more, the buses do not

stop at the Turkey–Georgia border. Then they pass on the territory of the Batumi Airport, and passengers are taken to the departure hall waiting to get on board the planes. Upon the arrival, the same HAVAS busses meet the passengers leaving for Hopa right beside the plane, which takes people to Hopa, once again never having a stop on the border control point. The flight numbers from Batumi and Hopa are the same, but the tickets have quite different prices, since in case of Hopa there are domestic prices, and Batumi Airport taxes are not paid.

6 Schools belonging to that network are: *Tbilisi Private Demireli School*, est. in 1993; *R. Sahin Friendship Primary Secondary School*, est. in 1994; *Kutaisi Niko Nikoladze Primary Secondary School*, est. in 2004; *Primary School "Skhivi"*, est. in 2011; *Tiflis Nikolaz Tsereteli International School*, est. in 2006; *Rustabi Rustaveli Primary Secondary School*, est. in 2007; *Marneuli Agmashenebeli Primary School*, est. in 2011; and *International Black Sea University* in Tbilisi, est. in 1995.

7 Georgian Patriarchate suggests Turkey allow services in Christian churches in return for allowing a mosque to be built in Georgia, April 2013.

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2 Common faith in scrutiny

Orthodoxy as soft power in Russia–Georgia relations

Salome Minesashvili

Introduction

Since the earliest phase of Russia–Georgia relations, common faith has been claimed as the basis of the two countries' relationship. The Treaty of Georgiyevsk in 1783, through which Georgia sought protection from the Russian Empire, marked Russia's entrance into Georgian history under exactly this ideological banner. The Georgian King Erekle II signed the treaty under the presumption that Georgia would preserve its national self-identification against Muslim aggressors under the protection of Christian Russia. To this day, Russian policy has frequently referred to religious sentiments (Pkhaladze 2012, p. 27). Common faith was repeatedly stressed as the basis for Russia–Georgia relations during the 1990s. For instance, when Russian President Boris Yeltsin visited Georgia in 1994, he and Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze visited Sioni Cathedral to meet the Patriarch. The meeting was emphasized as a gathering of the leaders of two Christian, and therefore friendly nations (Kurbanov and Kurbanov 1995).

Particularly in the current post-2008 war context, with ceased diplomatic relations between Georgia and its northern neighbour, the role of religion as a potential medium is elevated. This is especially relevant given that the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) still maintain invariably positive relations after the war. This opens up the potential for politics to instrumentalize religion and, at the same time, for the churches to play a political role.

The GOC's and ROC's activities have frequently had an implicit, if not explicit, political aspect. Both wish to participate and have a say in the political arena. Whereas the GOC has become a moral challenger of the Georgian government on domestic issues, the ROC closely cooperates with the Russian state.

The GOC maintains a high level of authority with a 91 per cent trust rating from Georgian society (International Republican Institute 2015), which is one of the five most religious nations in the world (*The Telegraph* 2015). This strong standing in society gives the church the ability to set an agenda not only for moral but also for social and political issues in the country. The Constitutional

Agreement (or so-called Concordat) between the Georgian state and the GOC in 2002 further reinforced the church's powerful position in society, equipping the GOC with special privileges including tax exemption (The Patriarchate of Georgia 2002). The GOC holds the power to influence Georgian politics both directly and indirectly. The indirect influence stems from its authority among the political parties, who often seek legitimacy from the patriarch (Kekelia *et al*. 2013, Jödicke 2015). Moreover, some clergymen actively engaged in the campaign process during the 2012 elections (Naskidashvili 2013). On several occasions, the GOC has also attempted to alter political decisions more directly. In 2011 and 2014, Patriarch Ilia II protested against an amendment in the civil code on the registration of religious minority groups and opposed the anti-discrimination law on equal rights for sexual minorities and gender equality.

In Russia, the ROC is also deeply interconnected with political affairs. The church closely cooperates with the Russian state, including on foreign policy. For instance, a group of experts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has held regular sessions with ROC representatives since 2003 (Payne 2010). The ROC supports Russian integration projects like the Eurasian Economic Union, and is particularly supportive of cultural institutions such as Russkiy Mir (the Russian World Foundation), whose goals coincide with Russia's sphere of cultural influence (Curanovic 2015, p. 195–196). Patriarch Kirill not only supports state initiatives but also complements them by imbuing his own institutions with religiously inspired Russian ideology. One such example is the Russian People's Council, which offers its Orthodox viewpoints on different social and political issues (Popkova 2011, p. 673).

At the same time, the Russian state actively employs religion as a tool in its soft power policy. Conceptually, the ROC has become the core of the soft power strategy that Russia has been developing to compete with its perceived rivals (Kornilov and Makarychev 2015, p. 241, Payne 2010). This ideological project is intended not merely for self-identification but also for facilitating reintegration processes in Russia's perceived sphere of influence. It implies that Russia understands its rivalry with the West from a civilizational perspective, and has consequently proposed its own version of civilization known as the "Russian world"—*russkiy mir*. As an alternative to the secularized West, Russia has sought a return to traditional values blended with the idea of "Orthodox civilization" (Leustean 2015, Kornilov and Makarychev 2015). Russian leaders find the church to be an important tool in this identity construction and export (Zevelev 2009), which contributes to the country's supposed spiritual security as well as linking external and internal security (Payne 2010). As Putin noted back in 2002: 'there are no more labour collectives, party units, and organizations, as there were in times of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. There are no tutors or mentors and therefore nothing else but religion can offer universal values to people' (Pravda 2002).

In its soft power policy, Russia must find religion particularly appealing in the non-Slavic Orthodox states such as Georgia. In relations with its southern

neighbour, the religious dimension is unquestionably significant considering the high religiosity of Georgian society, the GOC's influential role nationwide and its positive relationship with the ROC as well as the Russian state.

With this context in mind, this chapter investigates how political and religious elements intersect in Russia–Georgia relations and to what extent soft power is part of the game. Specifically, keeping in mind the churches' involvement in domestic politics, this research seeks to study the transnational nature of their political role and how they form part of Russian soft power policy. For this purpose, this paper focuses on the potential objects of Russian soft power in Georgia: the GOC and the multiple public groups that are inclined to a pro-Russian and anti-Western position. It examines the extent to which the GOC and the ROC share a similar ideological footing and similar values, and how this translates into the GOC's political position and activities on the international arena. It also looks at the role religion plays in the pro-Russian advocacy groups in Georgia and to what extent they reflect Russian soft power.

The discourses, actions and decisions of the GOC and pro-Russian groups in Georgia constitute the focus of this research. The analysis is based on a contextual study of sources such as the speeches, statements and official documents of Georgian clergymen and the GOC as an institution, as well as of pro-Russian groups. This data is further complemented by 23 in-depth interviews with clergymen, group representatives, politicians and experts in the field.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: first, I overview the GOC's ideology and examine how its anti-Western values and attitudes position the church towards the ROC and generally in the religious world. Second, I analyze the GOC's transnational political relations with Russia and the West, from an ideological and geopolitical perspective. Third, I scrutinize the political preferences of pro-Russian groups in Georgia, examining to what extent religion plays a role in their construction and how they find support among the Georgian public. Finally, I summarize the grounds for Russian soft power in Georgia and discuss the intersection between religion and politics in GOC and ROC relations.

Anti-Western ideology as common ground for the Georgian and Russian Orthodox Churches

This section overviews the main ideological basis of the GOC as potential grounds for Russian soft power and examines the extent to which the affinity between the GOC's and ROC's values translates into specific positioning in the religious world. The GOC is treated as a composition of multiple groups and individuals, rather than an entirely homogenous entity. Indeed, multiple groups with distinct positions operate inside the Georgian Church (Sutidze 2013). Some interview partners divide these groups in terms of having relatively liberal and relatively fundamentalist or ethnic nationalist

values (Abashidze, personal communication, 1/10/2014, Chikvaidze, personal communication, 20/10/2014). However, they also note that the nationalists dominate church discourse and the liberals only represent a minority with a rather weak stance (Gamrekelashvili, Papuashvili, Dalalishvili, personal communication). When I refer to the GOC's position, I imply an official institutional judgment voiced by its head, the patriarch, and official statements from the GOC website, but I also take into consideration the concordant positions of the majority of church members.

The GOC has had a dominant position in (re)constructing national identity since the 1990s, to fill the ideological vacuum after Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union (Sumbadze 2012, Kekelia *et al*. 2013). The official pronouncements of GOC leaders on national identity are interwoven with values and attitudes that feed a specific type of ethnic nationalism. Religion thus becomes the primary component in national identity, contributing to a gaze towards the supposedly idyllic past, to a fear of contact with the impure and to antagonism towards the liberal project, cosmopolitanism, ecumenism and globalization (Mamardashvili 2010, Gavashelishvili 2012, Ladaria 2012, Kekelia *et al*. 2013). The GOC defines the concept of true "Georgianness" only as an embodiment of Christian moral values, and as such constantly advocates for its own authority over the civil government. This is the most emphasized topic in the epistles since 1997, arguing that liberalism will work in favour of state enemies and highlighting the importance of governing the state in accordance with the moral agenda (EMC 2014).

Patriarch Ilia II has stated several times that the Orthodox faith is unique, and moreover, that Orthodoxy represents a privileged civilization. Based on this premise, the GOC demonstrates significant intolerance towards other religious confessions as it seeks privileged status in the religious market. Religious pluralism is labelled as religious indifference by the Patriarch, who considers it impossible to situate all the religions, sects and other confessions within the same scope: 'even an underdeveloped person knows that there is only one truth' (EMC 2014). This ideological stance is often reified in practice as well. In 2011, Patriarch Ilia II protested against an amendment in the civil code which gave religious minority groups the right to be registered as legal entities according to public law. The amendment was preceded by protests from the patriarchate, fearing that it would raise ownership issues for some disputed churches, particularly with the Armenian Church. The Georgian Church condemned the law, saying it conflicted with both state and church interests (Civil Georgia 2011).

This emphasis on the primacy of the GOC has contributed to several instances where the rights of religious minorities were violated. One such example dates back to the beginning of the 2000s, when clergyman Basil Mkalavishvili led violent protests against Jehovah's Witnesses. In autumn 2012, multiple clashes took place in the villages of Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro, between Orthodox Christians who were protesting against or trying to block Muslim religious practices and the local Muslim population. The state has primarily

delegated its role in settling these conflicts to religious actors, who reached agreements in Nigvziani and Tsinstkaro. Despite letting the Muslim congregations open a prayer house in Nigvziani and conduct Friday prayers in Tsintskaro, the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) notes that the conflict resolution in each case took place at the expense of more concessions from the minority group. In Tsintskaro, Muslims from other villages were prevented from joining in prayers, while in Samtatskaro the Muslim community was forced to give up the idea of maintaining its prayer house owing to local pressure and threats (EMC 2013, p. 56).

What is particularly noteworthy about the GOC's ideology is the linking of liberal values to specific political actors, including the West in general and specifically Europe and the US. The latter are associated with a somewhat distorted version of liberalism, particularly with so-called "homosexual propaganda" (usually linked with pornography and paedophilia), which has become the new "other" for the Eastern Orthodox Church (Ramet 2006, p. 169). The official GOC discourse is overwhelmed by talk of this "other", linking it primarily with a degradation of values—through the processes of globalization, cosmopolitanism and post-modernism—and a 'war against traditions and morality' brought on by allowing extreme freedom (Khositashvili 2014). Homosexuality is contrasted with family values, which are portrayed as a basis for state stability and strength. In May 2013, Georgia saw a violent attack against 50 activists at a rally on the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. The mob was led by clergymen in the name of protecting the nation and religiosity, and the Patriarch marked the day as the 'day of strength of family and respect for parents' (Civil Georgia 2014d). In the following year, the church vigorously opposed the adoption of an anti-discrimination bill and condemned the bill as a promoter of deadly sin (Civil Georgia 2014c). Some clergymen even personally attended the plenary meetings at the parliament during discussions of the bill, claiming that equal rights for sexual minorities and gender equality went against moral principles (ibid.).

The church identifies the West as a source for these changes that morally threaten "Georgianness". The West is seen as undesirable because it embraces unacceptable values while moving away from traditional ones. Consequently, the GOC considers the West to be morally inferior and deprived of spiritual development in parallel to its technological progress (Patriarch Ilia II 2014). The framework of traditional values that the GOC has constructed around European integration is so strong that even the EU has to occasionally acknowledge "Georgian tradition". In a meeting with the Georgian Patriarch, EU commissioner Stefan Fule had to make clear that the EU did not aim to undermine Georgian traditions (Civil Georgia 2014a). In one of his speeches, the Patriarch stated that the 'Georgian nation should take care of its history, past and traditions, what flows from the West is often unacceptable for Orthodoxy'. At the same time he awarded Iob, the bishop of the Ruis–Urbnisi eparchy which issues the highly anti-Western journal

Qvakutkhedi, for his efforts in guarding spiritual values. The Patriarch even called on parents in 2010 to refrain from sending their children abroad for studies that could harm their development culturally and spiritually (Civil Georgia 2010).

This position places the GOC well within the ideological orbit of the Eastern Orthodox Churches dominated by the ROC, which has also developed its ideology based on the rejection of values that have gained currency in the West (Ramet 2006, p. 148). The idea of Orthodoxy as a unique civilization, the search for a privileged status in the religious market, the elevation of homosexuality as the major point of opposition to the "rotten West" and anti-globalization are also largely shared in ROC discourse and politics (Ramet 2006, Popkova 2011). Moreover, the GOC's ideology primarily stems from Russian ideology. As many interview partners note, this happens mainly through the Russian theological literature that dominates the Georgian religious market. Russian literature is unrestrictedly translated into Georgian, containing the ideas of the sinful West, the sacred character of Orthodoxy and Russia as the saviour of the world (Sutidze, Gamrekelashvili, Tevzadze, Abashidze, personal communication). As one of the clergymen explained in the interview, the reason for such wide translation from Russian is that the Russian school is considered the most important in Orthodox theology (Archpriest, personal communication, 19/10/2014). Such wide acceptance of Russian-promoted ideology can be further explained by the low level of education among Georgian clergymen, which results in a lack of original Georgian ecclesiastical literature (Mamardashvili 2010, p. 99). It should also be noted that a significant number of Georgian clergymen are educated in Russian schools, including Patriarch Ilia II who graduated from the Moscow Theological Seminary and its academy (Jones 2010). The GOC's pipeline of Russian ideological sources is further solidified by its isolation from other influences; since 1997, the theological academy in Tbilisi has ceased all Western ties, exchange programs for students and visits by foreign lecturers (Merkviladze 2013).

The GOC's push for isolation from Western churches not only automatically but also willingly places it in the Russian camp. Religious authority in the Orthodox world has been balanced between two groups of churches: those surrounding the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and those surrounding the Russian Orthodox Church (Leustean 2015, p. 183). In this rivalry between the ROC and the Constantinople Patriarch, the GOC clearly aligns with the former. The latter is often associated with the West and liberalism, which is off-putting to the GOC.

The GOC's anti-ecumenism also contributes to its isolation. The GOC's position on ecumenism took a radical turn in 1997. Until the 1990s, it was actively and even somewhat enthusiastically involved in ecumenical relations, participating in the World Council of Churches (WCC), which was established in 1948 by Protestant churches and then gradually joined by the Orthodox ones (including the GOC in 1962). In 1979, Georgian Patriarch Ilia II was

elected as the vice president of the WCC, which significantly increased his authority. However, in the second half of the 1990s, the situation reversed. The WCC slid into a crisis as Orthodox churches protested against the discussion of new topics such as homosexuality, abortion and ordination of women (Leustean 2015). In April 1997, the St. Shio-Mghvime Monastery issued an open letter demanding withdrawal from the WCC. They were joined by the Betania Monastery, the Lavra of David Garedji, the Zarzma Monastery and the clergy of the Shemokmedi diocese, with some even threatening a schism. Under this pressure, the synod ruled that the GOC would pull out of the WCC and the Conference of European Churches, but also suspended the rebellious clergymen from their positions and from religious service (Meeting record of Georgian Orthodox Church Synod 1997). The GOC was followed by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church a year later. Even though at one point the Serbian and Russian Churches also threatened to leave, they eventually remained as members. This makes the GOC one of two churches outside the WCC.

This anti-ecumenical attitude has not only remained but strengthened over time in church discourse. In 1999, the visit of the Pope of Rome to Tbilisi was condemned by many clergymen; the Patriarch did not attend the service, stressing that the visit had only a political character (Kekelia *et al*. 2013, p. 101). Through this anti-ecumenism, the GOC remains isolated from the international arena and loses an opportunity to voice its position internationally. In addition to rejecting Western communities such as the WCC, the GOC more willingly integrates into the processes of the post-Soviet states. For instance, in 2004 the GOC became a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Interreligious Council, formed and led by the ROC and uniting all the religious groups except Protestants and Catholics. At the same time, the GOC refuses to become a member of the Georgian Interreligious Council which includes Protestants and Catholics (Kobakhidze 2004).

The GOC's transnational political positioning

This section discusses the extent to which the GOC's ideological footing affects its transnational political positioning when confronted with geopolitical realities. Unlike Georgian political elites, the GOC mostly represents the part of the population with anti-Western preferences. Ideological similarities and familiarity with the ROC undoubtedly create the grounds for Russian soft power in the GOC. However, to what extent this translates into political choice is a more complex question than it seems at first glance. Here, it is vital to unpack the GOC as a uniform entity and look at its complex composition. Although all the groups in the GOC share common traditional beliefs, the level of ideological intensity, the severity of perceived threats and the corresponding proposed action vary, and we observe that political choice varies accordingly as well. The more nationalistic and fundamentalist adherents are, the more anti-Western they tend to be. As already mentioned, this accounts for

the largest group in the GOC, for whom Europe is extremely unattractive due to its decreasing Christianity (Priest, personal communication, 24/10/2014).

Those fundamentalists who presume that there is an ongoing war against Orthodoxy and expect the apocalypse in the near future tend to favour specific external actors. In comparison to the sinful West, they consider Russia less of a danger to Georgian spirituality. Some repeat the very Russian narratives that the West is at war with Orthodoxy and that Russia will be united with Ukraine and Belarus into a strong, Orthodox country (Father Spiridon Abuladze 2012), or that spiritual distortion is even worse than territorial conflict (Georgia and World 2012). As one of the responding clergymen noted: 'in fact it was during the Russian empire that Georgia managed to survive spiritually rather than during other empires' (Priest, personal communication, 24/10/2014). One of the extremely anti-Western journals issued by an eparchy in Georgia, *Qvakutkhedi*, interpreted the 2008 August war as 'heavenly pincers to block Georgia's drive towards the West and as God's blessing to enter under the patronage of Russia' (Asatiani 2013). This war conspiracy theory suggests that the Orthodox world should unite, and in this context Russia takes on the role of a natural ally to Georgia. As was noted by N. Papuashvili, a professor in church history, most of these fundamentalist clergymen tend to be more pro-Russian (personal communication, 20/9/2014).

A small group of liberals tends to be more open about the West and Western belonging. Some claim that immorality has no boundaries and therefore cannot be attached to a specific political entity such as Europe (Priest, personal communication, 26/10/2014), and others even claim that Georgians are Europeans, although this belonging is almost always exclusively explained in terms of religion or Christianity (Priest, personal communication, 20/10/2014, priest, personal communication, 25/10/2014). Europe is believed to possess some valuable qualities as well, often in the realm of political and civic values, and therefore the strategy suggested by this group of believers is to embrace the positive and avoid the negative (ibid.). For them, Russia's political ambitions override the common faith, as 'Russia is capable of even more harm and often uses religious arguments for expansion' and is not really behaving according to Christian values (ibid.). When it comes to the argument of the sinful West, Russia is considered even more sinful in some areas, such as prostitution, pornography, alcoholism, etc. (Priest, personal communication, 5/3/2015).

However, the GOC as an official institution is rather ambivalent, demonstrating that ideological and political positions can sometimes contradict each other. Despite the disapproval of European values, Ilia II stated that the church would do everything to make Georgia an EU member (Civil Georgia 2014b). In December 2015 the European Commission released a report that Georgia met the criteria for visa liberalization, which would become the basis for a legislative proposal to the European Council and Parliament to lift visa requirements for Georgian citizens. In the midst of nationwide celebrations, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and EU Ambassador to Georgia Janos

Herman visited the Patriarch, who himself stated that the aim of this visit was 'to celebrate what happened before (…) as a huge achievement, celebration for the entire Georgian population and Georgian church among them'. The Patriarch, who univocally portrayed the process as positive, thanked everyone who contributed to the positive result and expressed 'hope that Europe will not only bring much goodness to Georgia, but also protect our culture' (Kokoshvili 2015). As T. Dalalishvili, a political scientist, explains: 'for the Patriarch, Europe is not a normative–ideological choice, but rather a political one. His statement indicates that he can be flexible about his political preferences' (personal communication, 19/9/2014). According to B. Mindiashvili, a former clergyman who is now working in the office of the Public Defender of Georgia, the Patriarch is constrained by the contextual situation—in which Euro–Atlantic integration is backed by wide public support—and thus, Ilia II is protecting his prestige (personal communication, 25/9/2014). Therefore, despite openly preaching against the West as an entity whose values are lacking and inferior when compared to Georgian values, the Patriarch distinguishes the political from the cultural–normative preference.

Despite the GOC's official ambivalence on the EU, the GOC and the ROC often operate in cohesion on the international arena. This opens up opportunities for the churches to play a political role, in terms of both advocacy and transnational communication.

Along with the GOC representatives' visits to Russia and frequent interaction between the two churches, the GOC and the ROC support each other against breakaway churches. In contrast to the Kremlin's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states in 2008, the ROC supports the GOC's canonical territorial integrity, recognizing Georgian rule over the Abkhazian and South Ossetian Churches. Similarly, the GOC supports the ROC's canonical rights in Estonia, Moldova and Ukraine. During the Ukraine crisis, the GOC refused to voice any position, but later contacted the head of the Donetsk eparchy and promised brotherly support and prayers for peace (Orthodox Donbas 2014).

There are various factors that draw the two churches together, involving not only ideological closeness but also political reasoning. Cooperation and support take the form of an exchange between the two churches, complementing each other's political interests. In fact, the ROC's decision not to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia's canonical independence not only doesn't contradict the Kremlin's interests, but complements them (Conroy 2015). By acting canonically, the ROC maintains its own legitimacy in the Orthodox world, while retaining the GOC's support in asserting its canonical rights in Estonia, Moldova and Ukraine. Otherwise, the ROC would risk pushing its Georgian counterpart into the camp of the Ecumenical Patriarch. Moreover, asserting the ROC's role as a mediator in the Caucasus is in the mutual interest of the ROC and the Kremlin, as the role parallels Russia's ideas about its sphere of influence. Russia's strategy indeed implies support for the ROC's influence in the Orthodox world, as well as in the aforementioned perceived sphere of

influence, as it sees the church as a possible tool for reaching its goals (Conroy 2015). Rather than risking the ROC's legitimacy in the territories where it already wields influence, it maintains de facto authority.

The same holds for the GOC. L. Abashidze, a member of the State Agency for Religious Issues, explains the GOC's closeness to the ROC as a pragmatic move rather than one simply bred by pro-Russian doctrine. Political gains—like the ROC's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as GOC canonical territories and its acceptance of the GOC as a potential mediator between the two countries—explain this pragmatic outlook.

Another important factor behind the political significance of this relationship is the possibility for communication channels outside of official transnational relations. In fact, during the 2008 August War the two religious institutions were the only sources of communication between the two nations. Even though both the ROC and the GOC still featured nationalist elements and supported their own national claims (Werkner 2010), both condemned the violence between the two nations. Moreover, as the theologian Dalalishvili notes: 'the Patriarch seeks for the conflict resolution in Moscow', which leads him to 'an appeasement policy with the northern neighbour' (personal communication, 19/9/2014). It was only after the Georgian Patriarch appealed to Russian authorities that they opened a corridor and let Georgians retrieve the corpses from the destroyed villages (Pkhaladze 2012). By maintaining good relations with the ROC and the Russian state, the GOC considers the channel open for a potential solution, and regards itself as a mediator in this process. This is precisely where common ideology comes into play as a tool, as it is their historical friendship, common values and religious grounding that the GOC employs when advocating for appeasement. In late January 2013, Patriarch Ilia II went on a six-day visit to Moscow, where he received an award from the ROC's International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations. After meeting with President Putin, he stated:

> Russia and Georgia have always been and will be as friends and brothers, but apparently someone envied us and deliberately created hostility between us. I think that Vladimir Putin, a wise leader of state, can change the situation and Georgia will become united again. (…) The idea of Russia is to protect spirituality. You know that nowadays globalization process is taking place in a clash of values. Russia and Georgia have a huge spiritual value and we should take care of our Orthodox/true faith. Orthodoxy helped us and helped Russia. (Georgia Online 2013)

In a later interview, he repeated the same narrative that Georgia and Russia should remain brothers and restore their relations as soon as possible, as Orthodoxy and historical experience ground their closeness (Interview with Ilia II 2015).

The Kremlin also speaks positively about the Georgian Church's attitude and activity, which further motivates the GOC. In January 2013, Putin

congratulated Ilia II on his 80th birthday and his 35-year anniversary in the following way:

> We highly appreciate your warm attitude towards Russia, and the Russian Orthodox Church. Your personal efforts, calls for peace, love, creation, harmony and unity, largely contributing to maintaining many centuries of friendship and understanding between our nations at difficult stages of history. I am convinced that fruitful spiritual, cultural and humanitarian dialogue will become a reliable basis for further development of relations between Russia and Georgia. (Kremlin.ru 2013)

It is apparent that the Russian government also recognizes the benefits of cooperation with the GOC, perceiving it as a potential channel for soft power in Georgia.

Pro-Russian groups in Georgian politics

The government change in Georgia in 2012 was followed by a loosening of the dominant Russia-demonizing discourse, which opened up space for some groups to openly advocate for the northern vector. These interest groups comprise multiple political parties, public institutions, unions, media sources and some public figures. Their overarching ideology implies common principles of ingrained nationalism (particularly in terms of glorifying the past and protecting traditions and identity), strong anti-Westernism and a pro-Russian position. To what extent religion is a part of their political preferences and whether they manage to propagate their positions in Georgian internal or external politics is the focus of this section.

In 2015, Damoukidebloba.com (established by the members of the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, IDFI) released a report on 'Russian Influence on Georgian Non-Governmental Organizations and Media' which overviews the main actors that serve as communication for Russia. In the same year, the Media Development Fund (MDF) released a report on 'Anti-Western Propaganda', analyzing the discourse employed by those actors. Both reports stressed the increased Russian soft power in Georgia. The discourse of these pro-Russian groups alienates the West and portrays Russia as an alternative through both political reasoning and ideological arguments, in which religion occupies an important place.

The MDF identified *Obieqtivi, SaqInformi, Geworld.ge* and *Asaval-Dasavali* as the media sources with the most frequent anti-Western rhetoric, while the Burjanadze-Democrats, the People's Assembly and the Alliance of Patriots are distinguished as political parties with anti-Western attitudes (Kintsurashvili 2015). The most apparent pro-Russian sentiments with an anti-Western character stem from several public organizations—particularly from the Eurasian Institute, Eurasian Choice and its extension, the Erekle II Society—which maintain relations with Russia and Russian representatives.

For instance, the latter institutions cooperate with the Russian-based International Eurasian Movement led by Alexander Dugin. Some of the Eurasian Institute's cultural activities are supported by Russkiy Mir, including Russian language courses (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili 2015). Their members frequently visit Russia to participate in the meetings, forums and conferences of the Russian Center for Strategic Research, the Gorchakov Foundation, the Lev Gumilev Center and different representatives of the Russian government. They often cooperate with the above-mentioned media sources, including *Geworld.ge* and *Saqinformi* (ibid.).

From a geopolitical perspective, these groups develop more or less the same line of argument, with variations in depth and scope. The overarching narrative suggests that the West engages with Georgia and the South Caucasus out of its own interests rather than out of genuine concern. These interests are said to include establishing NATO bases, conducting military sabotages in Russia and using Georgia as a corridor for transiting energy resources (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili 2015). The US and the West in general are portrayed as transgressors and inciters of revolutions; according to these groups, the Ukrainian crisis is nothing more than the West plotting against Russia. In their vision, Euro–Atlantic integration is a danger to Georgian independence and economic freedom that lacks legitimation from the Georgian people as it is not a majority decision (Kintsurashvili 2015). Calling the European aspiration a utopian pipe dream, they advocate for cooperation with Russia, which they view as an opportunity to return Georgian breakaway regions following the departure of Saakashvili and the end of his antagonistic policy (Makarychev 2016). Archil Chkoidze, founder of Eurasian Choice and head of the Erekle II society (personal communication, 13/5/2015) stated that 'Georgia should use the chance given by Russia who intentionally leaves room for negotiation. What else is then its refrain from convincing at least Belarus to recognize Abkhazian independence'. Pro-Russian groups see the ROC's position of supporting Georgia's canonical territorial integrity as a point of communication that Georgia should utilize. The related political parties also espouse a similar "window of opportunity" narrative, saying that because Russia needs a strong Georgia in the North Caucasus, it has made space for political negotiation by not claiming South Ossetia officially (Lortkipanidze, personal communication, 2/4/2016). The implied conclusion is that some compromise is necessary from Georgia in order to bring about concessions from Russia (Kukava, personal communication, 1/3/2016).

There are two noticeable tendencies in regards to religion among these groups: first, religion is a significant part of their ideology; and second, some of them justify their pro-Russian position from a religious and cultural perspective. The political parties deny official institutional cooperation with the church but mention 'very warm relations with the Patriarch' (Inashvili, personal communication, 8/3/2016, Lortkipanidze, personal communication, 2/4/2016), and some also mention consultation with the church on certain

issues (Bagaturia, personal communication, 8/5/2015, Kukava, personal communication, 1/3/2016). The Eurasian Institute and Eurasian Choice directly engage church representatives in their programs and activities. They primarily mobilize their supporters around religious—and more specifically, Orthodox—values. They echo the church narrative of degrading Western values, accusing the West of trying to impose homosexuality, incest, paedophilia and a generally debauched lifestyle (Kintsurashvili 2015). The Eurasian Institute, Eurasian Choice and the Erekle II Society, as well as the aforementioned media sources, present a narrative in which the West is undertaking a war against Orthodoxy (Rtskhiladze, personal communication, 27/8/2015), and argue for conducting relations between Russia and Georgia based on common religion (Vekua, personal communication, 7/5/2015). Religion, then, is both an ideology that makes Russia an attractive ally for these groups and an implied tool for external relations, suggesting that the churches could and should play a positive role in raising awareness between the two countries and pushing to unfreeze relations (Devdariani, Kukava, Chkoidze, Rtskhiladze, personal communication).

Despite this clear anti-Western and pro-Russian position, the question rather concerns the extent to which the position of these groups resonates with the Georgian public and political figures. The Caucasus Research Resource Center's (CRRC) surveys can shed some light on this issue. According to the latest survey, 44 per cent of Georgians believe that Russian influence has increased since 2012, against only 17 per cent who think that EU influence has increased. At the same time, according to National Democratic Institute (NDI) polls also conducted by CRRC, people who support membership in the Eurasian Economic Union remain in the minority but their number has increased from 11 per cent in 2013 to 28 per cent in 2015 (CRRC 2016). These data are noteworthy but do not necessarily prove that there is a causal relationship between pro-Russian propaganda and the change in public attitudes. Then, in the beginning of 2016 we observe a sudden increase in approval of the government's goal to join the EU to 77 per cent and a decrease in support of the Eurasian Economic Union to 20 per cent (NDI Polls 2016), most likely owing to the developments from the EU. The 2015–2016 visa liberalization process that the EU launched for Georgia overwhelmed the whole nation. The sudden change seems more likely to be an immediate reaction to this policy than ideologically grounded, as changes in value affiliation are highly unlikely in the span of a year.

In politics, the pro-Russian groups remain rather marginalized and their multiplicity does not necessarily equal an increase in like-minded people, as it is mainly the same persons who establish and lead these diverse institutions (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili 2015). In terms of support for political parties, six per cent of people name the Labour Party as their first choice in the elections, and the United Democratic Movement and the Patriotic Alliance—Nino Burjanadze's and Irma Inashvili's parties respectively—are each preferred by five per cent of respondents, which means that support for

pro-Russian parties generally remains low. However, it should be noted that in the 2016 Parliamentary elections, the Alliance of Patriots even though with a just minimum threshold of 5%, but made it to the Parliament as a third party.

Conclusion

After the 2008 August War, the Orthodox Churches of Russia and Georgia have remained the only institutions within the two countries that have maintained uninterrupted relations in the context of their ideological closeness. This has opened up space for Russian soft power, which entails promoting their distinct civilization as an alternative to the secularized West and embracing the conservative values linked with Eastern Orthodoxy. The concept of soft power is particularly relevant given that the ROC is in line with and even complements state interests in Russia's perceived sphere of influence. In light of Georgia's official pro-Western vector, an appeal to religious values is in principle the primary way through which Russia could hope to convey its vision. This chapter has examined that premise by focusing on the GOC and the pro-Russian advocacy groups in Georgia, and by studying the intersection of political and religious influences.

There are multiple internal and external constraints that bind the ROC and the GOC together, certainly including ideological affinity. The GOC's official discourse embraces a position which situates it within the ROC-promoted ideological orbit of distinct Eastern Orthodoxy. The two institutions share a common "other" and the GOC embeds similar values in its identity construction. The GOC is characterized by strongly ingrained homophobia; a push for isolation alongside sacralizing the nation; a hostility towards liberalism, globalization and cosmopolitanism; and a scepticism towards ecumenism and Western countries, including their institutions. It builds up a narrative of the flawed West as lacking true values and emphasizes the purity and distinctiveness of the Orthodoxy. The ROC, with its similar concerns and values, naturally forms a potential ally in this context. Ideological closeness pushes some clergymen to favour the northern neighbour with a common faith over the West, and draws anti-Western and pro-Russian groups closer to the church.

However, this comfortable coherence between the two churches does not simply stem from ideological closeness, but it also goes hand in hand with a political rationale. The churches supplement each other's interests for canonical territorial integrity on the international arena. The ROC recognizes the GOC's canonical authority over Georgia and the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the GOC in return supports the ROC in issues involving Ukraine, Estonia and Belarus. Moreover, as the ROC's position on Georgian breakaway territories does not necessarily contradict Russian state interests, the GOC seeks conflict resolution between Russia and Georgia in the Kremlin. High coherence between the GOC and the ROC on the international arena makes the GOC feel competent to mediate and

try to improve relations. However, we also observe that the GOC, despite its ideological contradiction with the West, occasionally takes an EU-favouring position. In this complex process, the churches function as political actors, both domestically and internationally.

Therefore, ideological affinity alone, however encouraging for some marginalized groups, would be an unlikely predictor for political positioning. Religious actors are aware of the strategic context, and occasionally their political choices respond to pragmatic needs rather than identity formation. The case of Russia–Georgia relations also shows that in this strategic context, religion can be employed as a political tool. The pro-Russian advocates refer to religious sentiments to convince the Georgian public of their position, while the GOC uses Orthodoxy in its appeasement policy towards Russia. Therefore, even though Russian soft power finds fertile ground in Georgia, primarily through religion, it is the conformity of religious affinity with political interests that could realize the political goals of that soft power.

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3 Iran's soft power policy in Georgia

Mariam Gabedava and Koba Turmanidze

Introduction

Relations between Iran and Georgia have been intensifying over the past decade. Overall, the two countries are far from being top partners economically, politically or culturally. However, Georgia's openness to Iran stands in stark contrast to the way it is shunned by other democratic states. In this chapter, we focus on one particular aspect of their relations: the potential for Iran's religious links to grow and be used in the context of soft power. The existing scholarship does not study Iran's soft power as such, but rather documents Iran's involvement in Georgia in the context of studying Georgia's ethnic and religious minorities (Therme 2011). This chapter attempts to fill that gap.

Georgia has been relatively open to Iran in terms of free movement of people and capital, unlike other Western and Western-oriented states. At the same time, Georgia has a sizable Muslim population. These two factors provide various options for interaction and influence and create a solid opportunity for Iran to use religion to achieve its political and economic aims in the region. While religious links appear weak on the surface—not least because of the pervasive dominance of the Georgian Orthodox Church—the potential for soft power is on the rise.

We focus on Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region, which has a sizable ethnic Azerbaijani population and is predominantly Shi'ite Muslim[1], like Iran. We assume that the potential for Iranian soft power is the greatest here. Whereas the low religiosity of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijanis can serve as an obstacle to Iran's soft power, their weak engagement in Georgia's political life, low civic participation and high perceived deprivation can provide grounds for potential influence from the South.

The data for our analysis stem from two surveys and multiple in-depth interviews. All were conducted under the responsibility of at least one of the authors of this chapter. First, CRRC-Georgia conducted a survey on Georgians' knowledge of and attitudes towards the European Union in June and July 2013. The data set has 2,462 respondents, including 522 ethnic Azerbaijanis from the Kvemo Kartli region. The sampling is representative of adults (18 years and older) living in Georgia, excluding the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Ethnic minority respondents constituted 10 per cent of all respondents, of which 33 per cent were Armenians and 67 per cent were Azerbaijanis.

Second, we carried out a small representative survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijanis to investigate the potential for Iran's soft power in the region in July and August 2015 (CRRC-Georgia, 2015 survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani population). The survey's objective was to assess people's willingness to engage in economic, cultural and religious relations with Iran. It also provides the respondents' assessment of the importance of the region's economic, cultural and religious ties with countries/unions like the United States, the European Union, Russia, Iran, Turkey and China. The survey was administered to approximately 300 randomly selected respondents.

Third, we conducted eleven in-depth interviews with Muslim community leaders in the Marneuli district of Kvemo Kartli in April and May 2015. Given the language barrier, we hired two local interviewers who spoke both Azeri and Georgian to actually conduct the interviews. On the one hand, this allowed for greater openness on the part of the interviewees, since these individuals were known and trusted inside the community; on the other hand, their lack of official credentials for the interviews (other than a standard notice of the research project, its funders and purposes) still caused the interviewees to be suspicious. This suspicion was cited by the interviewers as a reason for the many cancelled interviews.

In the following chapter we will first present a short overview of the existing Georgian–Iranian political relations. Then we will provide a more detailed look at the main potential target for Iran's soft power: the ethnic Azerbaijani Shi'a Muslim population of Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region. We will look at their linguistic, educational, economic, political and religious characteristics, as well as the causes for their marginalization. Finally, we will examine the instruments currently employed by Iran and analyze their current and potential success.

Iran as a political actor in Georgia: insignificant on the surface

As Iran attempts to overcome its international isolation and the economic damage caused by decades of sanctions, it may be interested in intensive engagement with Georgia. There are many reasons why Georgia is attractive to Iran: their geographic proximity, Georgia's status as the South Caucasus hub for international investment and economic development and its economic and political openness and access to European markets. Additionally, unlike European countries, the Georgian government and population seem to welcome ties with Iran.

The historically strong relations between Georgia and Iran have been scanty for quite some time. Throughout the centuries, eastern Georgian kingdoms were under the political and cultural influence of the Persian Empire. Persia conquered the Kingdom of Kartli in the early sixteenth century and appointed members of the royal family who had converted to Islam as rulers. Georgian nobility and royalty were also keen aficionados and translators of Persian poetry and literature. That influence was largely terminated after Georgia's alignment

with the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century. Current Georgian popular opinion, however only focuses on one aspect—that of subjugation and conquest. Since re-establishing Georgian independence upon the fall of the USSR, nationalism has clearly been on the rise. The predominant form of nationalism asserts national identity based on the Georgian language, ethnicity and Orthodox Christian religion. History has been viewed as a struggle for the survival and preservation of these three elements, in the face of existential threats posed by the mostly Muslim empires surrounding Georgia.

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has been shut off and ostracized by the West. Georgia has largely followed this policy since its independence from the USSR, despite always having some minimal trade relations. The sanctions towards Iran and Georgia's alignment with the West impeded the development of deeper relations in any field.

Georgia and Iran established diplomatic relations in 1992, soon after Georgia's independence. The ties remained relatively weak until the Rose Revolution in 2003, when relations warmed up noticeably. Still, the Saakashvili government's November 2010 decision to scrap visa requirements for Iranian citizens caught everyone by surprise. Georgia became one of the only three countries in Europe (Turkey and Armenia being the other two) to welcome Iranians in this way. While many Europeans and Americans were irked, the move fit well with the Saakashvili government's ultra-liberal economic approach. Georgia had significantly eased the registration of businesses and slashed taxes, licenses and permits—and was seeking out new investors. Iranians quickly flocked to Tbilisi and the trade turnover went up, as did the number of Iranian-owned businesses registered in Georgia. However, despite the gains, the trade relations between the two countries remained negligible—just over one per cent of overall trade figures (Table 3.1).

On 1 July 2013, the new Georgian government, which came to power after the first electoral government turnover since the country's independence, unilaterally scrapped the visa-free agreement. This was officially linked with the stricter border management requirements set by the EU as a precondition for visa liberalization with Georgia. But the visa-free regime was then reintroduced by the same government in February 2016, following the lifting

Table 3.1 Georgian–Iranian trade
(USD thousands, per cent of total in parentheses)

	2009	*2010*	*2011*	*2012*	*2013*	*2014*	*2015*
Import	29,192.8 (0.6%)	55,079.5 (1%)	64,871.3 (1%)	100,451.4 (1.2%)	129,857 (1.6%)	122,687.6 (1.4%)	92,308 (1.2%)
Export	6,425.8 (0.6%)	14,958.1 (0.9%)	16,209.1 (0.7%)	18,519.8 (0.8%)	46,946.2 (1.6%)	28,198.5 (1%)	35,782.4 (1.6%)

Source: Geostat

of international sanctions on Iran. The Georgian government's reported rationale for changing course again was to further enhance economic and cultural relations (Civil Georgia 2016). It is still too early to see whether the new developments will bear much fruit economically; however, it does appear that the Georgian government wants to capitalize on what a sanctions-free Iran has to offer.

While the new trade and investment opportunities were touted as a major developing trend, and media coverage of the Iranian entrepreneurs setting up shop in Tbilisi was abundant, the statistics show the meagre reality. Iran and Georgia are not major trade or investment partners by any measure. However, given the recent removal of decades-long sanctions on Iran, there is more realistic grounding for the prospects of mutual trade between the two countries.

For now, Georgia's image as an open, liberal haven seems to be one stable aspect of the relations between Georgia and Iran. The visa-free regime did apparently encourage greater movement of people, particularly around Iranian holidays. Iranian tourists and visitors to Georgia enjoy social freedoms and gambling opportunities that are definitely unavailable to them at home. Although there continues to be little effort on the Georgian authorities' side to promote Georgia as a tourist destination in Iran, it seems that the industry catering to the emerging market sprouted almost overnight, with offices in downtown Tbilisi advertising consultation services in Farsi to facilitate the visits of Iranians. The sustainability of this interest and its reach throughout the large Iranian population would be a matter of separate evaluation; however, it seems unlikely to flourish without a concerted state effort.

The Iranian state is officially theocratic and decidedly anti-Western in its rhetoric. However, despite its heated outbursts, it is widely seen as a shrewd and pragmatic actor in the international arena. Iran is obviously interested in having a presence in the Caucasus. Of the three South Caucasus countries, its relations with Georgia are the least developed for three reasons. Firstly, the lack of a shared border presents an obvious hurdle. Secondly, Georgia's traditional alignment with the West is an obstacle. Thirdly, Georgia's dominant Orthodox faith and the general wariness of the church and large sections of the population towards Islam and Muslims is a factor. Iran in particular is popularly seen as an old imperial subjugator, and this legacy combined with the fear of Islamic fundamentalism could be a major deterrent for the broader Georgian public in welcoming close ties.

The need to avoid antagonizing Russia may be the single most important factor in determining Iran's policy and involvement with the South Caucasus, particularly in Georgia (Therme 2011). Iran has consistently reaffirmed the importance of territorial sovereignty and has not recognized the independence of the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the 2008 war with Russia. Iran and others recognize that Russia has disproportionately large potential for influence, with many tools at its disposal. Besides, Russia is strategically important as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Because of all the above factors, Iranian engagement in Georgia is likely to be most intensive with the population it has the most common ground with: the ethnic Azeri Shi'a Muslim minority in Georgia.

Georgia's ethnic Azeri minority

While the general public may not be particularly eager for intensive cultural relations with Iran, Georgia's ethnic Azeri minority may be an exception. Georgia has two immediate neighbours which are predominantly Muslim, but secular: Turkey and Azerbaijan. Turkey has become more religious in recent years, under the conservative AKP (Justice and Development Party), while the Azerbaijani government remains staunchly secular.

Georgian Azeris are overwhelmingly Shi'a Muslims, as are most Iranians. While religion was very much discouraged and persecuted for the 70 years of Soviet rule, religiosity has thrived in Georgia since its independence. This has included a revival of Islam. As there is little opportunity for religious education in Georgia, Iran is seen as a resource in this regard, and one that is all too eager to offer its help. While ethnic Azeris retain close relations with Azerbaijan, the country is largely secular and is not seen as a major actor in promoting religious teaching or funding of religious groups, despite the rise of religiosity there in recent years. Iran, on the other hand, is eager to support both community organizations and students willing to study at its universities.

Besides the religious kinship, there are other factors that make Georgia's ethnic Azeri minority a good target for potential influence. This group is a good illustration of the failings of Georgia's minority policies. In this situation, most outside support is bound to be welcomed.

This section looks at Georgia's ethnic Azeri minority, profiling it in terms of economy, language, education and culture, and illustrating the ways their detachment from Georgian society creates the potential for successful Iranian soft power in Kvemo Kartli.

Marginalization and its consequences

Georgia's Azeri minority is significant and set to grow further. While there is a general population decline in Georgia, this ethnic group currently makes up about 6.5 per cent of the population and has a high birth rate. It is predominantly Muslim and concentrated close to the border with its kin-state Azerbaijan. The Azeri minority has a very low level of knowledge of the Georgian language, and generally a low level of integration in the Georgian state and society. All of this makes the majority of ethnic Georgians, along with the ultra-nationalistic Georgian Orthodox Church and the state, suspicious of them.

The Azerbaijani population of Kvemo Kartli mostly lives in rural areas and is engaged in the agricultural sector—65 per cent reported that their household receives income from the sale of agricultural goods, compared to 26 per cent of the rest of the population.

Table 3.2 Sources of household income (per cent)

	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
Money from family members/relatives/ friends living in Georgia	8	2
Money from family members/relatives/ friends living abroad	11	16
Sales of agricultural goods	28	65
Salaries of all HH members/excluding selling agricultural goods	50	30
Pensions and state support	48	47
Income from rent of property	3	3
Income from sales of property	1	3
Income from bank deposits	0	1

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

According to the measurable criteria, the Azeri population's socioeconomic situation does not differ much from that of the rest of Georgia: for both Azeris and the wider Georgian population, the reported unemployment is around 30 per cent (Table 3.3), and about half of both groups reported spending up to 400 GEL in the previous month (Table 3.4).

This indicates overall poverty that is fairly equal across ethnic groups; however, the Azeri citizens perceive their poverty as more acute. Sixty-seven per cent of Azeri respondents report that they belong to a low economic rung, compared to 51 per cent of the rest of the population (Table 3.5).

This points to relative deprivation and the feeling that they are poor and disadvantaged, which may be caused by their low level of engagement with and knowledge of the rest of the country.

The reported religiosity of Azeris is much lower than in the rest of the population—only 10 per cent say they attend religious services at least once a month, compared to 36 per cent of the rest of the population (Table 3.6). Likewise, 68 per cent say that religion is important in their daily lives, compared to 82 per cent of the rest of the population (Table 3.7).

It is interesting that when asked to identify their religion, a sizable portion of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijanis identify as Muslim, without Sunni or Shi'a labelling (Table 3.8).

This, as well as the fact that only six per cent of respondents said that they would go to a mosque to pray and socialize in their free time (Table 3.9), points to minimal observance of Islam beyond it being one nominal facet of their default identity. However, when asked about the role that religion plays

Table 3.3 Primary activity or situation (per cent)

	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
I receive a pension and do not work	17	17
I am a student and do not work	4	1
I am a housewife and do not work	13	24
I am unemployed	31	30
I work full or part-time, including seasonal jobs	22	13
I am self-employed, including seasonal jobs	10	14
I am disabled and cannot work	1	1
Other	1	1

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

Table 3.4 Household spending last month (per cent)

	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
More than 2000 GEL	2	1
1301–2000 GEL	4	1
701–1300 GEL	9	9
401–700 GEL	18	44
251–400 GEL	19	22
130–250 GEL	18	13
Up to 130 GEL	12	10
0 GEL	0	0
DK/RA	18	1

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

in society, a majority of respondents feel that it helps to maintain order, rather than playing a destructive role (Table 3.10).

The majority of Kvemo Kartli Azeris don't have even a basic knowledge of the Georgian language, and only three per cent speak Georgian well. Their abilities to speak Russian or English are also much lower compared to the rest of the population (14 per cent report advanced knowledge of Russian and 0.4 per cent advanced knowledge of English. The numbers for the rest of the population are 29 per cent and five per cent, respectively) (Table 3.11).

Table 3.5 Current perceived economic rung (per cent)

	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
Lowest	8	6
2	10	14
3	18	27
4	17	20
5	27	14
6	9	5
7	5	2
8	2	0
9	0	0
Highest	0	0
DK/RA	5	11

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

Table 3.6 How often do you attend religious services? (per cent)

	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
Once a week or more often	15	2
At least once a month	19	7
Only on special religious holidays	24	31
Less often	31	42
Never	10	17
DK/RA	1	0

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

Georgian has always been the state language in the country; however, during Soviet times, Russian was the *lingua franca* for the various ethnic groups who were receiving primary education in their mother tongues. This school infrastructure was maintained after independence, especially in the regions where minorities actually form a majority of the population. The quality of teaching at these schools has been consistently reported as low compared to Georgian-language schools. The Georgian language is formally taught in all minority-language schools; however, due to the lack of qualified teachers, the state

Table 3.7 How important is religion in your daily life? (per cent)

	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
Not important	3	5
Neutral	14	26
Important	81	68
DK/RA	1	1

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

Table 3.8 Respondent's religion (per cent)

Refuse to answer	7
Don't know	0
Islam	28
Shi'a Islam	32
Sunni Islam	32

Source: CRRC-Georgia, 2015 survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani population.

Table 3.9 What do you spend your free time on? (per cent)

Don't know	1
Hanging out with neighbours / friends on a meeting spot (birzha)	11
Going to mosque to pray and/or socialise	6
Spend time with my family	41
Doing sports activities	4
Visiting friends / relatives	10
Watching TV	22
Other	6

Source: CRRC-Georgia, 2015 survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani population.

of national language proficiency is dire, especially in the older population (Transparency International 2008). The reported decline in knowledge of Russian in the younger population throughout the country, including in the minority communities, has further contributed to their isolation.

The lack of language skills contributes to an effective withdrawal of minorities (especially those living in the minority-populated regions, away from the

Table 3.10 With which of the following statements about religion do you agree most?

Refuse to answer	2
Don't know	21
Religion helps maintain stability in a society	53
Religion rather leads to instability	12
Religion's role in society is uncertain	12

Source: CRRC-Georgia, 2015 survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani population.

Table 3.11 Respondent's ability in languages (per cent)

	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
Georgian		
No basic knowledge	4	53
Beginner	4	26
Intermediate	13	18
Advanced	79	3
Russian		
No basic knowledge	10	21
Beginner	20	20
Intermediate	42	45
Advanced	28	14
English		
No basic knowledge	63	95
Beginner	16	5
Intermediate	16	0
Advanced	5	0

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

capital) from Georgian society. For years, high-quality Georgian TV signals were unavailable in these regions, and even where the signal was available, an absence of minority language programming meant that minority-heavy regions were receiving their news and entertainment from their kin-states across the border or from Russian TV channels (Akerlund 2012). This inevitably leads to minorities being integrated into the information spheres of foreign states and disengaged from Georgian political and social discourse.

The Azeri population is half as likely to be interested in the country's domestic policies (27 per cent) than the rest of the country (55 per cent) (Table 3.12).

They don't consume information from Georgia's national TV channels, including the public broadcaster, which has a news program in Azerbaijani—only two per cent reported watching this channel daily, compared to 27 per cent of the rest of the population.

Azeris also have more paternalistic views of the state compared to the rest of the population. Whereas 89 per cent of Azeris consider the state to be like a parent, and thus should take care of its citizens as parents take care of their children, only 39 per cent of the rest of the population believe the same (Table 3.13).

This effectively means that they consider themselves less as citizens, but rather as subjects, and are less likely than the rest of the population to voice opposition to the actions or policies of the state.

Furthermore, the limited Georgian language skills of minority youth also limit their prospects for higher education within the Georgian educational system. This limitation was exacerbated by the introduction of a unified national entry examination for higher education institutions in 2005, universally acclaimed to have eliminated bribery and corruption from the testing and university entry processes (Gabedava 2013). However, it also highlighted the inadequacy of minority educational possibilities. The numbers of students from minority-heavy regions dipped dramatically in the years immediately following the introduction of the testing (Tabatadze and Gorgadze 2013).

Table 3.12 Interest towards domestic policy of Georgia (per cent)

	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
Not interested	47	71
Interested	53	27
DK/RA	0	2

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

Table 3.13 Government as parent vs. government as employee (per cent)

	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
Government is people's parent	42	89
Government is people's employee	48	7
DK/RA	10	4

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

The requirements were gradually tailored to accommodate the reality—in 2006 the compulsory exams could be taken in Russian, and from 2008 the general skills test has also been available in the Azeri and Armenian languages. The government also set up courses to prepare graduating high school students for the university entry exams. Still, given the very low test registration and university admission numbers, in 2009 a temporary quota system was introduced. This civic integration measure, as it is called in the Law on Higher Education (#688, adopted on 31.12.2004), is currently set to expire in the 2018–2019 academic year.

Georgian Azeris are much less open and more careful in terms of their attitudes towards foreigners compared to the rest of the population: whereas the vast majority of the rest of the population approves of doing business with all neighbouring nations, the Azeris only feel that way regarding Azeris, Georgians, Russians and Turks. Interestingly, only 39 per cent approve of doing business with Iranians, as opposed to 71 per cent of the rest of the population. They widely approve of marrying only Azerbaijanis, followed by Turks (48 per cent) and Iranians (27 per cent).

Additionally, when asked about marrying people from various religious communities, there was practically no difference in the overwhelming acceptability of marriage to Shi'as and to Sunnis, while there was a marked resistance towards representatives of other religions, particularly atheists.

Alienation and discrimination are not openly discussed by the Azeri community. While this can be attributed to a desire not to stand out too much (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013), it can also be an indication of withdrawal from the Georgian public sphere. The situation on the ground clearly illustrates a

Table 3.14 Attitudes to foreigners (per cent)

	Approve doing business		*Approve marrying*	
	Population of Georgia	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*	*Population of Georgia*	*Kvemo Kartli Azeris*
Americans	83	41	35	6
Russians	86	59	42	12
Turks	76	78	20	48
Iranians	69	39	17	27
Armenians	71	13	25	2
Azerbaijanis	79	99	24	98
Georgians	97	91	91	19
Jews	74	15	24	3

Source: Knowledge and attitudes towards the EU—www.caucasusbarometer.org

Table 3.15 Acceptability of a family member marrying a representative of [religious group] (combined percentage of 'object little' and 'not object at all')

Armenian Apostolic Church	21
Georgian Orthodox Church	35
Russian Orthodox Church	36
Judaism	28
Shi'a Muslim	94
Sunni Muslim	93
Atheist	20

Source: CRRC-Georgia, 2015 survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani population.

lack of real interest in minority issues in general, including the issues of the Muslim population, and a lack of commitment to their integration.

Minority policy in Georgia

Georgia's policy regarding religious minorities is heavily shaped by the strong political influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, the state provides funding for certain religious groups, and here too demonstrates its ambivalence towards minorities. The Orthodox Church has been funded since the signing of the Concordat (constitutional agreement between the church and state) in 2002, as a form of restitution for the damage inflicted by the Soviet regime. For the same reason, other 'traditional' religious groups have also received state funding since 2014: the Muslim community, the Armenian Church, the Catholic Church and the Jewish community[2]. The state does not provide a rationale for the specific amounts granted to each group. This non-disclosure, as well as the potential for state control of the religious groups, has been criticized by local civil society organizations (Netgazeti 2015).

While the other religious groups have kept a traditional organizational hierarchy in Georgia, there have been changes regarding the Muslim governance. Historically there was the Caucasus Muslim Board, with its seat in Baku, which Georgian Muslim leadership was subordinated to since the 1920s. In 2011, however, the Administration of all Muslims of Georgia was founded by ethnic Azeri government officials (Prasad 2012) in order to have a separate, Georgian governance body that is not affiliated with the Baku office; it is now the official counterpart of the Georgian state in religious affairs and the body that receives state funding. The creation of the body, however, has created a rift inside the Muslim community. All the experts interviewed[3] consider the step rushed, at least, and not fully thought through. They maintain that even the personnel choices were weak and failed to consider the domestic

reputation, contacts and education of the representatives, both religious and secular. Further, their contacts and standing in the wider Islamic community were apparently neglected (Interview with Giorgi Gvimradze, 2/3/2015 Tbilisi). It is clear that the Kvemo Kartli Muslim community felt sidelined by the creation of the body and its management (Prasad 2012).

However, not all Kvemo Kartli religious leaders seem to share the discontent. Some of the local religious leaders we interviewed commended the creation of the Administration of all Muslims of Georgia (Mufti Administration of Georgia) and credited it with funding Muslim religious education in the country. They maintained that while Iranian funding was crucial before the administration's creation, the local Georgian state funding had now supplanted it. This sentiment is not shared by the expert community. While all the Kvemo Kartli interviewees mentioned the Iranian financial support for Muslim education, there is a report that 75 per cent of the Georgian state funding given to the Muslim administration is allocated for the muftis' salaries, and the rest of the funds are very strictly budgeted by the State Agency for Religious Issues (NGO Joint Submission 2015) without allowing the community to independently decide which needs to cater to with the limited funds.

It is important to note that state funding for the Muslim community is only available to one entity (Resolution #117 of the Government of Georgia)—the Administration of all Muslims of Georgia—and it is responsible for distributing the funding to all Muslim institutions across the country, without Shi'a or Sunni distinction. Some Muslim leaders consider this as a source of pressure on the community and an attempt by the state to exert control (EMC 2015). To them, the fact that the sheikh (leader of the administration) changes when the government does further points to the organization and the position being managed by the state. Besides protesting the political intervention, there is also a protest on religious grounds, regarding the fact that Shi'a and Sunni Muslims are required to be governed by a unified administration and are effectively not allowed to exercise their freedom of religion. Currently, this norm is being challenged at the Constitutional Court of Georgia, awaiting a decision on its admissibility (LEPL Supreme Religious Administration of Georgia's all Muslims 2016). Whereas there is currently little animosity or even active distinction between the Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in Georgia, new schisms may soon open. Due to the very limited levels of religious education among the Georgian Muslim population, these conflicts may be based on political, rather than purely religious, grounds. This too may be a reason for demanding separate administrations for the two strands (Interview with Tamta Mikeladze, 27/5/2016 Tbilisi).

The fact that the state is encouraging the creation of a single leadership for the Georgian Muslim community can be interpreted as the state's attempt to easier manage the security threats that the Muslim population may entail, and curb the foreign liaisons of local Muslim groups. However, this security-based approach is also viewed as creating more potential security challenges

in the long run. Excluding various Muslim groups from the official leadership may push their activities underground and make controlling or engaging with them more difficult for the state (Prasad 2012).

Given the low religiosity of the population, the Georgian Muslim community does not seem to have any clear leadership with significant grassroots legitimacy. Instead, several experts have underscored that, especially with the Kvemo Kartli Azeri population, it is the secular local elders and leaders who have influence, rather than any national or local religious figure (Interview with Tamta Mikeladze, 27/5/2016 Tbilisi).

State funding notwithstanding, human rights groups point to a worsening minority rights situation since the change of government in 2012. The Muslim community is a particularly easy target, and since 2012 there have been six major incidents of restrictions on their religious freedom. These incidents all happened in the Adjara region, targeting the local ethnic Georgian Sunni population; however, the state's unwillingness to prevent violence and effectively investigate the incidents illustrates the environment of impunity regarding the violation of religious rights (NGO Joint Submission 2015). This is also a potent signal for Shi'ite Muslims, among other minorities, that the Orthodox Church's dominance permeates not only the personal beliefs of the Georgian population, but the civil service as well, and may be placed above the rule of law in practice.

Tools of influence: Islamic education in Georgia

Kvemo Kartli Azeri Muslims are predominantly Shi'ite, so Shi'ite Iran would seem to be an attractive and readily available partner for religious relations. However, religiosity was discouraged during the 70 years of Soviet rule: places of worship were closed, and clergy and believers of all religions were persecuted. This strict secularity meant that a large majority did not practice religion, including in the Georgian Muslim community. It is widely believed and was mentioned in all interviews that there is indeed little knowledge of Islam among Georgian Muslims.

The Azeri population of Kvemo Kartli is not particularly religious. However, in recent years there has seemed to be growing interest in a religious way of life. Given the limited willingness of the Georgian state and society to go beyond their declared "tolerance" of diversity, very little of this interest is facilitated by the state.

One of the most important aspects of religious life is religious education. There are limited opportunities to get Islamic education in Georgia. Madrasas that provide basic religious instruction do exist, but outside the national education system. The lack of qualified instructors is mentioned by all parties familiar with the situation as the main reason for the low level of religious education among Muslims in Georgia. Currently, no accredited Georgian educational institution offers a course in Islamic studies, and despite the interest evident in our interviews with Muslim community representatives, no

change seems to be forthcoming (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013). Consequently, the only real sources of education are foreign.

Iran is cited as one of the countries most active in providing educational opportunities for Georgian Muslims, along with Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia. These learning opportunities are not only religious, but also reportedly include Georgian language and computer courses. While these are not officially tied with the foreign governments, the Iranian Embassy in Tbilisi is said to be actively engaged and providing funding in cash, to avoid documented ties (Prasad 2012).

Several Iranian religious organizations are reportedly working in Georgia, particularly in Marneuli. Among them, Alhi Beyt was the only one named by our interviewees. It is active in supporting the madrasas and providing them with religious literature, as well as renovating a Shi'ite mosque in Marneuli (Prasad 2012). The organization was also reported to be active in Tbilisi, where it provides free classes in Farsi and supports religious teaching. Iranian support for establishing a madrasa in Gardabani was also mentioned (Interview with Giorgi Gvimradze, 2/3/2015 Tbilisi).

The Al-Mustafa International University of Qom (n.d.) in Iran has operated a Georgian branch since 2011. It offers a five-year program of theology, which is free, and provides accommodation for all students free of charge. The instruction is in Azeri and Farsi is also taught. Upon completion of the five-year course, the institution offers possibilities for graduate-level studies in Qom itself. However, the institution is not accredited by the Georgian educational authorities and its diploma is not recognized by the state as a certificate of higher education. Still, with its reported aim of supplying a cadre of people to serve the religious needs of the Muslim community in Georgia, the civilian concerns of diploma recognition may not be considered crucial. While there was no reference to the Tbilisi outpost on the Qom University web page itself, it does list five Georgian institutions as partners in educational cooperation, including St. Andrew's University, which was founded by the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate. However, there are no observable traces of active cooperation on the web pages of these institutions.

Officially, the only requirements for admission to the Tbilisi outpost of Al-Mustafa University are a high school diploma and Muslim faith. According to our interviews, in practice the local religious leaders have to recommend prospective students.

In addition to the Tbilisi outpost of Al-Mustafa University, there are also opportunities to study in Iran itself. According to our interviews, this is possible for either an Islamic education or a more secular one. However, given Iran's theocratic nature, all those studying there are getting instruction in religion as well. It is not immediately clear how the prospective students are selected. Our interviews in Marneuli indicate that local religious leaders facilitate the process in this case as well.

It seems that Iran's involvement in education is welcomed by locals, although some are noticeably suspicious of the motivations behind it. Many of our

interviewees alluded to the Iranian policy of spreading and supporting Islamic education throughout the world, which according to them is prescribed by the Iranian Constitution. Many of the overwhelmingly Shi'ite religious interviewees supported this policy, noting the scarcity of people in Georgia and Kvemo Kartli who are versed in Islam and the need to address this. They also overwhelmingly talked about the need for education in "traditional Islam", as opposed to the teachings of various radical sects, particularly the Wahhabis. Wahhabis are present in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, which borders Chechnya and has both an indigenous Qist[4] population and refugees from the Chechen wars. Religious respondents maintained that unlike the fundamentalist groups, who are using religion only as a cover for their violent activities, followers of traditional Islam are peace-loving and benevolent. They argued that traditional Islamic education promoted good citizenship and was beneficial for society. According to them, supporting such teaching would leave little space for the wayward sects and ensure both spirituality and national security.

Those residents of Kvemo Kartli who are sceptical of Iran's motivations spoke of calculated interest. They maintained that Iran is seeking to establish goodwill among the Shi'ites in Georgia to then use them for promoting Iranian interests in the country. These interviewees spoke of Iranian Embassy officials visiting Marneuli to inquire about the local religious, cultural and medical needs and to offer their support; they also mentioned the opening and funding of cultural centres that are registered as non-governmental organizations, which offer classes in religion as well as more practically useful classes like computer skills and Georgian and English language to lure more students. In general, these sceptics are not in favour of Iranian religious activism and would much prefer if relations were strictly secular, related to the economy and secular education.

It seems that the state is not particularly pleased with the level of Iranian involvement either, though it does recognize that it must be able to offer alternatives before it can restrict the current situation. At this stage, there are no alternatives for religious education in Georgia, especially for Shi'a Muslims, because there is a deficit of qualified Islamic theologians. The state appears to be watching the situation carefully for now, considering it a matter of long-term policy; no active steps are currently being taken (Interview with Lela Jejelava, 4/6/2015 Tbilisi). Meanwhile, it is clear that both the state and the local expert community consider foreign-educated Muslims to potentially serve the interests of those foreign countries.

The effects of Iranian activities: piety vs. practicality

Despite Iran's efforts, the ethnic Azeri public in Kvemo Kartli does not seem to be convinced. Both the public opinion survey and the in-depth interviews show that Iran is not currently viewed as a model to aspire to. Its products and universities do not have much esteem, nor do Iranians seem to be favoured as business or personal partners. This is a crucial impediment to Iran's soft

power in the region, as the local population attaches far more importance to worldly goods than religiosity. Facing the more pressing needs of employment, education, economic development and social services, Georgian Azeris are compelled to be more practical and judicious in their preferences for friendships and alliances.

Religious ties including pilgrimage and, surprisingly, medical tourism were mentioned by local community leaders as the most developed ties at the moment. Iran's medical industry seems to have a good reputation in Kvemo Kartli. Several people mentioned that some medical visits are at least partially paid for by the Iranian side, which seeks out poor patients to receive such help.

Kvemo Kartli population rate the current state of Georgian–Iranian relations as not very intense (Table 3.16 and Table 3.17) and almost all say they would welcome deeper ties, particularly in the economic sphere. In their opinion, Georgia should strive to have good relations with all its neighbouring countries, including Iran, and should try to benefit from Iran's huge domestic market. The economic relations are perceived to have deteriorated after the reintroduction of a visa requirement for Iranians entering Georgia, and the investments of Iranian businesses in Georgia are seen to have been stifled since then. Among the Kvemo Kartli population, tourism is believed to be an area for potential expansion of relations. Iran's relatively easy access to Georgia despite its general isolation, along with Georgia's rich tourism resources, should be an abundant source of profit for Georgia. Community leaders also commented on Iran's interest in Georgia as a transit route and as a market for goods and investments. They think that the recent developments between the USA and Iran and the prospect of scrapping sanctions could be beneficial for Georgia, as it would now have a freer hand in its relations and would not be reprimanded by its Western partners. There seems to be an understanding in the Kvemo Kartli Muslim community that Georgia's careful and tentative actions towards Iran are caused by its Euro–Atlantic aspirations and desire not to upset any important relationships. However, not everyone had a favourable opinion of Iran's motivations. Several people alluded to Iran's interest in dominating Georgia as well as Azerbaijan, and acting as Russia's proxy.

Despite the openness of community leaders towards Iran, the general population seems less than enthusiastic. According to our survey, Iran's influence is very low in the region.

The majority of those surveyed would rather not buy Iranian products (Table 3.18) and the desirability of Iran as an educational destination is very low (Table 3.19).

This comes in stark contrast to the apparent good standing and influence of Turkey, as well as, predictably, their kin-state Azerbaijan.

Of those students who do go to Iranian universities, most do so to study religion and all of them return to Georgia upon graduation, mostly to get involved with religious institutions. All the interviewees noted the small number of students going to Iran—citing only one or two persons per year. One reason given for this was the Georgian state's non-recognition of Iranian

Table 3.16 What is cultural influence of …. in your region? (combined percentage of 'very high' and 'somewhat high')

Azerbaijan	78
Armenia	11
Turkey	61
Iran	25
Russia	30
USA	27
China	16
European Union countries	37

Source: CRRC-Georgia, 2015 survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani population

Table 3.17 What is economic influence of …. in your region? (combined percentage of 'very high' and 'somewhat high')

Azerbaijan	73
Armenia	10
Turkey	58
Iran	20
Russia	29
USA	26
China	19
EU	34

Source: CRRC-Georgia, 2015 survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani population

diplomas[5]. The subpar quality of Iranian education was also cited on several occasions. In contrast, nearly all interviewees noted the relatively high number of students going to Turkish universities, graduates of which apparently have much better chances of success in secular activities.

The graduates of Iranian universities are well-respected primarily for their religious knowledge. Many interviewees mentioned that since most of the Kvemo Kartli population is rather ignorant in religious matters, those who are knowledgeable are generally respected. Religious education is also the most advantageous in terms of the employability of graduates from Iranian universities; it apparently guarantees employment in religious institutions and a good income, according to several sources. Given the existing discrimination and a lack of employment opportunities for Kvemo Kartli Azeris,

Table 3.18 Likelihood of buying products made in … (combined percentage of 'very likely' and 'somewhat likely')

Azerbaijan	88
Armenia	24
Turkey	86
Iran	44
Russia	62
USA	42
China	19
EU	21
Georgia	76

Source: CRRC-Georgia, 2015 survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani population

Table 3.19 Children receiving higher education in another country (combined percentage of 'very likely' and 'somewhat likely')

If you were to send your child to receive higher education in another country, how likely or unlikely will you be to send him/her to study in …

Azerbaijan?	66
Armenia?	3
Turkey?	69
Iran?	26
Russia?	47
USA?	30
China?	11
European Union countries?	39

Source: CRRC-Georgia, 2015 survey of Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani population

the religious realm is seen as the only sphere where they can fully realize their knowledge and potential (Interview with Tamta Mikeladze, 27/5/2016 Tbilisi).

It seems that our interviewees have underplayed the extent of engagement with Iran on religious education, however, as other sources suggest that students who have received religious education there number several hundred individuals (Prasad 2012). The fact that students educated in Iran return to Georgia and their home communities and continue to engage in religious

educational activities further multiplies the effect of Iranian-taught ideas and ideals.

It seems that while an interest in religion is there, the greatest motivation for Kvemo Kartli Muslims' interest in Iran is more worldly. Given the very limited opportunities for advancement in Georgia and the Georgian state's unwillingness and inability to systematically address their needs, they seem to be taking whatever opportunities are available, irrespective of who they come from. The fact that Iranians are considered their Shi'ite brethren only makes accepting Iranian help and involvement easier and better justified. The ubiquitous references to economic and investment relations in our interviews in Marneuli, and the importance ascribed to them, support this further. These things are particularly consequential for employment and economic well-being in the region, and seem to be valued more than heavenly blessings.

Conclusion

This overview of the existing Georgian–Iranian relations suggests that soft power influences are currently low, but there is some potential for future development. There are very limited trade and investment relations, and Georgian and Iranian policies are not proactively creating increased opportunities. While Georgia has some clout as the most accessible island of freedom for some Iranians from their controlling state and religious doctrine, the current links are still fragile.

Iran, however, has some potential for influence, primarily through the Azeri Shi'ite population of Kvemo Kartli. Their very limited Georgian language abilities and the consequently low levels of education and engagement in Georgian politics and the public sphere make them more receptive to outside influence. The Kvemo Kartli Azeris' perceived deprivation and discrimination, although hushed, are very real and contribute to their estrangement from the rest of Georgia. Additionally, their tendency towards obeying the state and viewing it paternalistically can have two effects. On the one hand, they are extremely unlikely to voice their grievances through Georgian political and social channels. On the other hand, if the Georgian state continues to overlook them, they can be easily lured by Iran, which provides them with education, healthcare and the potential for prestige and employment within their community.

For now, the local population is more interested in the social and economic issues of bilateral relations. Religious relations are given relatively low weight. The main obstacles to Iran's influence are the Azeris' current low religiosity and their access to Turkey as a destination for work and education, made particularly easy by a shared language. However, Iran's energetic actions towards teaching and reviving religiosity in this population and the evident material rewards of association with Iran may eventually help overcome this obstacle. Additionally, the high social prestige of Iranian-trained religious leaders in the community indicates that Iran's soft power may gain more substance in

the future. Iran's expected persistence and long-term planning may well turn Iranian soft power from a potentiality into a reality.

Notes

1 The Georgian statistics office does not break down observers of Islam into Shi'a and Sunni groups; however it is known that the Shi'a community is concentrated in Kvemo Kartli and is Azeri, but there is also a sizable portion of Sunnis among this same population. There is no independent reliable source for this information, but the generally held estimate is that Kvemo Kartli Azeris are about 70 per cent Shi'a and 30 per cent Sunni.
2 In 2015, the Muslim community was given GEL2 200,000, the Armenian Church—GEL 600,000, the Catholic Church—GEL 400,000 and the Jewish community—GEL 300,000, doubling the amounts allocated in 2014. (*Tabula Magazine*, 2015.)
3 Interviews with experts in Tbilisi between February 2015 and June 2016: Deputy Head of the State Agency for Religious Issues, Civil and Political Rights Director (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center), President of Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Studies, Program Director of Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC).
4 Qists are North Caucasian people, predominantly Sunni Muslim but sometimes Christian, who speak the Georgian language.
5 It must be noted, however, that all foreign diplomas must go through a legal certification and recognition process in Georgia, and no foreign diploma is automatically recognized. Hence this issue should not be an obstacle for Georgian citizens' studies in Iran. However, it does seem that this misconception is a result of the general scarcity of information about Georgian state policies, caused by language and other barriers previously mentioned.

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Part II

The case of Azerbaijan

4 Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan

Does religion matter?

Anar Valiyev

Religion and soft power

Very little research has been undertaken to study the role of soft power in international relations. Moreover, previous books and articles have mostly been limited to study of the soft power of secular regimes such as the USA, the UK, China, Germany or Russia. Researchers have mostly ignored the role of religious soft power or the use of soft power by theocratic governments such as the Vatican, Iran or Saudi Arabia. In studies of religious soft power, researchers usually mention the role of transnational religious actors such as Al Qaeda, American evangelical organizations or the Roman Catholic Church (Rudolph and Piscatori 1997, Haynes 2001, 2009, 2012). Their role in international relations and their impact on government policies has been the topic of many debates. The main reason for such an interest came from these organizations' increased capacity to use soft power and 'shape the values and norms of international relations' (Thomas 1999). Moreover, the extreme secularization of political regimes and monopolization of religious soft power by non-governmental actors has completely marginalized the study of how the state uses its religious soft power. From this perspective, the use of soft power by theocratic regimes and especially the use of religion as a tool becomes a very interesting topic of study. There are not many countries in the world that could be considered theocracies. Iran, as one of the rare examples, represents an interesting case. While enough has been written on Iranian soft power in Iraq (Haynes 2012) or Iranian influence elsewhere (Nasr 2006), not much has been written on Tehran's soft power in Azerbaijan, one of the post-Soviet republics. This chapter argues that Iranian soft power is slowly encroaching on Azerbaijan. Despite all of the Azerbaijani government's attempts to curb soft power, Iranians nevertheless continue to engage, sometimes very successfully. This chapter also claims that religious soft power is Iran's most important form of soft power, despite the fact that Tehran actively uses other forms and tools.

Before engaging in discussion of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan, it is helpful to conceptualize the term "soft power" itself. As one of the fathers of this concept, Nye states that soft power refers to 'the capability of an entity, usually but not necessarily a state, to influence what others do through direct or indirect international influence and encouragement' (Nye 2004).

But Nye mostly used the concept of soft power in general terms, only lightly mentioning its religious aspects. For him, religion had held soft power for centuries. Going deeper into Nye's argument we can state that soft power, i.e. attraction or co-optation, is the third way to wield influence in addition to coercion and payment. If you can attract others, to get them want what you want, you spend much less on carrots and sticks (Nye 2004). In other words, soft power allows countries or organizations to co-opt people rather than coerce them.

Researchers distinguish several instruments or attributes of soft power. Soft power, in contrast to hard power, can co-opt people through culture, values and ideas that collectively represent various forms of influence (Katzenstein 1996). Moreover, soft power is not necessarily the opposite of hard power. For example, we need not consider the financial assistance rendered to one country by another as some sort of soft power. This phenomenon relies more on the capacity of persuasion through non-violent methods and acceptance of ideas, values or ideologies. As Nye brilliantly explained it: 'If I am persuaded to go along with your purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place—in short, if my behaviour is determined by an observable but intangible attraction—soft power is at work' (Nye 2004).

Use of religion as one of the tools of soft power is another approach used in international relations. Only recently have scholars begun to pay attention to religious soft power as one of the elements of foreign policy. Nye himself (2009) understood religion in international relations as a persuasive element between similar religious entities. He went even further, claiming that religion is a double-edged sword as an American soft-power resource, and how it cuts depends on who is wielding it (Nye 2004).

History that matters

Before engaging in discussion on the forms of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan, it is worth understanding its sources. Some historical facts have shaped the current situation and perception in both countries. It is also interesting to review the history because the origins and sources of today's Iranian soft power can be attributed to historical factors. The proclamation of Shi'a Islam as the official religion on the territory of the Safavid Empire in the early sixteenth century brought both Iran and Azerbaijan under one umbrella of religious affiliation. That mere fact would shape the future of relations between the two countries for centuries. While the common Shi'a heritage would bring the two countries together, the Turkic origin of Azerbaijanis would not allow Iran to completely assimilate them. Russia's conquest of Azerbaijani principalities (khanates) from 1813 to 1828 put an end to Iranian domination and diminished the religious factor in relations between the two nations. Seen as a historical humiliation and tragedy, many Iranians still think of "northern" Azerbaijan as a historical province of Iran (Cornell 2001, p. 37). From the other side, many Azerbaijanis look at Iran as a prison in which millions of

their brethren are deprived of the right to use their own language. The Russian administration and later the Soviets tried very hard and succeeded in halting contact between the two nations, especially Shi'a religious ties. Meanwhile, Iranian elites perfectly remember the events of World War II and its aftermath, when an independent Azerbaijani People's Government, headed by Jafar Pishevari, was established in northern Iran (popularly called "South Azerbaijan" in Baku). This government ceased to exist after Soviet troops withdrew from Iran and stopped providing assistance. The young republic was crushed, and thousands fled to Soviet Azerbaijan. These events have had very strong implications for Iranian governments ever since. At the same time, Azerbaijanis of Iran have played significant or even major roles in all of Iran's revolutions, including the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Many prominent Iranian revolutionaries including Prime Minister Bazargan and others were ethnic Azerbaijanis.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought new realities into the relations between the two countries. During the early years of Azerbaijan's post-Soviet independence movement, Baku considered Tehran a natural ally. This support stemmed from Ayatollah Khomeini's statement condemning the Soviet Army invasion of Baku in January 1990, the return of Azerbaijanis to their (mostly Shi'a) Islamic roots, the opening of borders and Iranian humanitarian assistance, all of which made Iran a hero in the eyes of average Azerbaijanis. Besides the portraits of Khomeini that occasionally appeared at mass rallies in Baku, most of the statements made by Azerbaijani officials and elites about Iran were positive. However, the situation changed during the rule of the second president of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Elchibey. Proclaiming a Western, particularly Turkish orientation and accusing Tehran of violating the rights of Azerbaijanis in Iran, he alienated the Iranian establishment. Iranians, in turn, supported Azerbaijan's rival, Armenia, providing fuel and economic assistance to Yerevan during the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Since 1993, relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have fluctuated. Initially neither side risked crossing the point of no return or taking harsh actions. However, this restraint was challenged in 2001, when Iranian military ships threatened an Azerbaijani geophysical vessel, preventing it from conducting seismic works at an oil field in the Caspian Sea that is also claimed by Iran. A tense time ensued. Iranian planes repeatedly violated Azerbaijani airspace, but these provocative acts stopped after strong statements from the Turkish military and demonstrative exercises by the Turkish air force over the Caspian Sea (BBC News 2001). Azerbaijan–Iran relations then returned to their usual mode, marked by sporadic accusations, arrests of Islamists in Baku, Iranian cooperation with Armenia and occasional arrests of Azerbaijani writers and cultural activists in Iran.

Today, Azerbaijan–Iran relations are among the most complicated in the region, having experienced radical transformations over the last 25 years. Cordial friends and brotherly nations at the end of the Cold War, a decade later Baku and Tehran almost engaged in armed conflict in the Caspian Sea

over the Araz–Alov–Sharg oilfields, and relations have since remained tense. Both countries have several tools to exert their soft power over each other that raise suspicions within the respective political establishments. Azerbaijan's tools of soft power are stronger. First is the presence of a 22–30 million strong Azerbaijani ethnic minority in Iran, the largest in the country. Ever since Azerbaijan's independence, Iran has been suspicious that Baku might use the ethnic card as a tool to burden Iran. Second, the secular nature of Azerbaijan's regime attracts Iranian citizens, particularly ethnic Azerbaijanis. About 40,000 Iranians cross the Azerbaijan–Iran border during the Nowruz holidays in March to celebrate the holiday in a secular state (Valiyev 2012a). Moreover, Tehran considers Azerbaijani soft power, including its music, films and lifestyle, to be dangerous. The spread of output from the Azerbaijani entertainment industry in Iran as well as Iranians' frequent visits to Azerbaijan could provoke nationalist sentiments among Iranian Azerbaijanis. It is not surprising that the Eurovision song contest, held in Baku in May 2012, frustrated Iran and led to the recall of the Iranian ambassador from Baku for the duration of the contest. Baku does not officially consider its soft power as an effective leveraging tool in relations with Iran, fearing the deterioration of relations. In contrast, Tehran actively seeks to expand its soft power methods in Azerbaijan. The Shi'a factor remains one of the most important tools of Iranian soft power in the country. Beyond that, I would consider cultural–humanitarian as well as medical and touristic tools as a continuation of religious soft power.

Shi'a Islam as soft power

The Shi'a heritage of Azerbaijan represents the main source of Iranian soft power. As in Lebanon or Iraq, Iranian foreign policy actively uses this factor. The last survey conducted by the PULS-R agency in 2011 found that around 38.5 per cent of Azerbaijanis nominally consider themselves Shi'a, while 14 per cent are Sunnis, and around 50 per cent do not associate themselves with either of these streams (Musabayov and Shulman 2010).[1] In general, the degree of religiosity is believed to be greatest among Shi'a in southern Azerbaijan and Baku and its outskirts, and higher in the cities than in the countryside (Yunusov 2004). Researchers pointed out that a major factor consolidating popular Shi'a religiosity and political activism is pilgrimages to places of worship where saints or great Shi'a scholars are buried (Yunusov 2004). It is believed that such pilgrimages can help people solve their problems. Religious leaders who exploit these sites could wield power over the people. Thus, the location of holy Shi'a shrines in Nardaran village made this settlement one of the most central and influential of all Baku villages. The clergy coming out of this village had significant influence in the Absheron peninsula. Meanwhile, the same poll found that the share of people who fully or partially trust foreign theologians is around 34 per cent in Azerbaijan, while 36 per cent distrust them. Analysis of the above-mentioned survey indicates that religious

activism in Azerbaijan may not be deeply rooted, and the growing influence of Iranian soft power is totally dependent on Iranian religious missionaries. There are few reasons for that. First, Shi'a identity was not crucial for the majority of Azerbaijanis. It was present even during the Soviet time, exemplified by the observation of Ashura or reading Qur'anic texts, but it never used to be independent from Azerbaijani identity. In fact, we can say that Shi'a identity was successfully incorporated into Azerbaijani identity and could not play an independent role. Second, Shi'a identity formed among certain categories of people that could be considered marginalized. In the beginning of the religious revival in the 1990s, mostly unemployed and poorly educated people from the villages around Baku expressed Shi'a propaganda and identity. Around 42 per cent of respondents do not trust any of the religious leaders at any level. But among those who trust religious leaders, Iranian theologians occupy a prominent position.

Religious protests very often coincide with some significant political event happening in Azerbaijan or Iran. Looking at the last decade, we can see a surge of religious protests during the visit of an Israeli politician to Baku or during the caricature crisis in Europe back in 2006, after a Danish daily newspaper published a series of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. A fatwa—a religious order from a cleric—could be considered an effective tool of soft power. Although the literature does not look at these orders that way, in our case we may consider it an important element. In Azerbaijan, a certain share of religious people follow the call of respected Iranian theologians on various issues—from the time for observing Ramadan to following certain political orders. The effectiveness of this tool of soft power can be seen in the examples of the Danish cartoons and Rafiq Tağı's death. On 9 February 2006, about 1,000 young people took to the centre of Baku to chant religious slogans and then marched towards the French embassy to submit a note expressing their grievances about the republication of the cartoon by French media. The next day, residents of Nardaran set fire to the Danish flag and demanded a boycott of Danish products in response to the cartoons. That same day, a crowd of some 100 young demonstrators with banners, shouting slogans in Arabic, took to Fuzuli Square in downtown Baku before being dispersed by the police. On this wave of worldwide criticism of Islam, journalist Rafiq Tağı published an article in the Azerbaijani newspaper Sənət entitled 'Europe and Us'. The article claimed that Islam did not bring any positive developments or encourage progress, and his argument divided Azerbaijani society. Immediately after its publication, rallies and protests were organized in some Shi'a-dominated villages in Azerbaijan. During the rallies, protesters called for Tağı's murder. Meanwhile, Grand Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani of Iran issued a fatwa calling for the deaths of Rafiq Tağı and Samir Sədaqətoğlu, the editor of the newspaper (BBC News 2006). Both were accused of ridiculing Islamic sanctities and of portraying Christianity as superior to Islam. The article was also illustrated with the same cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that had triggered protests. Two other high-ranking Iranian clerics, Ayatollah Morteza Bani Fazl

and Ayatollah Mohsen Mojtahed Shabestari, also called for Tağı's killing. The fact that the fatwa was issued by a Grand Ayatollah who is a member of the Iranian Assembly of Experts showed that the Iranian establishment paid specific attention to this issue. Three years later, an unknown assassin killed Rafiq Tağı on a street in Baku. The investigation has not yet identified the killer. It is hard to say whether Rafiq Tağı was killed by the call of the Ayatollahs or was a victim of an ordinary crime. It is not the first time that Iranian clergy have used fatwas to threaten some public figure in Azerbaijan. Although a fatwa does not have legal binding, certain groups of people nevertheless take these orders literally and follow them. In 2010, senior Iranian cleric Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi threatened to issue a fatwa against the government of Azerbaijan due to Baku's decision to demolish an illegal mosque. 'If destroying mosques in Azerbaijan continues, we will issue a fatwa for resistance', he was quoted as saying in Iran's state-run Mehr news agency. 'Those who die in this way will be considered martyrs', he said (*Hurriyet Daily News* 2010). He further accused Baku of minimizing Islam's role and of anti-Islamic behaviour, saying that the government had closed or demolished seven mosques in the past year and banned Islamic symbols in state offices. So far, the secular government cannot present anything against fatwas. Only the secular nature of the country allows the government to minimize this most important tool of Iranian soft power.

Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan could grow tremendously if Shi'a Islam were to become a force that could monopolize the political and civil realms of the country. The situation is exacerbated by the absence of an independent and educated Azerbaijani clergy. Although Iran was naturally a source of spiritual guidance for Azerbaijanis right after independence, its influence was gradually limited through governmental actions. Shi'a Muslims usually do not have clerical hierarchy. Thus, the Azerbaijani Sheikh ul-Islam is not an absolute interpreter of dogma or sacred law. That is why Iranian religious authorities could in theory enjoy more spiritual authority among Azerbaijani Shi'ites, which may partially explain why independent religious communities reject the official clergy's spiritual authority (Crisis Group 2008). It is interesting to stress that Azerbaijan's Sheikh ul-Islam recognized the spiritual authority of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Khamenei, but changed his position in 1998 and now recognizes Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, an Iraq-based moderate (ibid.). Moreover, informally following the government's order negatively affected the Sheikh's image in the eyes of many pro-Iranian people in the country. This situation makes the Azerbaijani Shi'a population open for influence from senior figures in Iran. For example, Sheikh Fazel Lankarani, one of the Ayatollahs, was very popular among the youth until his death. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (now in Iraq) supervises the Ahli Beyt organization, which is known for humanitarian activities and promoting religious ideas. It is active in Azerbaijan and among Georgia's Azeris in the border region of Kvemo Kartli (Crisis Group 2008).

Most importantly, in line with what has already been suggested and as recent polls indicate, the potential for Islamization in Azerbaijan is as yet weakly institutionalized, in the sense that there are very few religious leaders who can lead such a movement. Results of the survey also show that the population does not know or trust those outside of their own community. Therefore, there is no single independent religious leader who can capitalize on and mobilize the masses like in Iran. As has been shown, apart from a few isolated examples, there is not yet any independent Shi'a clergy in Azerbaijan, and the development of such a clergy seems to be dependent on growing Iranian influence. Recent arrests of the leadership of the Islamic party and independent scholars from Nardaran show that the government prevents the creation of independent Shi'a groups. The absence of independent religious groups has both negative and positive aspects. On the positive side, the arguments are that no force can use religion for its own benefit, and having an independent clergy that might fall into the hands of the Iranian clergy could be problematic for the country. Meanwhile, it is bad for the country that many young people, having no model to follow and having heard nothing from their own clergymen, would follow fatwas from Iran. From that perspective, it is worth mentioning Allahshukur Pashazade, the head of the Caucasus Muslim Board. Paşazadə is one of the longest serving public officials in Azerbaijan's history, having held this position for more than 30 years. In all these years he was crucial in serving the secular governments and following official instructions. Moreover, he was able to help the country by forging ties with the Muslim world in difficult times. However, he was always cautious not to show any political ambitions and tried not to politicize religion or bring religion into politics. Nevertheless, despite the attempts of the Azerbaijani authorities to limit Iranian soft power, there are some indications that it has been growing in recent years, mainly through political and humanitarian activity and educational programs (Wilhelmsen 2009).

The impact of Iranian soft power can also be seen in the example of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA). The party is one of the organizations that has been significantly influenced by Iran. Iranian religious missionaries have been active in southern Azerbaijan, as well as in villages around Baku, where the population is predominantly Shi'a Muslim (Yunusov 2004). The IPA was established in November 1991 in the village of Nardaran near Baku. The party was officially registered in 1992 and its leader was Al Akram Hajji, then a trained philologist (Yunusov 2004). With a leadership of mullahs, mostly lacking basic religious education and boasting no more than a secondary school education, the IPA could not involve members of the urban elite in its ranks. It thus appealed mainly to rural populations. The party's basic ideology is that only Islam can structure an independent Azerbaijan. According to Hajji, the republic will not be able to extricate itself from perpetual moral crisis until its leaders have accepted Islamic values and concepts of state building (Valiyev 2005). The IPA preaches an anti-Turkic, anti-Semitic and anti-American doctrine threaded with conspiracy theories (ibid.).

Considering any form of nationalism to be *shirk* (worshipping anything other than Allah, breaking strict Muslim monotheism), it rejects loyalty to a larger Turkic community as anti-Islamic. The main task of Muslim society, according to the party, is to block the spread of American civilization. But the true principal enemy of the Muslim world is a Masonic conspiracy directed by Israel. In a bizarre rapprochement with Russian neo-fascist ideology, the IPA advocates an alliance between Islamists and the Russian Orthodox Church to destroy the "enemies of humanity" at their Tel Aviv headquarters. The main influences on the IPA's ideology are, in fact, external—late Soviet and Iranian ideas. Furthermore, there exists what might be called a crackpot tone to the IPA's propaganda that does not play well in Azerbaijan. It asserts, for instance, that Masons and Zionists run organizations like the UN and UNESCO. This rhetoric stirs up antagonism within nationalist groups, because it echoes Iranian attacks on Azerbaijan for cooperating with the West. In 1996, the leadership of the party was arrested and an investigation claimed that the activities of the IPA were sponsored by Iran (Yunusov 2012). The party is very influential in Azerbaijani villages and in Nardaran specifically, having been established there by its religious leaders. This village kept its religious traditions even during the Soviet period. Moreover, in the early 1980s (during Soviet times), an organization of followers of Khomeini was established in Nardaran (Yunusov 2012). Thus, it is not surprising that the party has tremendous influence in the village, and the IPA can manipulate or use the mood of the people there. The case of social unrest in Nardaran in summer 2002 is a perfect example of how the party was able to use its power in the village in order to push its own agenda.

Surprisingly, despite the fact that the ideology of the IPA turns many people away from the party, it nevertheless has a certain amount of trust from the population. The PULS-R survey showed that people's level of trust in the IPA is surprisingly high (10.8 per cent fully trust and 45.5 per cent partially trust). A high level of trust does not necessarily mean that people know about the party's ideology, but this is a very dangerous trend for the secular elite even if people are just trusting the party without fully understanding it. The party could easily manipulate people and capitalize on unpopular government decisions.

In contrast, despite a moderate level of trust for the IPA, which is considered a proxy for Iranian influence in Azerbaijan, Iran as a state did not attract the population's sympathies due the nature of the regime and the values it promotes (Paraszczuk 2012). The public opinion polls conducted by the PULS-R sociological agency found that the people surveyed predominantly consider Iran to be more an enemy state than a friendly one. The figures presented in the graph (Figure 4.1) represent the people who identified Iran as a friendly or non-friendly state. Others have not mentioned Iran in either category. Although the proportion of people considering Iran an enemy state does not exceed 11–12 per cent, it is nevertheless twice the number of people who consider Iran a friendly state. Meanwhile, Iran stands third in line after

Armenia and Russia on the list of countries considered unfriendly towards Azerbaijan (Musabayov and Shulman 2010).

The same poll (results shown in Figure 4.2) asked respondents what country they would prefer to work and reside in if they left Azerbaijan. Only a marginal percentage of people, between 0.2–0.8 per cent, would choose Iran as their second home.

Thus, the negative political image of Iran in Azerbaijan limits Tehran's abilities and chances to use its soft power in the political realm. The absence of tendencies to politicize religion and Islamize politics limits Tehran's soft power.

Beyond these tools, Iran tries to exert its soft power through religious literature. For years, Iranian missionaries as well as various organizations could easily import and sell religious literature in specialized shops and even on the street. Translated into the Azerbaijani language, this literature was able to penetrate the hiatus in religious affairs. From 1992 until 2010, much of the literature explaining Islam and religious issues came from Iran.

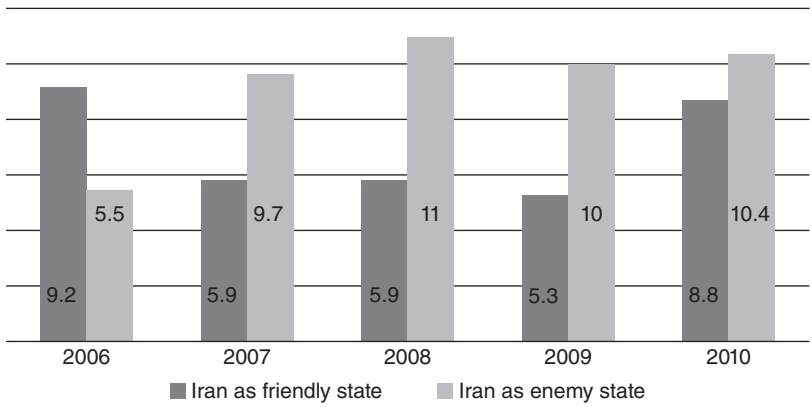

Figure 4.1 Countries considered unfriendly towards Azerbaijan

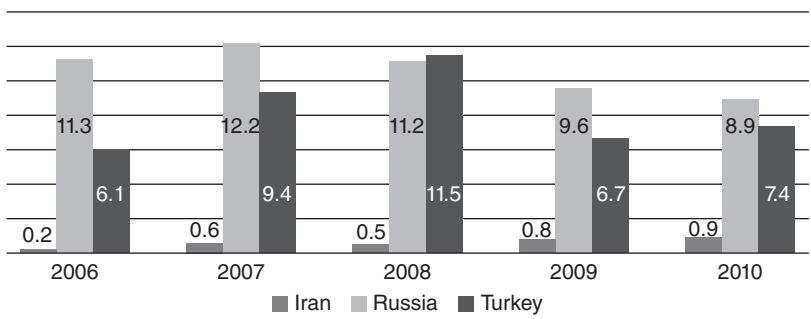

Figure 4.2 Preferred country for work and habitation

Most Azerbaijanis got their knowledge of religion from Iranian religious literature. However, since the establishment of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations, it became harder to freely import literature. For example, by 2010 the committee had reviewed more than 18,000 books and banned around 348 titles from sale in Azerbaijan (News.az 2011). Many of the banned books come to Azerbaijan from Iran. Meanwhile, parliament adopted a law that made the sale of legally permitted religious literature and other productions illegal outside specialized shops.

Using TV channels as a propaganda machine for the Iranian style of life and its religious order is another tool Tehran uses to exert its soft power in Azerbaijan. The Iranian political regime, along with its unappealing entertainment industry (compared to Turkey's or Russia's), is hardly attractive to Azerbaijanis. Nevertheless, the Iranian government is actively seeking to increase its cultural–humanitarian links to Azerbaijan. One of the tools for such cultural intervention is Sahar TV, a TV channel broadcasted from Iran into Azerbaijan's territory. The TV channel can be easily picked up in southern Azerbaijan. The content of the TV programs is usually anti-Azerbaijani and official Baku is constantly expressing its concern about the channel (BBC News 2010). In October 2003, the government voiced its strongest disapproval of Sahar TV's content following the broadcast of an interview with Isa Qambar, the leader of the opposition party. Baku considered it interference in domestic affairs, based on the logic that foreign TV should not broadcast an opposition leader who speaks against government policy. The TV channel actively criticizes Azerbaijan's relations with Israel and the USA, as well as addressing issues such as the status of the hijab and arrests of Islamists. The channel has not had a positive effect on relations between the two countries (RFE/RL 2011). Furthermore, it tends to spread suspicion towards the Azerbaijani government amongst targeted Azeri viewers, especially people who live close to the Iranian border. However, the channel has not been able to attract many followers (RFE/RL 2009).

Much of Sahar's programming deals with religion, which is clear evidence of their exporting the ideals and values of the Iranian Revolution. Critics accuse Tehran of carrying out a soft power offensive to unduly influence the Azerbaijani public—or even undermine indigenous culture or tradition (RFE/RL 2008). Back in 2008, correspondents of Radio Free Europe monitored the situation in the southern regions of Azerbaijan and found that people there are fond of Sahar TV's Compass program and of call-in shows conducted in their native tongue. As one of the respondents stated: 'Of course I watch the Iranian channels, they have very good programs,' he says. 'They have different programs: critical. As needed. They say all things that are hidden here' (ibid.).

Sahar TV's call-in show continues to receive a flood of calls from interested viewers in Astara, Lankaran, Masalli and other southern Azerbaijani districts. Another respondent said that locals trust the family nature of Iranian programs and says they fit with their moral and religious values.

'Children like the programs and there are women's programs for women', Rahim says. 'My sister-in-law likes religious programs a lot; she always listens to them. She participated in a competition for Koran reading and won a prize from the Iranian Embassy' (RFE/RL 2008). Considering that Sahar doesn't reach all of Azerbaijan, the number of people watching this channel is small. However, it does have an audience among specific segments of the population and regions in the country, especially in the lower, more religious class in southern Azerbaijan or villages around Baku. Another Iranian broadcasting tool is Iran Azeri Radio (IRIB World Service). The topics of the radio programs range from criticism of the Azerbaijani government to banning the hijab to Iranian domestic politics. In general, there is no harsh criticism of the Azerbaijani government, but rather softly critical views on Baku's international and domestic policies.

It is important to stress that we should consider these tools as a continuation of religious soft power since the Iranian authorities also pay specific attention to humanitarian ties with Azerbaijan. The Imam Khomeini Imdad Committee was an influential organization in Azerbaijan in 1990s. The organization appeared in Azerbaijan in 1993 with the purpose of helping Azerbaijani displaced people and refugees. In 2001 there were more than 400 places in Azerbaijan where the committee was distributing aid. A bulletin published by the Iranian embassy in Baku stated that between 1993 and 2002, the committee provided aid in 19 population centres to more than 25,000 people (Murinson 2010). Iranian aid organizations also distributed small grants and other assistance to refugees from the Karabakh region and to young families. In 2003, the amount of aid reached $25 million. However, beyond providing aid, the committee was responsible for promoting the ideas of Khomeinism and the Iranian revolution (Kuliyev 2005). Particularly in the southern regions of Azerbaijan, one can easily find the books of Iranian theologians translated into the Azerbaijani language. Finally, in 2013 Azerbaijani officials closed the committee 'due to the fact that Azerbaijan has achieved economic development, therefore the activities of foreign charitable organizations in the country are not necessary' (APA, 2014). Nevertheless, Iranian officials continue unsuccessful negotiations with the Azerbaijani side to reopen the office (APA 2013). Along with providing humanitarian aid and religious literature, Iranian agencies recruited Azerbaijani youth to study in religious schools in Iran. Iranian Hezbollah was allegedly behind this recruitment and may have been attempting to establish bases in Azerbaijan. By early 1997, newspapers reported that hundreds of young Azerbaijanis had been trained in Iranian Hezbollah camps (Nasibli 2001). After graduation, they were given the choice to go back home to disseminate Hezbollah's ideas or to fight in Lebanon against the Israel Defense Forces. Meanwhile, a council of 15 influential Azerbaijani religious figures is said to have organized the activities of the cells, whose responsibilities included forming 'an army of God' to operate in Azerbaijan (Yunusov 2004).

Until recently, Iran was also hosting dozens of Azerbaijani students studying theology in the cities of Tehran or Qom. Many of the IPA members

who have been arrested had theological education and were studying in Iran (Yunusov 2012). That was particularly dangerous since after returning to Azerbaijan these theologians were actively criticizing the government and promoting Iranian values and policies. One vivid example is Mövsüm Səmədov, the head of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan. Səmədov is a graduate of the Islamic University in Qom, Iran and was an active critic of Aliyev's government. He was actively featured on Sahar TV as well as on Iranian state radio, where he spoke eloquently on the issues of banning the hijab or *adhān*. The members of the IPA under Səmədov's leadership began to participate in various social protests. In January 2011, he was arrested on charges of possession of arms and sentenced to 12 years on charges of terrorism (Yunusov 2012). In order to curb this type of influence, in 2011 the Azerbaijani parliament adopted an amendment that forbids sending Azerbaijani citizens abroad for religious education unless it is approved by the government (HRWF 2011). Meanwhile, a person who has studied abroad cannot perform religious rites unless it is coordinated with government agencies. Summarizing the Iranian cultural–humanitarian tool of soft power, we can say that Iran tries to maximize the impact of its cultural instruments in Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the 70 years of anti-religious society under Soviet rule, these attempts have not proven to be very effective. Moreover, the Azerbaijani government's position as well as the creation of obstacles to the penetration of Iranian influence into Azerbaijan has decreased the chances of the Iranian government's success.

What is the future of Iranian soft power?

Religion will continue to be the major source of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan. However, this creates an unfortunate paradox. The Azerbaijani establishment curbs and makes obstacles for the creation of Shi'a clergy who might be independent (from the state), since they would immediately fall under the influence of Iranian theologians. Due to the fact that major Shi'a schools are located in Iran, the new generation of Azerbaijani Shi'a clergy would need to follow rules or procedures established by Iranian clergy. That would be dangerous for the secular Azerbaijani government to allow. Meanwhile, the population distrusts the state clergy that have received their education in Azerbaijan. Thus, the Azerbaijani establishment has continued its policy for almost 25 years by limiting the independent clergy, arresting pro-Iranian theologians and strengthening the state-controlled Shi'a bureaucracy that is not highly trusted by the population.

The activities of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, Iranian action to attract more tourists from the country and the broadcast of Iranian TV and radio over Azerbaijan are all vivid examples of Iranian efforts to exert soft power in Azerbaijan's public sphere. However, sober analysis would ask: what is the deeper nature of the relationship between the two states and what does the future hold? Does Iran have the potential to increase its soft power in

Azerbaijan and gain fundamental ground in the country? It is very hard to predict what the future of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan will hold. Several factors may significantly affect the outcome, including the policies of both Tehran and Baku. We can draw a few possible scenarios.

Soft power turns into hard power

Today, relations between Azerbaijan and Iran depend more on regional and global issues than on mutual interests. It is hard to predict how sanctions and increased pressure on Iran would affect Tehran's behaviour towards Azerbaijan. However, strengthened international sanctions against Iran, an intensification of the civil war in Syria or targeted strikes on Iran can be expected to further harm relations between Baku and Tehran. In order to divert attention from itself, Iran may escalate conflicts across multiple borders, including the one it shares with Azerbaijan. Due to ongoing militarization and unresolved territorial claims, the Caspian Sea remains an area with high conflict potential. Moreover, Azerbaijan remains the weakest link among the states bordering Iran today. Judging by Iranian behaviour in the Hormuz Straits, if Iran comes under pressure, it may seek to demonstrate to the West that regional infrastructure is fair game, including Azerbaijani oil and gas platforms and pipelines that supply the West. Iran could also spearhead various provocations as it usually does by arresting Azerbaijani writers in Iran, threatening vessels in the Caspian Sea or violating the country's border. Having refrained from using the threat of force since 2001, Tehran may no longer believe it prudent to restrain itself militarily against Azerbaijan. In this scenario, Tehran may turn its soft power into hard power.

At the dawn of independence, Azerbaijan was the most appropriate target for exporting the Iranian Islamic revolution. In order to achieve this goal, Tehran propagated Islamic values and ideas of Islamic statehood in the republic. Nonetheless, Tehran's attempts have not been very successful because of the long and intense anti-religious policy instituted in the Soviet Union as well as cultural differences between Iranians and Azerbaijanis. Iran's inability to establish an effective mass political party for influencing Azerbaijani public life forced its governmental agencies to rely mostly on radical clandestine organizations. Tehran could be using pro-Iranian elements in targeting Western establishments, US or Israeli embassies or any other strategic facility. Baku has experienced many such cases. For example, in February 1997, famous Azerbaijani scholar and academician Ziya Bunyatov was assassinated in Baku, allegedly by Hezbollah, which accused him of being an agent of the Israeli Mossad and of disseminating Zionism in Azerbaijan. Five people were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. The death of the scholar became a catalyst for a full-scale attack against all Iranian-affiliated organizations (Mammadov 2002). In the fall of 2001, the Ministry of National Security (MNS) arrested six citizens in possession of documents proving their connection with Hezbollah. Additionally, a network of 30 people was discovered.

During interrogations, members of Hezbollah openly rejected the secular regime of Azerbaijan (Yunusov 2012). Within a couple of months, the MNS crushed most of the Hezbollah cells in the country.[2] In 2006, pro-Iranian forces again tried to gain ground in Azerbaijan. This time, a radical organization called the Northern Army of the Mahdi was formed in Iraq with the purpose of fighting against the United States and Israel, and to create a separate Sharia-ruled country. A group of 17 people headed by Said Dadashbeyli allegedly kept secret contacts with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. One of the leaders of the organization met with a member of this group in Qom, Iran where he was allegedly offered financial support. Meanwhile, members of the Northern Army received military training in Iran (Trend.az 2007). The members of the group have now been sentenced to various terms in jail. Repeated attempts by the Iranian special services to establish a network of radical groups in the country show Azerbaijan's importance in the plans of its southern neighbour.

Alarmed by the active penetration of Western capital and influence in this small South Caucasian republic, the Iranian authorities are trying to secure their northern borders. The decision to establish radical groups or cells is now not necessarily motivated by the aim of conducting terrorist attacks. In fact, Iranian special services do not want the activities of the cells to come to the attention of Azerbaijani law-enforcement agencies. In reality, the local radical groups or sleeper cells have been established in case of hostile actions on the part of Azerbaijan or the country's decision to join a US attack on Iran. In January 2011, Azerbaijani law-enforcement agencies arrested several dozen IPA activists after party chairman Mövsüm Səmədov called for the overthrow of the Azeri government. 'The Azerbaijani people should rise and put an end to the despotic regime and the leader with a face of Yazid', he declared, comparing President Ilham Aliyev to an early Islamic caliph despised by Shi'ites for killing Imam Huseyn (Rubin 2014). It is interesting that a similar tactic, comparing a secular regime with a historical figure, was successfully used to provide credibility for the clergy in pre-revolutionary Iran. However, in Azerbaijan this kind of rhetoric worked only for religious people. The court charged Səmədov with plotting to create mass unrest and perpetrate terrorism. In March 2012, security services arrested 22 individuals accused of conducting espionage against Azerbaijan. These individuals were given special instructions by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard to collect information on certain embassies in Baku, including the Israeli embassy. The arrests coincided with news of an alleged Iranian bomb attack against Israeli diplomats in New Delhi and another thwarted bomb attack on an Israeli embassy car in Tbilisi. Iran has also previously accused Azerbaijan of assisting in Israeli-organized assassinations in Iran. In response, Iranian authorities arrested two Azerbaijani poets who were visiting Iran and accused them of spying for Israel (RFE/RL 2013).

The latest events show that Iranian authorities have understood the limits of their soft power and have slowly begun to resort to hard power. If this scenario were to continue, there is a danger that the fragile religious and political

balance may collapse. Beyond using pro-Iranian elements for radical activities, Tehran may strengthen its political proxies to take a more active part in public life and unite dissatisfied religious elements. The case with hijab in schools is a very good example. Despite the fact that banning the hijab affects both the Shi'a and Sunni communities (including Salafis), it was mainly the Shi'a community that opposed the decision and technically monopolized the problem, using it for its own benefits. A campaign to lift the ban on wearing hijab in schools followed, gathering tens of thousands of signatures. However, this did not necessarily indicate the growing influence of Islamism in the country, but simply growing discontent with the hijab being banned by the ministry of education. It is not impossible that in the future, other problems might arise that could provoke further protests from the Islamic party and unite people who are not even aware of the real agenda behind their banners.

In November 2015, the law enforcement agencies of Azerbaijan engaged in deadly clashes with supporters and followers of the recently established Muslim Unity Movement of Azerbaijan. Its leader, prominent Shi'a cleric Taleh Bağirzadə, spent several years behind bars before being released. During the clashes in Nardaran village, several people were killed while more than 20 were arrested. The Muslim Unity Movement was another organization that could implement its religious agenda without being under the banner of the IPA. For a very short time, this movement was able to attract many followers and popularize itself. With social media on rise in Azerbaijan, the movement was able to disseminate its messages across all levels of society. Bağirzadə was slowly becoming a leader who could unite the Shi'a movement against the government. He acknowledged that, at this juncture, Azerbaijan is not ready to become an Islamic republic, but he did not oppose the Iranian system either. In fact, he has also publicly noted that Azerbaijan was ruled by Sharia law up until the nineteenth century, while stopping short of calling for its reintroduction (Mamedov 2016). It is interesting that the events in Nardaran and the arrest of Bağirzadə coincided with the execution of Nimr al-Nimr, a Shi'a cleric who was sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia. The Iranian press and propaganda machine seized the moment to compare the two leaders and proclaim them martyrs for the Shi'a cause. This tactic worked in Shi'a communities across the world. But in Azerbaijan, due to the marginal nature of religious politics, it is hard to expect that painting Bağirzadə as a martyr would trigger the same effect as in other Shi'a dominated societies.

Nevertheless, if this scenario works, Iran would continue to create or recreate political organizations using the Shi'a agenda. Looking at the resilience of the Islamic party or other pro-Iranian groups, a lot of things would depend on the government employing proper tactics to address this issue.

Religious soft power turns into economic soft power

With the economic situation deteriorating and crisis looming in Azerbaijan, Iranian authorities may resort to a new type of soft power. Economic

relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have been capricious. Up until 2007, trade turnover increased every year, reaching $539 million. However, it dropped precipitously to $168 million in 2009, mainly due to a significant decrease in Azerbaijani oil exports to Iran.[3] Trade turnover increased again to $304 million in 2011, on the basis of increased Azerbaijani gas exports. Nevertheless, Iran continues to be the major supplier of food products to the southern regions of Azerbaijan. Thousands of Azerbaijanis cross the Iranian border every month to buy food products in Iranian bazaars that are significantly cheaper than in their own country. Iranian authorities encourage this dependence by abolishing visas for Azerbaijani citizens, which keeps the Azerbaijani population close to Iran. Meanwhile, Iranian financial institutions were actively using Azerbaijani banks for their banking operations in order to avoid US sanctions. Thus, in early July 2012, the Central Bank of Azerbaijan annulled the license of Iran's locally operating Royal Bank, which was under suspicion of illegal banking operations and laundering Iranian funds. Although the central bank did not officially justify its action against Royal Bank, experts connect the move with the local bank's illegal banking activities. Local newspapers claimed that Royal Bank had come under surveillance from Azerbaijan's Ministry of National Security for illegal money transfers (Contact Online News 2012). Moreover, back in 2010, WikiLeaks disclosed the correspondence of Ann Derse, a former US Ambassador to Azerbaijan, in which she shared her suspicions of money laundering of Iranian funds by several Azerbaijani banks, including Royal Bank (Wikileaks 2009). The founder and major shareholder of Royal Bank (44 per cent) is Ali Jam, a US citizen of Iranian origins (Valiyev 2012b).

As of 1 February 2011, Azerbaijani citizens have been able to enter Iran visa-free for one-month stays. Tehran has indicated that it plans to increase that period to three months. The former Iranian ambassador to Azerbaijan, Mohammad-Baghir Bakhrami, cited the cultural and religious ties between Iran and Azerbaijan as the reason for Tehran's decision. Azerbaijanis mostly travel to Iran for trade, visiting relatives and medical services. Meanwhile, Iranians account for 15–20 per cent of foreign visitors to Azerbaijan (Rajabova 2013). Baku and Nakhchivan were the destinations of choice, as indicated by the increased number of Iranian license plates seen in Baku recently (Abbasov 2010). The Azerbaijani capital's proximity to Iran, its open access to alcohol and the freedom for women not to wear the hijab motivates many Iranians. Current Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Mohsen Pak Ayin stated that in 2015 700,000 Azerbaijanis visited Iran and about 350,000 Iranians came to Azerbaijan. The difference in the number of tourists may be a good example of Iranian soft power in the country. Iranians visit Azerbaijan in particularly high numbers during holiday vacation times. On the other side, due to the poor quality of the medical services in Azerbaijan, low trust in the public health system and high prices, the number of Azerbaijanis visiting Iran for medical treatment is rising day by day, especially after the simplification of the visa regulations. The majority of people are visiting Tabriz for treatment.

Moreover, Iran plans to provide medical services at the border. The doctors working there will diagnose the people applying and give them recommendations. This will prevent the loss of time and money for people applying for medical treatment.

Iran will continue to promote medical and religious tourism for its own purposes. It is expected that the number of Azerbaijani tourists will rise, considering the economic deterioration. The number of Azerbaijani citizens from neighbouring regions has already skyrocketed for the last couple of years and will continue to grow. Comparatively low prices for medical services, food and other products make Iran attractive. If Iran uses this comparative advantage wisely and without interfering in the political realm, then we can expect the growth of Iranian soft power and its spillover into other spheres.

Demise of Iranian soft power

The third scenario stipulates a purposeful policy from Baku for diminishing the role of Iranian soft power. This scenario envisions active social policies and spreading the oil benefits to a larger share of the population, which would decrease social dissatisfaction and diminish the social base of pro-Iranian elements. Moreover, political pluralism, vibrant civil society and active party politics may further diminish the role of the IPA and any other pro-Iranian political parties. Today, the IPA capitalizes on certain protest elements and its image as a "fighter against the regime". Even with most of its leadership in jail, the party still holds strong positions and has become even stronger because of its active use of social media. The party's involvement in political life may marginalize it or make it a mainstream party. Meanwhile, the authorities hope that a national Islam will emerge, erasing the already weak borders between Sunnism and Shi'ism (Crisis Group 2008). This would be a victory for the government but would imply a strong and powerful state to force its religious policy on the people (Balci 2004). For this to happen, the government would have to gradually diminish the influence of radical ideologies through tight control over foreign missionary work and would have to initiate a Sunni–Shi'a dialogue to reduce sectarian tensions in society. A national public debate involving independent and official clerics, scholars and NGOs would then need to be organized to effectively guarantee religious freedom. Independent religious communities, in particular Salafi groups, would then in turn have to clearly warn their members of the risks connected to terrorism and militants and engage in genuine dialogue with official clergy and Azerbaijani authorities (Valiyev 2008).

Conclusion

Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan may take various forms and lead to different outcomes. Considering the recent softening of pressure on Iran, Tehran could limit its soft power towards Azerbaijan and begin fully fledged neighbourly cooperation. If Iran feels secure enough not to perceive Azerbaijan as a threat,

it may slowly stop expanding its soft power activities. However, based on the actions of the two regimes, things could all go differently. Azerbaijani authorities and various agencies understand that due to the nature of the Iranian regime, Tehran would capitalize on Azerbaijan's vulnerability. Surprisingly, the source of Iranian soft power depends on Azerbaijan itself. Iranian soft power will grow if Azerbaijani statehood becomes weaker and the country begins to experience economic problems. Thus, the future of Iranian soft power is contingent on the results of Azerbaijan's internal politics.

Notes

1 Such a high number of people with non-affiliation could be explained by the absence of deep knowledge of religion and religious streams among the general public. The years of Communist rule isolated the people from access to information as well as contacts with the rest of the world.
2 According to the government, in the late 1990s another pro-Iranian radical group, Jeyshullah, became active in Azerbaijan. Mubariz Aliev, 31, a renegade Internal Affairs Ministry officer, founded the organization in 1995 to "cleanse" Azerbaijan of foreign influences and restore "true Islam". Ensconced in the mountains north of Baku, the group initially collected information on its targets, mainly foreign organizations. It then distributed leaflets threatening to attack those foreigners if they refused to leave Azerbaijan. Between 1996 and 1999, Jeyshullah staged an armed raid on the Baku office of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, planned and threatened an attack on the United States embassy, planted a bomb at the headquarters of the International Krishna Society in Baku, assassinated the chairman of the Azerbaijani Psychics' Society and his two sons, and finally botched an attempt to hijack a military helicopter. In 2000, the Jeyshullah leader and his militants were sentenced to various terms in prison ranging from four to 13 years. Neutralization of this organization cleared the ground for other pro-Iranian radical groups to emerge and expand their activities for at least six or seven years (Valiyev 2008).
3 It may sound strange that Azerbaijan exported oil to Iran, but in fact Iranian authorities imported oil or oil products for oil refineries as well to meet its needs in northern Iran. Moreover, at a certain point, due to sanctions and the need for hard cash, Iran increased its export of oil to Southeast Asia and other parts of the world, and thus had some deficit for its own needs. Thus, Azerbaijani oil was needed to continue the work of its own oil refineries.

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5 Examining Salafism in Azerbaijan

Transnational connections and local context

Kamal Gasimov

This chapter examines the dissemination of the transnational Salafi movement in Azerbaijan in the context of its relationship to external powers and local discourses. It will show how Saudi Arabian religious discourse has been diffused in Azerbaijan, to what extent and in what way local Salafis[1] connect to external actors and maintain their transnational linkages, and what the limitations of Saudi religious soft power are in the local sociopolitical context. Generally, Salafism in Azerbaijan (as well as in Russia and nearly all former Soviet republics) is represented by the media and the expert community as an agent of Saudi Arabian influence, while Salafi preachers are depicted merely as spies serving the interests of another country. However, this study supports the idea that Azerbaijani Salafis are neither spies, nor controlled actors, but members of a complex religious movement which has both been involved in a continuous transnational interaction and a process of adaptation to the local context. In addition, it shows that benefiting from the soft power of a religious movement does not presuppose its direct instrumentalization. Thus, while arguing that domestic Salafi networks have been established through support from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries with whom they have maintained a variety of connections to this day, I also emphasize that Salafism in Azerbaijan has become a local religious movement with distinct features, acting under the social and political conditions of Azerbaijan itself.

Transnational religious movements and soft power

In order to examine the relationship between a transnational religious movement and a nation state, this study refers to the concepts of transnationalism and soft power. In what follows, transnationalism is understood to comprise cross-border interactions and contacts between different people and organizations that try to escape the state's control and that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of any government (Nye and Keohane 1971, p. 331). Despite the fact that the role of religion in the study of transnational relations has been ignored for a long time, religion has long been a transnational force (Piscatori 2000, p. 73). Contemporary religious movements have become so organized, extensive and economically self-sufficient that

they have gone far beyond the borders of the nation state and now play an important role in international politics. However, while noting that transnational relations or links do not necessarily serve the particular interests of a foreign actor or a coherent political objective, we nonetheless realize that transnational actors, especially the Salafi movements, cannot be completely disconnected from state policies. More precisely, while increasing globalization and information technology have allowed some religious movements to go far beyond the borders of nation states and obtain enough resources to expand their community and finance their activities, the state has never stopped trying to control these movements or use them for political gains. Nation states not only contribute to the emergence of new religious movements beyond their borders, but also 'seek to serve as patrons of the new movements' (ibid., p. 78). In particular, some Muslim majority countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey try to exploit transnational actors to legitimize their own position and to enhance their influence abroad. In doing so, they benefit from the symbolic soft power that these religious transnational actors wield. Joseph Nye summarized the idea of the "soft power" of attraction and persuasion in this way:

> A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries—admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness—want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them. (Nye 2004, p. 5)

Thus, Nye suggests that in contrast to hard (military and economic) power, a third form of power, soft power, aims to shape people's preferences. Nye's understanding of soft power is quite similar to what Steven Lukes identified as 'power's "third dimension": the power to shape, influence and determine others' beliefs and desires, thereby securing their compliance' (Lukes 2005, p. 486).

Noting the growing role of non-state actors on the international stage, Nye adds that 'for centuries, organized religious movements have possessed soft power' (Nye 2004, p. 94). Moreover, according to him, the soft power of non-state actors might be independent of state policy or even in contradiction with it (ibid., p. 17). Jeffrey Haynes states that religious transnational movements, due to their transnational ideas and values, can have a certain impact on international relations by attracting groups of people, often across state boundaries, and by mobilizing them to participate in common activities and to pursue common goals. The success or failure of their soft power does not necessarily depend on their ability to forge alliances with state power (Haynes 2012, p. 6–9). Discussing transnational activism, John O. Voll argues that even militant transnational non-state actors such as al-Qaeda extensively use soft power to gain support, build constituencies and recruit militants (Voll 2008, p. 254).

Thus, religious transnational actors may have different goals, ideas and values, but most of them make efforts to preserve their movement's sustainability and enhance their community. However, most of them do not have a conventional military power; the only means they have to achieve their goals are symbolic and normative or communicative power. At the same time, due to their sources of attraction, transnational religious movements are able to assist the state in various ways. As the case of Azerbaijani Salafism and Saudi Arabia will indicate, Salafism has helped Saudi Arabia extend its legitimacy and prestige among Muslim populations far beyond its national borders.

Saudi Arabia's religious soft power

The transnationalization of Salafism has been a constant Saudi political strategy to spread a Saudi version of Islam worldwide (Al-Rasheed 2007, p. 126). The oil boom of the 1970s brought great revenues to the kingdom and increased its ability to diffuse Saudi religious discourse globally. The Saudi authorities have tried to convince Muslims that the most right and pure form of Islam is the one rooted in the territory of the kingdom, and that the Saudi monarchs are the main promoters and defenders of this Islam. Saudi Arabia exercises its soft power through such international institutions as the World Assembly of Muslim Youth and the Muslim World League as well as through Islamic universities, mosques, charitable organizations, religious schools, research centres and *da'wa* institutions (see Al-Rasheed 2007, p. 126–127). In addition to education, training programmes, NGOs and mosques, which have proven particularly effective, the profound sources of Saudi soft power are its religious authorities, which, due to globalization and the development of information technology, have become transnational sheikhs with millions of adherents outside the kingdom. Other sources of soft power include the hajj and the special status of Saudi Arabia in the Muslim world as a centre where the two holy places—the Kaaba in Mecca and the Prophet's grave in Medina—are situated.

However, the transnationalization of Saudi religious discourse can sometimes lead to unintended consequences (Al-Rasheed 2007, p. 109). On one hand, the transnationalization of Salafi discourse has led to the emergence of currents that see the kingdom as a legitimate Islamic state where the law is based on the Qur'an and Sunna. On the other hand, the Salafis' militant and political experience in Afghanistan and later in Iraq and Syria has led to the emergence of groups and organizations (such as al-Qaeda and ISIS) which call the kingdom a puppet of the West and wage war against it. In addition, according to some authors, even local Salafi communities that have received financial support from Saudi Arabia and share its religious ideology are able to maintain their autonomy and do not necessarily become tools of influence or instruments of soft power (Bonnefoy 2011, p. 9). Indeed, external connections and funding do not necessarily lead to the loss of autonomy. Local Salafi groups may have their own interests, and the local context continually

urges them to adapt and find unexpected solutions in order to survive and endure. The sociopolitical conditions of the countries in which Salafis find themselves, as well as their national alliances, can prevent Saudi Arabia or any other state from using them for its political aims. However, certain states can benefit from the soft power of religious actors without instrumentalizing or fully taking control of them. In other words, the projection of soft power necessitates neither the instrumentalization of local actors nor their transformation into state puppets. Various governmental and non-governmental agencies in Saudi Arabia invest in young people from other countries, providing them with a free religious education and empowering them with a sacred knowledge of the "pious ancestors" (al-salaf al-salih). After accumulating this symbolic capital, these educated youths go back to their countries, familiarize the local community with the concepts of Salafism, and transform the Islam of the Saudi sheikhs and the fatwas issued by the Saudi official religious institutions into hegemonic references. Meanwhile, by being involved in proselytism at home, local Salafi figures may not necessarily be linked to the Saudi government or controlled by its agencies, but they still wield a soft power that ultimately increases Saudi Arabia's legitimacy. Even though Saudi Arabia does not occupy a central place in Salafi discourse, it is indirectly present as a country of *tawhid* and a place where Salafism is the official Islamic teaching, where the most influential Salafi sheikhs live, where the universities that teach the most "correct" version of Islam are, where Sufism and Shi'ism are condemned and where the rulers financially support Salafism around the globe. It is mainly in this sense that the discourse of the Salafi movement in Azerbaijan can be equated with the soft power of Saudi Arabia.

As Nye puts it: all kinds of power, including soft power, depend on their context. Thus, it is reasonable to always contextualize the religious soft power of Saudi Arabia in terms of its dialectical relation with local actors and the local context.

The emergence of Salafism in Azerbaijan

Salafism appeared in Azerbaijan as the result of diverse transnational flows, notably from Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf countries. After independence, the Azerbaijani political elite was highly interested in developing relationships with Saudi Arabia because of its influence on the Arab–Islamic world in general, and on the Gulf countries in particular. Relations between the two countries began to develop rapidly after Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev (d. 2003) visited Riyadh in July 1994. It was his first visit to the Arab country, during which he signed a number of important agreements and performed the *umrah* pilgrimage. Since that time, the two countries have cooperated in the oil and gas industry and on infrastructure projects and investments (Qasımlı 2015, p. 298–301). Saudi Arabia supports Azerbaijan on a political level as well, using the platforms of the United Nations and the Organization

of Islamic Cooperation, above all regarding the Armenian–Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

During the period of 1994–1999, Azerbaijan received millions of dollars of humanitarian aid under the umbrella of the programme of King Fahd. In 1993, the Saudi charity organization Nijat financed the construction of apartments for refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh in the cities of Barda and Sumgait. At the request of the Azerbaijani authorities, the Nijat regional office was moved from Moscow to Baku. From 1993 to 1995, this organization provided aid to the tune of $4.6 million (Qasımlı 2015, p. 296–301). It goes without saying that almost all Islamic charitable organizations were also involved in proselytizing activity. However, at that time, Kuwaiti charitable organizations such as Renewal of Islamic Heritage (*Ihya al-turath al-Islami*) and the Committee of Muslims of Asia (*Lajnat muslimi asia*) surpassed Saudi organizations in terms of the level of their proselytism. The former built 61 mosques in different regions of Azerbaijan (Sattarov 2009, p. 146), while the latter largely succeeded in the publication, distribution and translation of Islamic literature.

Nonetheless, by the end of the 1990s, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, many organizations had ceased their activities in Azerbaijan. During this period, it became clear that some organizations had links with members of al-Qaeda, and had also provided some financial assistance to Chechen fighters during the first Chechen war (1994–1996). For these reasons, some of these organizations were closed down by the government of Azerbaijan; others were closed by the governments of their own countries (Sattarov 2009, p. 132).

By the end of the 1990s, when Heydar Aliyev had centralized power in the country, the authorities had begun to develop policies for the prevention or control of transnational religious (notably Islamic) flows. However, besides NGOs there were other kinds of transnational flows that were more difficult to control: personal contacts and interactions between local and external actors at the grassroots level. If Salafism in Azerbaijan initially resulted from the policies of governments and NGOs from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, the complex process of self-structuring and the diffusion of religious movements was now taking place through daily interactions, personal contacts and proselytism by individuals—especially students from Arab countries who had come to study in the Soviet Union shortly before its collapse, and young Azerbaijanis who had studied in the Middle East and returned home for *da'wa* (preaching and missionary work).

A few years before Islamic NGOs entered Azerbaijan, the small epicentres of Salafi preaching were student dormitories, especially in the medical university and the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy (Interview with members of Salafi community, 5/2015 Baku). In these places, Arab students who came to the Soviet Union to study medicine and the oil industry taught the Qur'an, Sunna and Islamic law to ordinary Azerbaijanis. These foreign students and their talented local disciples made the first translations of Islamic literature and

published the first brochures. One such student was the Palestinian preacher Abu Umar Salim (Zaharna) al-Gazzi (b. 1965), who came to Azerbaijan in 1986 and later became known as Sheikh Salim. He organized *da'wa* in the Ashur-bey (Lezgi) Mosque, located in the centre of Baku, where he taught many Azerbaijanis the Arabic language and the Salafi creed (some of his students went on to become successful preachers). Using his personal connections, he helped Azerbaijanis enter Islamic universities; travelled to different regions of Azerbaijan for *da'wa* purposes; attracted sponsors in the Arab world to fund educational projects and the construction of mosques; and organized short-term visits by famous Salafi sheikhs from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, etc., who familiarized Azerbaijani Muslims with different aspects of Salafi teaching (Safarbek 2014).

However, al-Gazzi had to leave Azerbaijan in 1998, as the authorities at that time decided to limit the influence of foreign missionaries and were already reconsidering their legal position. Before leaving Baku, he managed to convince the Kuwaiti organization Revival of Islamic Heritage to undertake the construction of what was at the time the largest Sunni mosque in the Caucasus—the Juma (Cümə) Mosque, which became known among ordinary Muslims as the Abu Bakr Mosque. By this initiative, he was able to create conditions for the stable and sustainable development of Salafism in Azerbaijan. It was around this mosque that the dominant Salafi movement in Azerbaijan was organized. However, before discussing this formative period, it is pertinent to mention the specific ideological content of Azerbaijani Salafism and its transnational connections.

From Medina to Baku: educated youth and transnational linkages

Many scholars divide contemporary Salafism into the purist/quietist strand, the politically active strand and the jihadi or militant strand (Wiktorowicz 2006). Adherents of these manifestations of Salafism do not differ much in their theology, but disagree largely on how to implement certain political facets of this theology in society (*manhaj*). The quietists are concerned primarily with nonviolent methods of missionary work (*da'wa*) and education (*tarbiya*). As for politically engaged Salafis, they strongly believe that in order establish Islamic governance and increase Islam in the public sphere, Muslims need to participate in politics. In contrast, the jihadi Salafis (for example al-Qaida or ISIS) do not accept the concept of the nation state, regard rulers of Islamic countries as infidels and try to create a new transnational Islamic caliphate or emirate through military resistance. This study predominantly concentrates on the first trend—quietist Salafism—because this form of Salafism is the largest and most dominant in Azerbaijan. As a matter of fact, the sources of inspiration and discursive references for Azerbaijani Salafis are such authoritative creators of contemporary Salafism as ʻAbd al-Aziz ibn Baz (d. 1999), Muhammad ibn Salih al-Uthaymin (d. 2001), Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999) and Salih

ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan (b. 1933). In addition to these prominent scholars, two Saudi sheikhs—Muhammad Aman al-Jami (d. 1995) and his disciple Rabi' ibn Hadi al-Madkhali (b. 1931)—had a particular influence on the main figures of Azerbaijani Salafism, as we shall see later. The major characteristics of this trend in modern Salafism are a strict concentration on the purification of Islamic creed from religious innovations, the refutation of political Islam, loyalty to the Saudi royal family and all-out support for the official religious institutions and organizations of Saudi Arabia, such as the Council of Senior Ulama and the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and the Issuing of Fatwas. In the 1990s, the Saudi authorities started to empower representatives of this trend (specifically al-Jami, al-Madkhali and their disciples) and appoint them to the universities, replacing teachers associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, in order to rely on these quietists against politically engaged Salafis who challenged the monarchy's authority (Lacroix 2011, p. 211–214). Al-Jami was the dean of the faculty of Hadith at the Islamic University of Medina (IUM) and al-Madkhali taught there in the department of Sunna. After gaining positions in one of the main Islamic educational institutions of the kingdom, their followers (often called Madkhalis or Jamiis) were allowed to spread their interpretation of Islam to a large student audience, especially abroad. The IUM is the oldest international Islamic university in the kingdom, established in Medina in 1961 with the strategic purpose of providing an alternative to older influential Islamic universities such as Egypt's al-Azhar, and of promoting Saudi religious and cultural influence in the world (Al-Rasheed 2007, p. 61–62). The university has advanced facilities and a budget of many millions. Every year, IUM provides scholarships and accepts a huge number of foreign students, including from Azerbaijan. In the first years of independence, through personal contacts with Arab preachers or Islamic NGOs, a group of young Azerbaijanis were able to enter IUM.

It is important to note that that in the 1990s, when the future leaders of the Azerbaijani Salafi community were studying Islamic disciplines in Medina, Jamii or Madkhali discourse was very powerful there and the university itself was strengthening its role as an instrument of Saudi Arabia's national state power (Farquhar 2015, p. 716). Thus, the harbingers of Azerbaijani Salafism were to be disciples of the Saudi scholars of this of this trend within global Salafi movement. Since the 1990s, through involvement in *da'wa* activities and restructuring of the religious field in Azerbaijan, local Salafis have reproduced these same quietist Salafi ideas and practices, mostly of the Jamiyya/Madkhaliyya type—especially in terms of ostracizing Islamists and jihadis by publicly disparaging all Salafi actors suspected of sharing any jihadi ideas and legitimizing the existing post-Soviet government. These practices and discourses have largely been diffused by the most authoritative figure of the Salafi community, the well-educated and charismatic Azerbaijani theologian Qamet Suleymanov (b. 1970), who had personal connections with al-Jami (until his death in 1995) and maintains a relationship with al-Madkhali and other famous Saudi sheikhs (Suleymanov 2013).

The status of IUM graduates and students of venerable Salafi sheikhs empowered Suleymanov among ordinary Muslims and legitimized his

position as a *talib al-ilm* (a seeker of knowledge who had studied under well-known sheikhs). Generally, in the eyes of lay Salafis, IUM graduates (*Mədinə tələbələri*) have a special authoritative status as the bearers of "correct" sacred knowledge, the only ones who can provide the right responses on religious and mundane questions, and the sole link connecting ordinary Muslims to the prominent Salafi sheikhs. In turn, Suleymanov and other leaders of Azerbaijani Salafism hegemonize, strengthen and legitimize the theology and authority of Saudi scholars and religious institutions (such as the Council of Senior Ulama and the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and the Issuing of Fatwas) through references, translations and transmission of fatwas, not only in Azerbaijan, but throughout the post-Soviet space. Thus, there is a dialectic authority-building and empowerment process between IUM graduates and Saudi religious authorities and structures.

As will be shown in the following section, in addition to the funding from Saudi Arabia and the symbolic and spiritual capital held by IUM graduates, the success of Salafism in Azerbaijan was largely facilitated by their gaining access to a mosque—an effective centuries-old tool for transmitting the religious message, mobilizing people and attracting new followers.

The formation of the Salafi movement in Azerbaijan

The most successful and dominant Azerbaijani Salafi movement was structured inside and around the Abu Bakr Mosque, which was built in Baku in 1997. It is since that time that Salafism has spread throughout Baku and then strengthened its influence in other regions of Azerbaijan. Although the mosque was built with financial assistance from the Kuwaiti organization Renewal of Islamic Heritage, it was not Arab preachers but young Saudi-educated Azerbaijani youth who were involved in the diffusion of Salafi discourse in the mosque. From the very beginning, the Abu Bakr Mosque claimed to be the centre of Islamic learning and sacred knowledge. During the Soviet period in Azerbaijan, the practice of transmitting Islamic knowledge was largely interrupted and the Salafis tried to revive this tradition by disseminating a culture of "learned" or "bookish" Islam. Azerbaijani Salafis called on people to study the Qur'an and Sunna intensively, and to take religious knowledge solely from these authentic Islamic texts. At the epicentre of Salafi preaching was the rigorous affirmation of the unity of God (*tawhid*), the combat against polytheism (*shirk*) and reprehensible religious innovations (*bid'a*), and criticism of Sufism and Shi'ism. This discourse of "learned" Islam was in opposition to the traditional Azerbaijani religious discourse of the Shi'a and Sunni mullah-storytellers, who monopolized the religious field but were mostly religiously uneducated, did not know the Arabic language and intermingled their speeches about Islam with folk tales, anecdotes and literary themes. Often, empowered by Salafi *da'wa*, young new lay advocates of Salafism entered into disputes with these mullahs and corrected their religious "mistakes", demanding proof of every story they delivered.

The charismatic IUM graduate Suleymanov, imam of the Abu Bakr Mosque and leader of the Salafi community, eloquently read sermons on various religious topics every Friday, with an emphasis on monotheism and the Islamic creed. His Friday sermons drew seven to eight thousand people—no other mosque could attract such a large number of believers. The exact number of Salafis in Azerbaijan is unknown, but generally, from the 1990s to the present day, the number of adherents could vary from 20,000 to 50,000 (Interview with experts from SCWRA, 10/2015 Baku), which is obviously not a considerable number for a country of nearly ten million (9.6) people. However, having penetrated a new environment, Salafism was able to influence it and become one of the most competitive religious currents in Azerbaijan.

The religious discourse, ideas and values which were disseminated by the Salafi movement in Azerbaijan had a transformative impact on language, social behaviour and practices. The proselytes increasingly began to use such Arabic expressions as "*Inshallah*" (if God wills), "*jazzak Allahu hayran*" (may God reward you with good) or in Azerbaijan "*Allah razi olsun*" (may Allah be pleased with you). As in other parts of the world, local Salafis addressed each other in friendly terms as brothers and sisters, in Arabic (*akhi*) or in Azerbaijani (*qardaş*). Some Salafis began to grow beards, wear short trousers and walk while brushing their teeth with a *miswak*[2], while some female Salafis veiled themselves with the *niqab*. These practices were extremely unusual for the citizens of a former Soviet republic. The long beard of the Salafis was not just to adhere to a religious norm, but was also a marker, emphasizing their individuality and identity against the backdrop of Azerbaijani society. Beards and short trousers carried a certain social message of being different.

Not long after its opening, the Abu Bakr Mosque and the territory around it turned into a hub for transnational flows. Small shops opened around the mosque (including the very popular Muslim Shop whose franchises still operate today) where goods from Arab countries were sold: head scarves, perfumes, *miswak*, carpets for prayer, Qur'ans, CDs with lectures by Suleymanov and his colleagues Yashar Gurbanov and Alikhan Musayev (both graduates of Medina) and translations of books by well-known Salafi sheikhs, mainly in Russian (Azerbaijani translations appeared later, and since the mid-2000s started to dominate). Translations were funded by the respective ministries of religion and by various Islamic NGOs in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait. The most famous Salafi writings in Russian were printed in Dagestan by Badr Publishing House, which was quite productive until it was closed by the Russian authorities in 1999. The books which introduced Salafism to Azerbaijanis include *The Book of Monotheism* by Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab, *Loyalty and Disavowal* by Salih al-Fawzan, *Foundations of Faith in the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah* by Salih al-Suhaymi, *Description of the Prayer of the Prophet* by Nasr al-Din al-Albani and others. The authors and titles of the books reveal the predominance, with very few exceptions, of the literature of the quietist Salafi sheikhs. In addition, Salafis were the first to familiarize Azerbaijanis with translations of some primary medieval

sources of Sunnism (notably Hadith collections), albeit accompanied by the commentaries of Salafi scholars. In imparting knowledge of primary sources to ordinary Muslims, Salafis taught them to seek a proper understanding of these texts from specific Salafi sheikhs. Since only they had access to these sheikhs (through their knowledge of the Arabic language and personal relationships), IUM graduates became the hegemonic interpreters of Islam for their followers. In 2004, the young theologian Elmir Kuliev (a disciple of Sheikh Salim) made a Russian translation of the Qur'an based on Salafi exegesis. This "Salafi" translation replaced other translations of the Qur'an made by Russian and Soviet Orientalists and became one of the most popular Russian translations of holy scripture in the post-Soviet space. Later, in 2008, IUM graduate Alikhan Musayev prepared an Azerbaijani translation of the Qur'an. Both translations were published by the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an, which indicates that the Saudi religious authorities recognized them as the best Russian and Azerbaijani translations and allowed them to be disseminated globally among Muslims who read in the Azerbaijani and Russian languages. These flows of books, brochures and CDs show precisely which Salafi ideas were disseminated to society by the mosque, as well as which transnational references and connections linked local Salafis to global Salafism.

Thus, the Abu Bakr Mosque became a place for Muslims to study Islam and Arabic, bring friends and family members, discuss problems, trade, read books and make friends. This mosque was a social meeting point (Bedford 2009, p. 115) not only for the residents of Baku, but also for Salafis from the northern regions, Chechen refugees, Muslim employees of various foreign companies and NGOs and Muslim preachers who were paying short-term visits to Baku. The Abu Bakr Mosque and its surroundings turned into a symbolic place for diverse forms of social, political and economic interactions, meaning production and identity building. We can say that the mosque itself and the territory around it became a 'representational space', which, according to Lefebvre, 'overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects' (1991, p. 39). This space was represented, lived and experienced as a "real Islamic mosque", and associated with piety and true Islam.

At the same time, the mosque was perceived by a considerable number of people as a disturbing place full of "long-bearded radicals" and as a building with severe architecture, inside which murky and dangerous things took place. The appearance and practices of the Salafis as well as their gatherings around the Abu Bakr mosque raised negative attitudes towards them among the residents of secular post-Soviet Baku, who perceived Salafism mostly as a threat to the secular environment of the country. In addition, Shi'ites, who are the largest Islamic group in Azerbaijan, viewed Salafism as a deviant hostile phenomenon. Thus, these societal and cultural limitations pose considerable challenges to the diffusion of Salafi *da'wa* in Azerbaijan.

Salafi *da'wa* and the Azerbaijani state

Although Salafism has been successfully diffused in modern Azerbaijan since its formation, certain social and political limitations have hindered its development. The Salafi *da'wa* has never been interrupted, but it has experienced difficulties in self-organization and in attracting a high number of followers, especially since the middle of the 2000s. First, a considerable number of Azerbaijanis perceived Salafism as an alien phenomenon; second, the governmental structures considered Salafism a potential security threat. However, despite the state's restricting religious transnational flows[3] by the end of the 1990s, a local Salafi community with its own dynamics, needs and interests had already formed in Azerbaijan (mainly in Baku, Sumgait and such northern cities as Zaqatala, Balakan, Quba, Qusar, Shaki and Shirvan), and government structures regulating the religious arena were needed to establish a policy towards it.

Like most post-Soviet political elites, the Azerbaijani authorities immediately began to form their own policies towards religion after the declaration of independence. For example, the widely publicized Heydar Aliev's pilgrimage to Mecca, along with his common refrain that Azerbaijan is an inseparable part of the Islamic world, formed part of these policies. Since Heydar Aliyev came to power in 1993, the Soviet-era Caucasus Muslims Board (CMB) and its head, Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, have been entrusted with managing Islamic practices and interaction between Muslim communities. In addition to the CMB, the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), which registers religious communities and shapes public policy about religion, was created in 2001.

Thus, the government initially tried to control and manage the religious field. However, from the mid-2000s it started to compete with religious actors for the monopoly over the "correct" reading of Islam. In this context, it has rightly been said that in the Muslim world, 'kings, presidents, military officers, bureaucrats (…), *'ulama*, Sufi *shaykhs*, and nontraditionally educated intellectuals are all competitors for sacred authority' (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, p. 68). For example, although the SCWRA was initially planned as a secular institution, in time this institution began to intervene in debates within Islamic communities, expressing its views on purely theological issues and constructing a "correct" form of Islam. The state-constructed Islam has been named "traditional Islam" (*ənənəvi islam*)—it does not engage in politics; never contradicts, but supports and legitimizes the foreign and domestic policies of the government; recognizes the multi-confessional, multi-ethnic and secular nature of Azerbaijan; does not articulate contradictions between Sunnism and Shi'ism; and does not have any connection to external Islamic institutions and powers.

Obviously, the theology and practices of Salafism do not fit the paradigm of this "traditional Islam". Indeed, state structures perceive Salafism

as an extraneous and dangerous phenomenon, but unable to completely adapt or control it, they impose structural constraints—not only by limiting interaction with external sponsors, but also by depriving Salafism of legal status. For instance, Suleymanov has not been appointed as an imam by the CMB, and his community has never been registered by the SCWRA. Despite these limitations, Suleymanov and his supporters have been trying to adapt to the existing social system and to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the state. He and other like-minded local Salafi preachers recognize the legitimacy of the president and the government and call on Muslims to obey them.

Still, Suleymanov sees democracy as incompatible with Islamic law and strongly urges lay Salafis to ignore the political contests in the country and not join political parties (Suleymanov 2008a). However, the fact that Salafis endorse a strict anti-political stance does not mean that their activities have no political meaning. Suleymanov and other preachers connected with him want Azerbaijan to be ruled by the Qur'an and Sunna, although to achieve this they do not appeal to political struggle or militant resistance; rather they approach the government through the Islamic concept of *nasiha* (polite and good advice or counsel). The concept of *nasiha* suggests that a preacher can only politely advise the ruler, to edify him without publicly criticizing or agitating against him (al-Fawzan 2011). Thus, Muslims are advised to be patient and ignore all calls by anti-government opposition—both secular (e.g., the Musavat Party, the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party, etc.) and religious (Shi'ite Islamists). Suleymanov has also explicitly pointed out that his community does not participate in the political process because the election of the president every four years is contrary to Shari'a. He made an interesting comparison: the election of other candidates while the ruler is still alive is a kind of revolt against the legitimate ruler (Suleymanov 2016a). The apolitical nature of Azerbaijani Salafis can be explained not only by the influence of Saudi religious discourse, but also as an effect of the local context—the limitations on political participation in the closed post-Soviet regime also push Salafis to adapt.

Suleymanov did manage to establish informal relations with the CMB. The relationship between Suleymanov and the main religious authority empowered by the state of Azerbaijan, Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, was perhaps a unique example of a Salafi preacher's recognition of the Shi'ite leader. Suleymanov has never criticized Pashazade publicly; on the contrary, he has always stressed that he respects him, recognizes his authority and even, during one interview, asked the journalist not to call him "Sheikh" because there is only one sheikh in the country (Day.az 2006). Certainly, confrontation with the Sheikh ul-Islam would mean confrontation with the state—something Salafi preachers try to avoid in every way. The Sheikh ul-Islam also has never criticized Suleymanov publicly, however, as a Shi'a cleric he generally sees Salafism as an extraneous tradition and a competitor. Increasing hegemony of Salafi discourse leads to a reduction of the CMB's influence and endangers some of its sources of income, because by embracing Salafism, Muslims may stop giving alms in sacred places or stop paying mullahs for

funeral and wedding ceremonies and for pilgrimages to holy Shi'a places in Iran and Iraq (see Motika 2001, p. 5).

Despite the fact that Salafi discourse is extremely anti-Shi'a, local Salafi preachers are very careful with their statements. Suleymanov usually avoids the term "Shi'ites" in his public lectures, instead calling them "Rafidis", probably because this medieval term is little known and less clear to Azerbaijanis. In addition, he argues: 'If Salafi scholars say that, all Muslims are generally brothers, so the Shi'ites are also brothers, because despite all their religious deviations and reprehensible innovations—they are Muslims' (Suleymanov 2014a). This view is extremely controversial among Salafi scholars; no one else calls Shi'ites brothers. This kind of pragmatism has even caused Suleymanov to be criticized by some of his followers. However, responding to questions from lay Salafis, Suleymanov emphasizes that Azerbaijan's social context is different from the context of Saudi Arabia, and this factor should be taken into account to avoid societal conflicts. For example, he does not advise that his followers wear Gulf clothing (*thawb*)—firstly, because according to him it is an Arab tradition, not a religious practice (*sunna*), and secondly, because it is highly uncommon in Azerbaijani society and can attract too much negative attention (Suleymanov 2014b). Additionally, despite the fact that he considers the traditional funeral practices to be a reprehensible religious innovation, he nevertheless allows Salafis to attend funerals (under certain conditions) so that they do not spoil relationships with family members (Suleymanov 2015a).

Due to his pragmatic position, Suleymanov has managed to avoid clashes with the authorities and with the official Sunni and Shi'ite clerics. Despite the difficult context and limitations, Salafi *da'wa* continued to diffuse steadily as long as Salafis had access to the Abu Bakr Mosque; however, the loss of the mosque (the reasons for which I will discuss in the next section) led to a weakening of Salafi *da'wa*.

Transnational rivals: quietist Salafis vs. jihadis

The geographical and political contexts surrounding Azerbaijan forced quietist Salafis to engage in a fierce discursive struggle with jihadis. Salafi preachers who graduated from IUM started their activities in Azerbaijan at a time when the war between Russian federal forces and Chechen mujahidin in the North Caucasus was still ongoing. Later, the Caucasus Emirate was established and has since been urging Muslims from all over the world to engage in jihad against Russia (see Knysh 2009). After jihadi currents began to penetrate the northern regions of Azerbaijan, accusations that the Abu Bakr Mosque community was spreading the radical ideology of Wahhabism and terrorism dramatically increased in the media. Suleymanov has been summoned to court several times to testify about youths that had joined the fighting in Chechnya (Sattarov 2009, p. 254) and about the radical groups that had attacked facilities in the country. Salafis tried to convince local politicians, experts, journalists and Azerbaijani society in general that the Islam they preach has nothing

to do with the Islam of the jihadis and that their teachings do not pose any danger to the state. Moreover, since 2000 (especially after 9/11), Suleymanov and other IUM graduates have been involved in harsh debates with jihadis, both inside their mosques and in cyberspace, about whether there is a global jihad, whether Azerbaijan is an Islamic country and whether the Azerbaijani authorities are legitimate rulers. This is a manifestation of the long-standing debate between two religious transnational actors: quietist and jihadi Salafis. There has been conflict between these two Salafi movements in many parts of the Islamic world, and it reached the South Caucasus in the 1990s.

However, in the writings of many authors involved in discussions about the Abu Bakr Mosque, there is a direct transition from the mosque to jihadi groups and terrorism in Azerbaijan, giving the reader the impression that there is a direct link between the Salafi preachers of Abu Bakr Mosque and jihadis (for example Cornell 2005, p. 46–49, Souleimanov and Ehrmann 2013, p. 116). In fact, the mosque was a place of permanent contestation between quietists and jihadis. The Abu Bakr Mosque and the territory around it were an epicentre for transnational interactions and the circulation of transnational Salafi flows, including violent ones. In the mosque, young Muslims became acquainted not only with Salafism in its apolitical purist interpretation, but also with the discourse of jihadi Salafism, mainly through Chechens and other Muslims with jihadi experience who were among the visitors to the mosque. It is clear that jihadi actors used the space of the mosque to recruit lay Muslims and help them to join North Caucasian fighters; Suleymanov was not able to control these interactions. A shared theology between quietists and jihadis (notably radical stigmatization of rival Muslim groups and harsh disapproval of non-Salafi interpretations of the oneness of God) creates a favourable preaching environment and made some attendees of the Abu Bakr Mosque susceptible to jihadi preachers.

Eventually, this fierce ideological struggle between two Salafi currents ended with bloody violence. In 2008, a member of the Forest Brothers jihadi group, which operated around the northern border between Dagestan and Azerbaijan, threw a grenade into the Abu Bakr Mosque while people were performing a prayer. As a result of this terrorist act, two people died and 18 were injured, including Suleymanov, causing the authorities to close the mosque (Sattarov 2009, p. 256). Since then, the situation in the Salafi community has been further aggravated and the media criticism has largely increased. From the point of view of the media and of many people, Salafis and their leaders were to blame for the emergence of radicals and terrorists. However, a month before the terrorist attack, Suleymanov strongly criticized his rivals and designated them Kharijites[4]: 'They are not Salafis! Do not let them fool you with passionate speeches. If you refer to history, you will see that many of those who opposed the government—collapsed' (Suleymanov 2008b).

Since the conflict has a transnational dimension, in waging fierce theological battles with jihadis, Azerbaijani Salafis mobilize their transnational

connections in the Muslim world to legitimize their local fatwas. Suleymanov, leaning on the fatwas of authoritative Salafi sheikhs (notably al-Fawzan and the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al al-Shaikh), insists that only the legitimate ruler (in the case of Azerbaijan—the president) has a right to mobilize Muslims for jihad, so they cannot travel abroad for a war without his permission.

Over time, the Salafis of the CIS have associated such views on jihad predominantly with Suleymanov and some other like-minded preachers. Often, opponents of this position have referred to all those who advocated it as Jamii, Madkhali or Qametchi in Azerbaijani and Qametovets (meaning follower of Qamet Suleymanov) in Russian. For instance, Said Buryatskiy (d. 2010), a young jihadi ideologue of the Caucasus Emirate, associated the discourse of submission to the authorities and the rejection of global jihad and the spread of the ideas of al-Jami and al-Madkhali in the post-Soviet space with Suleymanov specifically. In 2009, he called Suleymanov a 'diligent civil servant' who urges Muslims to obey Aliyev's 'infidelocratic' regime (Buryatskiy 2009). Obviously, the main reason behind this vilification is Suleymanov's reluctance to recognize jihad in Chechnya.

After the events of the so-called Arab Spring, the leaders of the Salafi community of Azerbaijan faced new challenges. The military success of ISIS in Syria and Iraq raised the spectre of global jihad and a transnational caliphate in the Muslim world. Advocates of ISIS opened Russian-language websites and Twitter accounts, which were successfully used to recruit radical youths from Russia, Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Since 2013, several hundred Azerbaijanis have joined the civil war in Syria. Conflicts in the Middle East encouraged the Azerbaijani authorities to tighten up criminal laws on terrorism and mercenaries in March 2014, increasing the length of prison sentences. Meanwhile, the media spread information that the local Salafi leaders were involved in sending Azerbaijanis to Syria. Suleymanov made several oral and written statements in which he called jihad in Syria invalid, echoing some of the Saudi '*ulama* (Suleymanov 2015c, Manshet 2015). In his speeches, he tried to convince the authorities that only the Salafi discourse of the Abu Bakr Mosque can oppose jihadi ideas, and the most effective way to deal with radicalism and terrorism is to reopen the mosque. In turn, in one of videotapes, an Azerbaijani ISIS fighter threatened to cut off Suleymanov's head, calling him an advocate of the infidel regime and a slanderer against the caliphate (Media Center Furat 2016). Facing these threats constantly, Suleymanov has never stopped accusing his rivals of rash actions which, according to him, cause irreparable harm to the Salafi community and could lead to the complete prohibition of Salafi *da'wa* in Azerbaijan.

The rivalry and violent clashes between the two Salafi transnational currents instigate local conflicts that greatly reduce the appeal of the Salafi movement and limit its diffusion. In addition, intra-Salafi conflicts prevent the countries involved in the transnationalization of Salafism from benefiting

from its soft power, because locals start to see these countries (notably Saudi Arabia) and everyone who propagates their religious practices as a source of terror and instability. After the closure of the Abu Bakr Mosque in 2008, quietist Salafism lost its erstwhile influence in society and its dissemination slowed down. The sermons and educational programmes were interrupted, and various shops surrounding the mosque in which everyone could buy Salafi literature, audio and videotapes of prominent Salafi preachers and religious clothing were closed. The Salafis' ability to spread their message has never fully recovered from this episode; indeed, it has been hampered by further setbacks.

From physical space to cyberspace

The closure of the mosque created new challenges but also new internal dynamics for Azerbaijani Salafism. Salafis scattered to different mosques, in which they were induced to share space with Shi'ites and other groups as well as pray behind the non-Salafi imams who had been appointed by the CMB—which many of them found theologically uncomfortable. The loss of an actual space considerably limited the public sphere in which Salafism could operate and eventually led to its fragmentation. In addition to peoples' negative attitudes towards Salafi practices—which have been largely strengthened by the media (see Bedford 2009, p. 146–47), the Salafi community of Abu Bakr mosque suffered from the government's policy, which has tried to limit, control and co-opt any social activism in the society. Sometimes, the response to Salafi activities from local authorities and the police, both in the capital and the regions (especially in Qusar and Zaqatala), was persecution and forcible shaving of their beards (Salaf Media/Azer Islamoglu 2014). This policy was, however, rare; the main limitations imposed by the state were the denial of legal legitimization and deprivation of access to their own mosque.

Nevertheless, the limitations on the scale and scope of their activities, the fear of repression and the desire to escape state control have simply encouraged Salafis to find other spaces for interaction. Deprived of a real *minbar*, the Salafi community has found an effective solution: they have started to gather in a virtual one. In the contemporary period, public Islamic cyberspheres are rapidly evolving and the Internet is having an extreme impact on the dissemination of Salafism. Indeed, since the closure of the mosque, the Salafis have opened a number of channels on YouTube and continued to communicate through the Abu Bakr Mosque online forum, to publish articles, translations and online fatwas. The fact that Azerbaijan is an 'internet leader in the South Caucasus' with an increasing number of Internet users (Sidorenko and Geybullayeva 2010) also makes the relocation of Salafis from physical space to cyberspace an effective move. Through the Internet, Suleymanov and his associates—IUM graduates and their most successful students, who have never studied in Arab countries but have

acquired religious knowledge in the Abu Bakr Mosque—have continued to diffuse Salafi teaching, win new followers and shape Salafi opinion on a variety of issues and events.

One of the Salafis' new initiatives was a Salaf News (*Sələf Xəbər*) portal, which was supported and theologically legitimized by Suleymanov (Lent. az 2014). The website was created to get around the information blockade in which the Salafi community found itself in the aftermath of the closure of the Abu Bakr Mosque. In addition, it has become a Salafi voice that communicates with the public directly rather than through any third party, clarifying views on religious, social and political events. This kind of media project is not unique to the Azerbaijani quietist Salafi community; Kazakh Salafis have created a similar site, Sunna Press. Both sites produce the same discourse and use the same interpretative strategies. The main peculiarity of these projects is that they present global and local news from a Salafi perspective. Every event, in Azerbaijan, in Kazakhstan or in the world, is accompanied by comments with Islamic proof-texts or sayings by Salafi scholars, which implies that Muslims should understand the news in accordance with a Salafi *Weltanschauung*. To take just a few examples: the site informs readers that 'the Municipality of Baku denied the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan the right to hold a rally on December 21st'. This information can be easily found in the local media. However, *Salaf News* accompanies it with a comment:

> *Salaf News*: The late Sheikh Ibn Uthaymin (may Allah rest him) said: 'There is no doubt that the rallies and demonstrations—are evil! Indeed, such actions could turn to anarchy and self-will in relation to other people. During demonstrations, people are like drunks and do not understand what they do so they can encroach on people's honour, lives and property. Demonstrations and strikes—are all about evil!'. (*Salaf News* 2014)

In the same way, all information related to President Ilham Aliyev—news about his activities, decrees, speeches and official visits—is backed up by similar comments. For instance: 'Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (May Allah strengthen him) has issued a decree on the establishment of the Baku branch of the First Moscow State Medical University named after M. Sechenov'. Under this information, there is a reference to the highest religious authority of Saudi Arabia:

> *Salaf News*: Almighty Allah says: 'A Muslim who study sciences which Muslims need and upon which the *umma*'s welfare depends (such as medicine, agriculture, industry, etc.) or the one who uses these sciences in practice in order to benefit the Muslim *umma*—that Muslim enters the ranks of those whose level is exalted by Allah'. Source: The Standing Committee for Scholarly Research and Issuing Fatwas in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 77/12 (*Salaf News* 2015a).

Interestingly, after mentioning the name of the President, Salafi reporters add a reverent formula—"May Allah protect him", "May Allah keep him safe", "May Allah remedy the situation of Muslims by him"—which is common practice in countries like Saudi Arabia, but highly unusual in the post-Soviet space. In this way, Salafis not only try to show the authorities that they fully support the current political system, but they also indicate to the general public as well as to their ideological opponents (jihadi Salafis and the Shi'ite political opposition) that they accept the legitimacy of the president and consider him a Muslim ruler.

The site also has a separate section, "Who are we—Salafis?", where the administration of the site explains the creed, goals, beliefs and social and political position of the Azerbaijani Salafi community, emphasizing that Salafism is compatible with the national state. In another special section called "What is patriotism?", Salafis explain through references to Islamic proof-texts that the modern understanding of patriotism and love of the motherland is not contrary to Islam. According to Azerbaijani Salafis, patriotism is the unity of citizens, protection of the homeland and obedience to the ruler. The entire narrative text convinces the reader that attachment to the nation state is not alien to Salafis. Moreover, the text ends with a wish to 'restore territorial integrity, get back to Shusha and perform a prayer inside in its mosques' (*Salaf News* 2017). That is a direct reference to the main issue of Azerbaijan's foreign policy—the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to which Azerbaijani Salafis pay particular attention. News about events from the frontline supplied by Islamic texts relating to jihad are frequently posted on *Salaf News*. Suleymanov also emphasizes that the war in Karabakh is a jihad and distinguishes the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from other armed conflicts in the Muslim world, because according to him, Muslims there confront the infidels, while in other places Muslims are mostly fighting Muslims (Sunnapress.com 2016).

These utterances about the state, patriotism and Nagorno-Karabakh once more indicate the Salafis' attempts to situate themselves within the political context of Azerbaijani society and point out the national dimensions of their movement. Thus, the deterritorialization of the transnational phenomenon of Salafism has certain limits in Azerbaijan.

While focused on domestic issues, Azerbaijani Salafi media and preachers never stop paying attention to affairs of the *umma*, especially to events related to Saudi Arabia. For example, the narrative presented by *Salaf News* supports the kingdom's war in Yemen and takes Saudi Arabia's side in its conflict with Iran in the Middle East. When asked about Saudi Arabia's internal or foreign policy, Suleymanov also usually defends the kingdom's position, frequently providing the argument that nothing is wrong with the decisions of the Saudi government since they are supported by well-known Salafi scholars (Suleymanov 2015b, 2016b). Naturally, the narrative on Iran is negative, portraying it as an aggressor, as a country which causes discord between Muslims and especially as an ally of Armenia—with which Azerbaijan is at war (Salaf

News 2016a). Conversely, Saudi Arabia is presented as a friendly country, through news reporting on bilateral relations, meetings of the heads of state, the kingdom's provision of humanitarian assistance to Azerbaijan and so on (*Salaf News* 2016b).

While in the 1990s Azerbaijani Salafis used the Internet mainly as a platform for preaching, there is something novel and important about these new Salafi media strategies. Today the Internet is also used for convincing Azerbaijani society that Salafism is an indigenous religious community rather than an extraneous phenomenon, and for shaping public opinion about a variety of issues related to politics, culture and society.

Conclusion

Salafism was not an indigenous religious movement in Azerbaijan, but a result of heterogeneous, predominantly non-state external influences and transnational flows. It has penetrated Azerbaijan through the financial and proselytizing activity of public and private organizations from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, as well as students from the Middle East, but has been structured as a movement of local youths educated in the centres of Salafi knowledge (notably, in Medina). Most students who have introduced Salafism to Azerbaijan are graduates from IUM, which was founded for the purpose of the transnationalization of Salafi discourse and increasing Saudi Arabia's soft power. Therefore, Saudi educational institutions have had a transformative impact on the Azerbaijani religious landscape. Local Salafis still preserve transnational connections with the Saudi ulama and hegemonize religious discourse produced by Saudi religious institutions in Azerbaijan and the post-Soviet space.

At the same time, the diffusion of Salafism in Azerbaijan has its limitations due to the nature of the local sociopolitical context, which constantly induces Salafis to adapt. Restrictive policies such as control over mosques and legal exclusion of those educated abroad from the religious arena slow the spread of Salafism. Furthermore, policies aimed at limiting transnational flows (funding, foreign preachers, books) constrain external support, thus limiting the influence of foreign sponsors. In addition, Salafi *da'wa* is limited by a negative attitude among many locals, as a response to Salafi practices that view Azerbaijani nationalism and the local Shi'ite tradition as incompatible with Salafism. Not only the state and societal restrictions, but also the transnational rivalry between quietist and jihadi Salafis, which often transforms discursive battles into physical violence, limits the attractiveness of Salafism in society and damages the image of countries that export Salafism, such as Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, we can talk about a certain contemporary (already indigenous) form of Salafism in Azerbaijan, which preserves its global connections but has distinct national dimensions, and continuously situates itself in the local context.

Notes

1 Although Saudi religious discourse is generally called 'Wahhabism', here I use the term "Salafism", firstly because Wahhabism/Wahhabite has a pejorative meaning to the people designated as such, and secondly, because those who are called Wahhabis often call themselves Salafis (as is the case in Azerbaijan and elsewhere).
2 Twig used as a toothbrush for dental hygiene.
3 Especially, through the law banning foreign citizens (since 1996) and those educated-abroad (since 2009) from conducting missionary activity.
4 Kharijites are adherents to a sect that developed after the assassination of the third caliph Uthman in 656. The title is derived from the Arabic word *khuruj*, meaning "insurrection". This sect was extremely violent and declared everyone who disagreed with its ideology and policies an infidel. From the very beginning, Suleymanov designated jihadis as Kharijites (which is a usual practice of quietist Salafi preachers) and, in time, local media along with some officials and experts (for example, see: Crisis Group, 2008) adopted this ideologically inclined term and used it to differentiate between the followers of Suleymanov and his rivals.

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6 Islam and Turkey's soft power in Azerbaijan

The Gülen movement

Fuad Aliyev

Introduction

Turkey has always been an active player in the Caucasus. It has maintained a special relationship to Azerbaijan due to its ethnic and religious proximity, its important economic and geopolitical potential as a cultural "bridge" between Turkey and Central Asia and their concurrent geopolitical interests (Kartaş and Macit 2015). Since Azerbaijan gained its independence in 1991 it has always been a part of Turkish foreign policy interests, which in turn has provided for Turkey's growing political, economic and sociocultural influence. Indeed, relations between the two countries have been so close that Kartaş and Macit (2015) called them 'emotionally-based'. Both sides, including state officials, have widely used the slogan "one nation—two states", which exemplifies this sociocultural connection.

Religion, as one of the determinants of culture, has inevitably been utilized to various extents at different points in the complex bilateral relations between these two Muslim–Turkic nations. This chapter focuses on religion as a specific part of the Turkey–Azerbaijan relationship. It explores how the transnational religious actors from Turkey operate across state boundaries and how their relations with both the home and host states affect their success.

This chapter will give an overview of different actors in Azerbaijan, focusing specifically on the network led by Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen (called the Gülen movement, *Hizmet* or *Cemaat*), which was the most successful actor until recently. Transnational religious actors should be capable of delivering an attractive message, and they should adapt to local conditions in order to be successful in any country (Haynes 2012). This chapter will assess the Turkish religious actors' activities in Azerbaijan based on their capacity to deliver attractive messages to target audiences and their ability to adapt to local conditions.

Turkish soft power in Azerbaijan has been based on ethnic and religious commonalities. In the field of religion, the strong connection between the Turkish government and the Gülen movement broke down in 2013–2014. The unsuccessful coup d'état attempt in July 2016 massively changed the situation in Turkey, resulting in precarious prospects for the future of the

Gülen movement. As this chapter will explore, this could not help but affect Turkish soft power abroad, including in Azerbaijan, since the government has lost one of its major informal tools.

In this chapter, "soft power" is understood as a state's ability to attain its policy agenda by influencing other states through attraction, not force. Thus, you get others to want what you want and achieve your policy objectives as a result (Nye 2004). Soft power is exercised through persuasion (the ability to convince using argumentation) and the capacity to attract (Nye 2004). Religion is considered an important element in the construction of identity and the cultural framing of domestic and foreign policies (Warner and Walker 2011). It has also historically been a form of soft power (Nye 2004, Haynes 2012). In this regard, the concept of soft power includes non-state religious actors who advance their own interests by attempting to induce policymakers to consider their religious beliefs, norms and values (Haynes 2012).

This chapter is based hugely on original qualitative data. Several in-depth interviews with state officials, independent researchers, alumni from the Gülen movement and journalists were conducted for this paper.[1] Many of the interviews took place before the closing of Gülen institutions in Azerbaijan in 2016. These interviews were updated after the events of 2016. In addition, conversations with a few individuals who were previously involved with the network in Azerbaijan and preferred to remain anonymous were held prior to and during this research.

This chapter is structured as follows: first, it reviews the role of soft power in Turkish foreign policy. Second, it explores the Turkish transnational religious actors' operations in Azerbaijan. Finally, it analyzes the phenomenon of the Gülen movement as a major non-state transnational actor in Azerbaijan before the split with the current AKP government, and examines its changing role in Turkish soft power afterwards.

Turkish foreign policy and soft power

This section is about path dependency and new trends in Turkey's foreign and soft power policy under the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government. After coming to power in 2001, the AKP government has in many ways continued the foreign policy patterns of previous governments while paying more attention to soft power, especially outreach to the Muslim world.

The ex-prime minister of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu coined the slogan 'zero problems with neighbours' to describe modern Turkish foreign policy in (Davutoğlu 2010). This new foreign policy of regional expansion in the broader neighbourhood, with more embedded prospects for soft power, could be interpreted as a forced strategy by the AKP government to reduce the traditionally strong military influence on Turkish politics in both the domestic and international spheres (Jung 2012). This strategy has been supported by Turkey's new rising entrepreneurial class and civil society unhappy with the military's dominance.

Turkey's foreign policy focuses on the whole region rather than just looking at one country. (Davutoğlu 2001). According to Ibrahim Kalin, a chief policy adviser to the prime minister and director of the office of public diplomacy in 2011–2012,

> Turkey operates from a broad foreign policy perspective that combines elements of constructivist and realist approaches to global politics and international relations. Turkey projects its sense of identity and history into its regional and global engagements, seeks to pursue a value-based and principled foreign policy, and responds to the hard realities of power struggles and national interest. (Kalin 2012, p. 9)

As a result, Turkey's strategic position is reinforced by historical and cultural ties with its neighbours. Under the AKP government, we saw Turkey's gradual activation in regional politics in the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus.

Kalin describes three principles of contemporary Turkish foreign policy: political and economic justice, the balance between security and freedom, and trade and economic development (Kalin 2012, p. 14). All three, to various extents, are related to soft power and can serve either as a source or an instrument thereof. These principles resonate with three dimensions of the AKP government's political strategy, highlighted by the political scientist Dietrich Jung (2012): adopting the discourse of human rights and democracy, abandoning Islamist rhetoric to mobilize broad political support for democratic legitimacy, and reaching out to liberal groups in order to achieve popular recognition (although recently there has been less emphasis on the last point).

The AKP government itself stresses four distinct foreign policy instruments: (a) engaging all political (including non-state) actors; (b) supporting democratic processes; (c) expanding economic integration; (d) increasing sociocultural relations and interpersonal communications (Kalin 2012, p. 17). All these instruments entail elements of soft power, and are implemented by government agencies as well as NGOs and business communities, actively involving non-state actors. During the last decade, Turkey has become a major soft power actor in the region that 'derives its strength from a young population, long historical ties, deep cultural relations, and a growing economy' and is 'grounded in the larger concepts of cultural affinity, historical companionship, geographical proximity, social imagery and how they create a sense of belonging' (ibid., p. 19). It is not surprising that Turkey has ranked in various soft power indices in recent years (e.g. Monocle, Portland), although it didn't make the most recent one, Portland's Soft Power 30 for 2016.[2]

As a soft power tool, religion has been an important part of the AKP's foreign policy strategy, which implied a more active role for Turkey in the Middle East and Muslim Eurasia. The regular use of Islamic symbols and slogans in foreign policies, as well as the open piousness of key AKP policymakers, is not a new phenomenon in the political history of republican Turkey.

Previous secular governments, even when attacking religion domestically, utilized Islamic symbols for their policies, with Sunni Islam being a central reference and an ideological resource (Jung 2012). Furthermore, despite all the de-Islamization and secularization policies of Atatürk, Article 2 of the first constitution retained Islam as the state religion until 1928. The end of one-party (Kemalist CHP) rule in 1950 and the following decade of Democratic Party rule was accompanied by a departure from some of the strict secularist policies of the previous decades and an increased role for Islam in Turkey that Jung called the 'post-Second World War Islamic revival' (Jung 2012, p. 32). This change was also evident in Turkey's foreign policy, which became more active in cooperating with Muslim countries while remaining a strong supporter and promoter of the interests of its Western partners (Sever 1998). For instance, Turkey played a prominent role in concluding the Baghdad pact between Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey in 1955. This same pattern of Islamization spurred by domestic interests combined with pro-Western foreign policies was continued by later governments as well, whether it was Kenan Evren or Turgut Özal.

The AKP government has continued and even strengthened this tradition of using Islamic symbols when needed. Some experts tie the new Turkish foreign policy to the Islamist nature of the government (Mufti 2011). Indeed, the AKP leadership came out of Erbakan's National Outlook, which is an Islamist movement (Bayat 2013), although it is obvious that the party's success is closely related to its departure from Islamism (Groc 2000). Only after partially adopting post-Islamist ideology and a political platform supported by the growing and institutionalized business community of Anatolia could the AKP turn into a mainstream political actor and gain national success as a centre-right Muslim conservative political party (Dagi 2013).

Although the AKP's foreign policy has been slightly more active with regard to the Middle East and has actively involved Islamic rhetoric and symbols, it has never really emphasized a solely Islamic identity in order to not compromise its partnership with the EU and the USA. As Jung aptly remarks on the domestic policy: 'Islam plays an important role in the party's domestic strategy to gain votes but it's not the party's only motivating factor' (Jung 2012, p. 36).

Having outlined the general aspects of Turkish foreign policy, we can more precisely examine Turkey's soft power policy towards Azerbaijan, which has involved non-state religious actors. Various Turkish organizations and movements have operated in Azerbaijan, with sometimes unclear relationships to the Turkish government.

Of Turkey's four major declared foreign policy instruments (Kalin 2012), we observe that three of them—(a) engaging all political (including non-state) actors, (c) expanding economic integration, and (d) increasing sociocultural relations and interpersonal communications—have been employed in the case of Azerbaijan. Only one, (b) supporting democratic processes, has not been observed. Thus, the Turkish governments have used soft power tools extensively for years.

Turkey has generally preferred to stay out of domestic democracy-related issues in Azerbaijan. Though some political leaders expressed concerns about the level of democratization in the country, Turkey did not strongly engage in the local discourse on democracy and never intervened in any form in the process of democracy-building. These matters have not been seriously included in any Turkish government's foreign policy agenda in Azerbaijan.

As far as engagement of all political actors is concerned, this may hold true for Turkish non-state actors, but the Turkish governments have avoided working directly with Azerbaijani political parties and NGOs, preferring to deal with the government or semi-government institutions. Turkish governments could, however, utilize Turkish movements and NGOs, including faith-based ones, to promote issues on their foreign policy agendas (e.g. Osman Nuri Topbaş, Mahmut Ziya Hudayi Foundation, Gülen movement). For example, followers of the Gülen movement used their connections in Azerbaijan to organize the visit of Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2003 and promote the AKP government. All the Turkish non-state actors cooperated with the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet Işleri Başkanlığı), when needed, to promote the Turkish version of Islam in Azerbaijan by holding joint events and coordinating their activities.

Expanding economic integration and increasing sociocultural and interpersonal communications can be considered the most important instruments of Turkish soft power. Trade between the two countries has been expanding, making Turkey Azerbaijan's second biggest importer and Azerbaijan one of Turkey's most important oil and natural gas providers (Kartaş and Macit 2015). Azerbaijan is also the second largest recipient of Turkish foreign direct investments, with Turkey being the largest investor in the non-energy sector (Yavan 2012, Kartaş and Macit 2015). In the meantime, Azerbaijan's national oil company, SOCAR, has emerged as a significant foreign direct investor in Turkey and is currently implementing several important investment projects there (Kartaş and Macit 2015).

Sociocultural connections and public diplomacy are effective and widely used tools of Turkish soft power in Azerbaijan. This was stressed by absolutely all the experts interviewed. Turkey has strongly utilized the linguistic and ethnic commonalities of both nations based on their shared Turkic Oghuz roots. These sentiments of "Turkic brotherhood" were more compelling than those of "Muslim brotherhood", due to the highly secularized nature of Azerbaijani society and sectarian differences (the majority of Azerbaijanis are Shi'as). Despite the religious cleavage between Azerbaijani Shi'a and Turkish Sunni Muslims, the Turkish government often makes reference to this sense of "brotherhood".

Turkish religious actors in Azerbaijan

Turkish religious influence, represented by state and non-state religious organizations headquartered in Turkey, has always been manifold in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. It has also played a crucial role in the revival of Sunni Islam in the traditionally Shi'a country (Balci and Goyushev 2012). Moreover, Turkish

religious influence has been more powerful in Azerbaijan than in other post-Soviet countries due to their historical, geographic, linguistic and cultural closeness.

The following paragraphs will describe the most relevant actors in order of importance. The most effective and successful was the Gülen movement, of Nurcu origin, which advanced Turkey's soft power globally for decades until the split and power struggle with the AKP government in 2013. There will also be an examination of the State Board for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (Diyanet), which has representation in Azerbaijan. Finally, the analysis will turn to other Turkish movements and communities such as the Mahmut Ziya Hudayi Foundation, Süleymancılar, the Osman Nuri Topbaş community, etc.

So-called Nurcular, the disciples of Said Nursi (1876–1960), were among the first to enter the religious field of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Said Nursi had a strong influence on religious affairs in secularist Turkey, with his philosophy and teaching collected in a book called *Risale-i-Nur*. Opposing secularism and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's policies, he was arrested in 1935 and imprisoned for 11 years (Balci 2003, Şık 2011). Nursi's movement was a semi-secret, highly conspiratorial network of obedient followers and thus has often been considered a threat by the Turkish governments. Today, the Nurcular movement is divided into different groups. Most of them are involved in business, education and faith-based activism.

In practical terms, regarding Nurcular movements, the movement of Fethullah Gülen is the most powerful, elaborate and widespread group. Gülen managed to create a strong, vertically structured organization of devoted followers, focused on the legacy of Nursi as well as Gülen's own written works (Aliyev 2015). There are a number of characteristics that make it different from other followers of Nursi (e.g. Mustafa Sungur's group): a clear hierarchy, strict discipline, the presence of secret statutes and a focus on the media and business institutions rather than on religion (Balci 2003, Şık 2011, Keskin 2012, Aliyev 2012, 2015). For instance, the structure of the typical Turkish city-level cell usually consists of the following levels: *shagirdlar* (students), *uy* imams (five students and their leader), *semt* imams (association of *uy* imams based on urban district or educational institution), and *bolge* imams (head of district level). Students are recruited and controlled on the local level by *abiler* (brothers) or *ablalar* (sisters). According to the experts interviewed, the confidentiality of the network is crucial and must be maintained. The movement has huge financial resources feeding its social activities and political power both in Turkey and abroad (Aliyev 2015). It is the largest religious movement in Turkey apart from the Alevis, representatives of the largest religious minority (Alekperov 2012).

The presence of the Gülen movement in Azerbaijan goes back to the early 1990s when the movement opened schools and took a significant role in the social and educational life of the country. It was never directly involved in openly religious activities, and dissemination of Gülen–Nursi ideas only occurred implicitly through contact between students and instructors as

well as businesses (Aliyev 2015). Gaining influence with local elites helped the movement promote its values and more importantly obtain business and political support.

The Gülen schools did not have any serious problems with the Azerbaijani government until 2014, when they were shut down—presumably as a result of requests from the AKP government in Ankara, which was combating Gülen followers by all means and wherever possible (Balci 2014a). However, the AKP government has not been as successful as it may seem in its efforts to eliminate the Gülen schools, which can be considered the cornerstone of its expansion and influence. Azerbaijani journalist Mr. Aqil Alesger recently reported that the Gülen-related schools are still operating under new names and with new, supposedly local, founders. The Araz Courses have been reincarnated into multiple university preparation courses under different names, all related to the newly established Güven Printing House (which serves as the sole training material provider and testing centre for all of them). In addition, the staff of the shut-down *Çağ Oyretim* high schools are now involved in managing and teaching at the newly established *Istek Lyceum* network (Alesger 2016).

The Gülen movement is believed to have long-term goals, investing in its future by working with the younger generation. They offer solutions for absolutely all the problems their devout students may face—from education to employment and accommodation. Upon completion of studies, Gülen followers can get a job in the companies which are linked to the overall structure.

The Gülen movement can be organized into different circles, corresponding to different degrees of institutional commitment and adhesion to the values of Fethullah Gülen (Hendrick 2013). As illustrated by Angey-Sentuc (2015, p. 7) in Figure 6.1, the central circle is the *cemaat* at the core of the hierarchy.

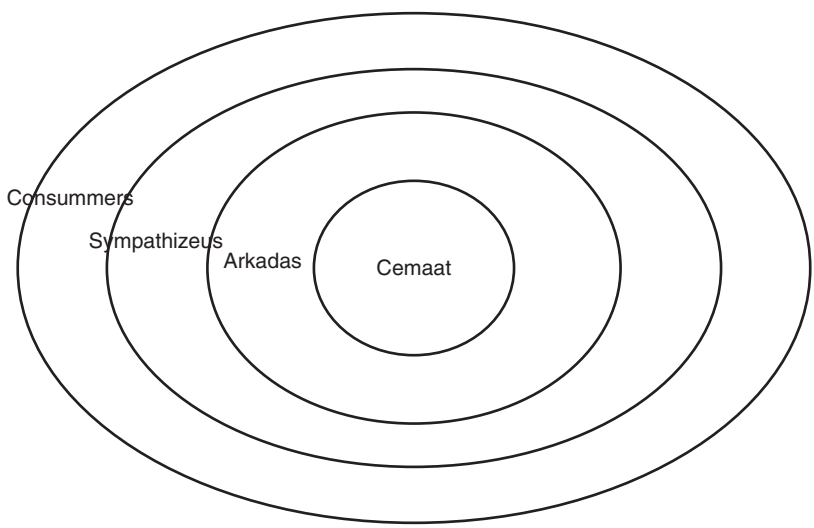

Figure 6.1 Different degrees of commitment and adhesion in the Gülen movement as presented by Joshua Hendrick (Angey-Sentuc 2015, p. 7)

The second consists of *arkadaşlar*, a large network of devout persons living according to Gülen's teachings. The third circle comprises sympathizers, including those who support the actions of the movement and participate occasionally in the movement's activities, but are mainly unaware of Gülen and his teachings. Finally, there are consumers who just buy products affiliated with the movement (e.g. education, business) for their consumer characteristics in a competitive marketplace. Thus, the Gülen movement, unlike all the others, has achieved a more sophisticated and not entirely identifiable network of support.

The late Mustafa Sungur, another famous Turkish Nurcu leader, also gained a significant following in Azerbaijan. His followers are students who get informal lessons on Said Nursi's works in private apartments in Baku and the regions of Azerbaijan, with some distinguished students and followers then sent to Turkey to continue their religious studies (Yunusov 2012). They run so-called *işık evleri* (light houses), where religious gatherings and discussions are held for existing and potential followers. However, this group has remained small with only limited influence.

The second most important organization active in Azerbaijan is directly related to the government of the Republic of Turkey. The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has been extremely active in Central Asia, Georgia and particularly in Azerbaijan. It is a huge organization with the mandate to 'operate affairs relating the beliefs, worship, and moral principles of Islamic Religion under the law no. 633 of 1965' (Yildirim 2011). Operating under the Prime Minister's Office, and with a president appointed by the prime minister, the Diyanet has five main departments: Education Department, including Qur'an courses for children and adults; Religious Services, including family, discipleship, ritual, social and cultural services with religious content; Publications Department; Public Relations Department; and the Higher Committee for Religious Affairs, an advisory council (Diyanet n.d.). In Turkey, its functions are carried out by muftis and religious personnel, while abroad they are carried out by the special Diyanet religious counsellors, diplomatic attaches and other personnel.

It is not a surprise that since the conservative AKP came to power in 2002, the number of Diyanet personnel has increased from 74,000 to 117,541 and its budget has significantly increased (Yildirim 2011). Turkey has developed a special policy to foster Turkish-style Sunni Islam in the post-Soviet republics, especially Azerbaijan and other nations with a Turkic ethnic background. The AKP government has used the Diyanet as an instrument to increase its Islamic presence in the region (Raufoglu 2012). Like in many other countries, the Diyanet has been massively involved in the construction of mosques. It also publishes and disseminates large amounts of literature, funds the Theology Department at Baku State University and contributes to various other educational projects.

There are other Turkish movements active in Azerbaijan besides the Gülen movement and the Diyanet. Like the Nurcular movements, they are built around religious leaders with strong ties to Turkey, Turkish Islam and

sometimes Turkish nationality. The Mahmut Ziya Hudayi Foundation was established in the tradition of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. This foundation started its operations as early as in 1992, running half a dozen madrasas for high school kids in Azerbaijan. Another non-state actor is the network of disciples of Süleyman Tunahan (Süleymancılar) running informal Qur'an courses (Balci and Goyushev 2012). The community of Osman Nuri Topbaş of the Naqshbandi brotherhood runs Qur'an learning courses and a vocational school in Sheki, and a madrasa in Ağdaş. There are also some smaller Turkish movements present in Azerbaijan, like the disciples and supporters of the controversial and extravagant preacher Adnan Oktar or the religious scholar Mustafa İslamoğlu.

Regarding the integration of these actors in Azerbaijan, there is another important issue: their relationship with the Caucasus Muslim Board led by Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, which is the official Islamic representative and administrative institution in the country. This institution is not governmental but has been the agency to oversee Islamic affairs since Soviet times. The Sheikh ul-Islam represents the Shi'a majority while his deputy is Sunni. Certainly, the spread of Turkish Sunni Islam through both state (Diyanet) and especially non-state (Gülen movement *et al.*) channels has not been welcomed by the board. Over several years, Paşazadə repeatedly made public mention of some "Nurcu threat" alongside the "Wahhabi threat" (525-ci Qəzet 2014). Thus, while allowing cooperation with the Diyanet and some Turkish preachers in the field of religious education, mainly in the northern Sunni-dominated regions of Azerbaijan, the Shi'a-dominated Caucasus Muslim Board has always been sensitive about the threat of imported Turkish Sunni Islam to their form of religious practice.

The chart in Table 6.1 provides an overview of the Turkish religious groups active in Azerbaijan:

Table 6.1 Overview of active Turkish religious groups in Azerbaijan

Actor	*Capacity to deliver attractive messages to target audiences*	*Ability to adapt to local conditions*
Gülen movement	Given the secularized nature of Azerbaijan and cautious attitudes towards independent and foreign religious activism, the Gülen movement's secular humanitarian and educational messages worked well with the general public and the government. Its capitalist pragmatism and business activities on all levels helped to position itself not only as a friend of the nation, but also of the ruling elite.	Gülen integrated into the local conditions, avoiding all links to religious activism and operating purely as an educational, humanitarian and business network. It is playing by the established rules and has never challenged the status quo or criticized the government.

Actor	*Capacity to deliver attractive messages to target audiences*	*Ability to adapt to local conditions*
Diyanet	The Diyanet is an official Turkish state institution and has formal capacities to deliver its messages. Its target audience is limited to practicing Sunni Muslims.	The Diyanet integrated into the existing religious structures, cooperating with Baku State University and the official Islamic body, the Caucasus Muslim Board.
Süleymancilar	The capacities of the Süleymancilar comprise a limited number of training courses targeting mainly Sunni Muslims, especially in the northern regions.	The Süleymancilar could mainly adapt to local conditions by cooperating with formal and semi-formal institutions. There was some cooperation with the Caucasus Muslim Board in the northern regions of Azerbaijan.
Mahmut Ziya Hudayi Foundation	The foundation has a lesser capacity for influence, limited to a network of madrasas and humanitarian activities targeting the youth and more general Sunni audience.	The foundation could mainly adapt to the local conditions by cooperating with formal public institutions within the existing framework.
Mustafa Sungur community	The Mustafa Sungur community is limited to targeting young people through informal networks.	The community could not fully adapt to local conditions, operating mainly based on purely religious proselytism and subject to government interventions.

Regarding the capacity to deliver attractive messages to target audiences and the ability to adapt to local conditions, the Gülen movement and to a lesser extent the Diyanet could be considered the most effective transnational actors among the Turkish movements. While the Diyanet has been involved in more direct missionary activities, the Gülen movement has focused on education and business, promoting their version of Islam indirectly and informally through personal communications and networking. The key to this faith-based movement's global success is its seemingly secular positioning. The Gülen movement is the only faith-based movement that could have created its own educational and business empire, and run TV, radio and press institutions in Azerbaijan, where no other Turkish group has achieved so much influence.

The Gülen movement's successfully integrative strategy is aptly described by Turkish researcher Bayram Balci (2014b):

> [T]he movement adopted a unique action plan that largely surpassed the religious sphere to which previous organizations had limited themselves.

> It opted to tailor its strategy to the customs, needs, and expectations of its host countries, determining references to religion and Turkishness on a case-by-case basis according to local sensibilities, the social and ideological environment, and the degree of openness and acceptance encountered on the ground, which may vary within the same country. As a result, unlike other Turkish Islamic movements, the Gülenists have never sought to build mosques and Islamic schools or to openly preach on Fridays. The Gülen movement refrains from such overtly religious pursuits even in Muslim countries in Central Asia and Africa, and in Europe and the United States its religious nature is almost totally obscured.

Until recently, most of the Turkish religious actors had cooperated with each other despite their differences and disagreements at home. However, the split between the government and the Gülen movement since 2013 has dramatically changed this status quo. The movement's deteriorated relations with its home country have negatively affected its relations with the host country and significantly undermined its success there. All the experts interviewed unanimously argued that the heyday of the Gülen movement is now history.

Turkey's changing soft power and the Gülen movement in Azerbaijan

Given the analyzes in previous sections of this chapter, I can summarize that the Gülen movement has been the most efficient Turkish religious actor in Azerbaijan, contributing the most to Turkey's soft power there. In the following section, I will concentrate on the changing situation for the Gülen movement as the most important Turkish religious group and soft power actor in Azerbaijan.

In looking back at some of the major Turkish foreign policy instruments formulated by Kalin (2012), such as expanding economic integration and increasing sociocultural relations and interpersonal communications, it is clear that the Gülen movement was a central pillar of this policy in Azerbaijan.

As far as economic integration is concerned, Keskin has labelled the Gülen movement as 'market-oriented post-Islamist' (Keskin 2012). Hundreds of different Turkish and local business enterprises are part of the network, either as active members and donors or as sympathizers. For example, the Azerbaijan International Society of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen (TUSIAB) has been operational since 1994 as an umbrella organization for the movement's related businesses. However, not all members of this organization are related to the network. Due to pressure from the Turkish government after 2013, the organization has systematically fired Gülen's supporters.

The Gülen movement is also the most obvious example of the active and successful utilization of sociocultural connections and ethnic–linguistic kinship in Azerbaijan by a faith-based network. Its focus on education and humanitarian projects made it easy for two decades of Turkish governments

to gain from the positive image the movement created of a reliable, helpful and caring (Turkic/Muslim) presence in Azerbaijan. This fact was mentioned by all the experts interviewed during field work for this research.

The AKP government, like its more secularist predecessors, recognized the global influence of the Gülen movement and its beneficial role in enhancing Turkish soft power (Balci 2014b). The Gülen movement initially cooperated closely with the AKP, based on their common Islamic roots. For instance, the visit by Prime Minister Erdoğan to Baku in January 2003 was actually organized by a businessman linked to this community (Rohozifski 2016). The AKP and the Gülen movement shared the same social base and had similar ideas and objectives for years.

The activities of the Gülen movement were the most effective element of Turkey's soft power in Azerbaijan and globally, but suited the AKP only as long as the friendship between Gülen and Erdoğan lasted. Gülen followers in the Turkish security forces are believed to have played a crucial role in the so-called Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases in 2008, when many Turkish army officers were arrested and the army was purged of Kemalist opposition (Rodrik 2016). While their common tactical interests made them both forget about their differences for some time, gradually the rift became more tangible and evident. As Balci argues,

> [T]he real reasons for the split are still unclear, but it seems that the Gülen movement increased its distance to the Turkish Prime Minister in order not to be compromised by his increasing authoritarianism, and even went on to criticize him. In turn, Erdoğan has accused the Gülen movement of posing an obstacle to his "reign" as its members became a political force in the country. This disjunction looks like a natural and inevitable separation between two groups that were unified through their opposition to a common enemy: the Kemalist establishment and its supporters in the Turkish military. (Balci 2014b).

After Erdoğan's campaign against Gülen's school network in Turkey, his followers from the security forces and judiciary effectively sought to undermine his government in late 2013, with charges of corruption against members of his family and his inner circle (Dorsey 2016). Erdoğan pushed back by firing thousands of judiciary personnel and police officers or moving them to other jobs, shutting down the investigation and increasing pressure on Gülen's religious, educational and commercial network (ibid.). This war between former allies reached its peak and possible denouement following the July 2016 unsuccessful coup attempt that was immediately implicitly associated with Gülen. Erdoğan used this opportunity to intensify his purge against supposed followers and sympathizers of his bitter enemy. Since then tens of thousands of people have been fired and arrested.

Although the Gülen movement has historically positioned itself as a social movement that integrates into society (Aliyev 2012, 2015), there has

always been speculation about its hidden agenda, and this speculation has been fuelled by the recent developments in Turkey. These developments—an attempted military coup for which the AKP government blames Gülen, as well as previous attempts by security and law-enforcement representatives to reveal corruption and misconduct in Erdoğan's inner circle—have demonstrated how deeply the movement penetrated the system of public administration, law enforcement and even the judiciary. The AKP government accuses the movement of attempts to build a "parallel state" in Turkey, and all of the experts interviewed for this research noted that a similar claim can be made for Azerbaijan.

The movement is somewhat reformist in nature, and there are some signs of it being partly elite-based and quite hierarchical (Aliyev 2012, 2015). Some experts actually claimed during interviews that the whole point of the group's activity is 'participation in the hope of controlling the state or shaping policies' with the goal to 'accommodate' and not 'integrate' in the long run. All the experts interviewed conceded to various extents that the Gülen movement could be practicing *taqiyya* (dissimulation of religious belief under threat, persecution or compulsion, permissible in Islam) in its operations. According to one expert, Dr. Ibrahim Ahmadov, the Gülen movement has managed to create a kind of society within society in Azerbaijan, which recalls President Erdoğan's rhetoric about the political and economic abilities of and related threats posed by Gülen's network.

The power struggle between Gülen and Erdoğan moved beyond Turkey into Azerbaijan in 2014, following the 2013 divorce between the movement and the AKP government and resulting in a weakened Gülen network. As described by Balci (2014b):

> Turning talk into action, the Prime Minister paid a visit to Azerbaijan less than one week after the Turkish local elections won by his party, and started his attack on the Gülen movement. Thanks not only to his pressure but also because Azerbaijani authorities had their own interest in doing so, the schools were placed under the control of SOCAR, the Azerbaijani State Oil Company. At the same time, some important movement figures were deported from Azerbaijan to Turkey.

Later these schools were disbanded and absorbed by the state *Zarifa Aliyeva* Lyceum network (Turan 2014).

In light of ongoing controversies in state–religion relations in Azerbaijan, with the threat of expanding Wahhabi terrorism and perceptions of Iranian religious influence, the Gülen movement had been positioning itself as the face of moderate, "politically acceptable" Islam. After the recent developments in Turkey, it is going to be hard for the movement to continue to claim apolitical intentions. The July 2016 attempted military coup accompanied by accusations against Gülen and the unprecedented purge of his alleged followers and supporters, as well as the Azerbaijani government's full support of

President Erdoğan in these activities, have buried all hopes and chances for the movement in Azerbaijan. Connecting Fethullah Gülen to terrorism and inventing a new label for the movement—FETÖ (*Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü*, Fethullah-followers Terrorist Organization)—pushed the hostility between the two former allies past the point of no return.

In the aftermath of the failed coup, Azerbaijan's private TV and radio company, ANS, had its license cancelled after announcing an interview with Fethullah Gülen, Qafqaz University was closed by its founders (affiliated with Gülen's network) and the newspaper *Zaman* was shut down.[3] Qafqaz University was later placed under the management of Baku Higher Oil School.[4] The new management fired about 50 Turkish professors and deans.[5] The Prosecutor General's Office also opened a criminal case against FETÖ in Azerbaijan in August 2016.[6] These developments demonstrate that Azerbaijan has decided to fully cooperate with the Turkish government in its fight against the now so-called FETÖ. This political decision is going to mark the end of the Gülen era in the country.

In general, religious affairs in post-Soviet Azerbaijan are still marked by the state's aspirations to control religious activity directly and absolutely. Islam is a part of the country's security discourse and can serve as an organizational framework for social mobilization, as was demonstrated by researcher Sophie Bedford with examples from Shi'a and Salafi movements (Bedford 2009). Our analysis has shown that this holds true for the Gülen movement as well (Aliyev 2015). Thus, the active operation of transnational, non-state and/or informal religious actors raises a red flag for the state, which is cautious of any alien and uncontrolled Islamic activism capable of mobilizing the masses. Since the Turkish case also demonstrated that the Gülen movement had infiltrated state structures, creating a "parallel state" capable of undermining the ruling government, the authorities in Azerbaijan could not help but have suspicions about Gülen's followers.

As a natural result of these developments in Turkey and Azerbaijan in the context of the Erdoğan–Gülen war, Turkish religious soft power, and consequently Turkish soft power in general, has been on the wane in Azerbaijan ever since. Thus, not only has the Gülen movement suffered by facing purges and losing support from official Turkish institutions and diplomacy, but Turkish foreign power has also lost one of its most important and effective channels.

Conclusion

The case of Turkish religious actors in Azerbaijan has demonstrated that transnational non-state religious actors operating across state boundaries can be a successful complementary soft power tool. While ethnic solidarity has been a much more important element for advancing Turkish soft power, Islamic rhetoric has also contributed to the more general messages of brotherhood.

Another important finding is the impact of domestic politics on the transnational non-state religious actors' operations in the host states. The example of the Gülen movement's weakening in Azerbaijan as a result of its conflict with the current Turkish government demonstrates the power of the political bilateral relationship over the religious connection. Otherwise successful Gülen followers could achieve public acceptance, and more importantly the acceptance of the ruling elite, by delivering an attractive message and adapting to the local conditions, compromising on many crucial items of the Islamist and even post-Islamist agenda. Other non-state religious actors from Turkey and even the state institution, the Diyanet, have not been able to achieve such success and expansion.

If checked against Turkey's declared foreign policy instruments (engaging all political actors, supporting democratic processes, expanding economic integration and increasing sociocultural relations and interpersonal communication), the Gülen movement has been active in all of them except supporting democratic processes, which was never really on the Turkish foreign policy agenda in Azerbaijan anyway.

The Gülen-affiliated organizations were active members of the civil society in Azerbaijan in terms of humanitarian projects and especially education. The Gülen movement contributed to the mutual economic relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan, having the most significant presence among Turkish businesses in the country. Moreover, Turkish and local business enterprises are a part of the network either as active members and donors or as sympathizers under the TUSIAB umbrella. The Gülen movement was also an example of active and successful use of sociocultural connections and ethnic-linguistic kinship for Turkish soft power in Azerbaijan.

Finally, it should be noted that while the Gülen movement has suffered from losing the support of official Turkish institutions and diplomacy, and the heyday of the Gülen movement is now over, the loss has been mutual. Obviously, with the weakened position of Gülen's followers in Azerbaijan, Turkish foreign power lacks one of its most important and effective non-state channels. Given the importance of transnational non-state religious actors in pursuing effective soft power, this development can limit Turkey's soft power capabilities in Azerbaijan as well as in other countries where the AKP government might neutralize its former transnational ally. Turkey's soft power potential is currently in decline and it needs an alternative transnational non-state (or state) actor to replace the embattled Gülen movement.

Notes

1 The interviewees are the following persons: the Director of the Eurasian Center for Islamic Cooperation Organization Youth Forum; the former Deputy Chair of the State Committee for Work with the Religious Organizations, Dr. Elchin Asgerov; an independent researcher, Dr. Ibrahim Ahmadov; a Gülen school alumnus and

journalist, Mr. Mammad Gulmammadov; a Gülen school alumnus and social activist Elchin Hasan; and a journalist on religious issues, Mr. Hilal Ali. Other interviewees preferred to main anonymous.

2 http://softpower30.portland-communications.com/ranking/ [Accessed June 2016]

3 https://euroasianews.org/2016/07/20/9886/. [Accessed August 2016]

4 http://azertag.az/en/xeber/Qafqaz_University_placed_under_management_of_Baku_Higher_Oil_School-974231. [Accessed August 2016]

5 http://politika.az/karusel/19627-elmar-qasimov-qafqaz-universitetin-50-muellimini-ishden-chixartdi.html. [Accessed August 2016]

6 www.trtworld.com/turkey/azerbaijan-to-probe-feto-network-165918. [Accessed August 2016].

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Part III

The case of Armenia

7 Religion as a factor in Kurdish identity discourse in Armenia and Turkey

Lia Evoyan and Tatevik Manukyan

Introduction

The Kurdish factor is geopolitically important in the present phase of regional developments. It has shifted from an internal political issue in countries with a Kurdish minority into an international problem. Thus, it is now a political tool in interstate relations, manipulated by all involved countries and by Kurdish political and military organizations. Today, Kurdish organizations in Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran are trying to progress from objects of regional policy to politically self-determined subjects realizing their own political agenda. They seek the means and tools to cooperate and influence each other, without much success. These Kurdish organizations present their ambitions within new geopolitical frames: the prospect of solving the Kurdish problem, reshaping borders and regional destabilization. Furthermore, they are trying to establish a unified policy with the much smaller neighbouring Kurdish communities in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The Kurdish community in Armenia is of special importance to Kurds in Turkey, since during the Armenian genocide and deportations, many members of the Kurdish/Yezidi tribes ended up on different banks of the Araks River, forming the Kurdish community of Armenia. Today, both sides are making efforts to find common ground. In this chapter, we analyze the interaction and identity formation between the Kurdish/Yezidi communities in Turkey and Armenia within the frame of Armenian and Turkish national soft power policies. So far, there have been various contradictory academic definitions of the origin of the Kurds. The issue of the scientific definition of Kurdish ethnogenesis continues to be problematic (McDowall 2007). In this chapter, we will reconstruct the political frame of these arguments rather than contribute to theories of Kurdish ethnogenesis. There is significant discourse concerning the perception of Yezidi identity, whether it is a separate ethno-religious group or just a religion (van Bruinessen 1992, Kreyenbroek and Sperl 2000, Asatrian and Arakelova 2014, Omarkhali 2014). Some scholars as well as political leaders prefer the distinction between the "Kurdish nation" and "Yezidi religion", which understands Yezidism as religion but not an ethnic group. The vast majority of Armenian Yezidis consider themselves

as ethnic Yezidis practicing Yezidism. Thus, we reconstruct the public and emic discourses regarding these identities rather than deciding about ethno-confessional nature. Nevertheless, we believe that every individual has a right on deciding his/her ethnic and religious identity, based on his/her personal emotions, beliefs and views.

We will demonstrate how the construction of ethnic and religious identities strongly depends on politics and international relations. Furthermore, this study is a case study in the intermingling processes of ethnic, religious and national identity formations.

As we will show, the identity issues are highly politically contested. We do not take parts in this political discussion but rather present an academic reconstruction of the identity formation. The results presented in this chapter are based on extensive fieldwork. We conducted field research in Armenia, Switzerland, France, Belgium and Germany. Furthermore, we collected data from Internet sources, mass media and social media. We combined the analysis of empirical data with historical-comparative analysis and historical synthesis.

Kurds and Yezidis: ethnic and religious factors

Summarizing the approaches in classical literature on Oriental studies, the term "Kurd" as an ethnonym was traditionally applied to the ethnic group (conglomeration) occupying the highlands of the Zagros mountain range and the valley between the Tigris River on the west and the Dizful River on the east (Asatrian 2009). It includes Souj-Bulagh and Ardalan in Safavid Persia, and stretches from Lake Urmia to Lorestan and North Mesopotamia (Mosul Vilayet) in Iraq (Adonts 1996).

The Kurds penetrated the Armenian Highlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Bayburdyan 2008). After the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, many Sunni Kurdish tribes from Safavid Persia and Mesopotamia were resettled in Western Armenia by the Turkish Sultan Selim I Yavuz for their support in the war. Starting in the second half of the sixteenth century, Turkish authorities fostered the resettlement of Kurdish tribes in the Armenian Highlands. Thus, the Ottoman Empire consciously intended to change the demographic picture of the region, aiming for the strengthening of Islam over Armenian Christianity. At the end of the sixteenth century, Ottoman sultans began massive and continuous resettlement of Kurdish tribes in the current South Caucasus territories, particularly in the Araks plain. As a result, the population of present-day Turkey is approximately 18 per cent Kurdish (Central Intelligence Agency 2016).

In terms of religion, the majority of Turkey's Kurds are Sunni Muslims and followers of the Shafi'i *madhab* (one of the four religious Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence). It is this specific religious characteristic that distinguishes them from Sunni Turks and Arabs, who are mostly followers of the Hanafi school. According to van Bruinessen, the Shafi'i *madhab* was the main

factor that allowed Kurdish society to maintain a certain religious distance from the others and retain its ethnic identity (van Bruinessen 2000b).

In Kurdish society, the mystical dimensions of Sunni Islam, such as the *tariqat* and orders of Sufi[1] religious philosophy, were historically common and are still present today. Among the Kurds of Turkey, Sufism has historically been accepted as an alternative expression of one's faith and as a counterweight to the dominant religion. Many Kurdish *ashiret* or tribal leaders are also leaders of Sufi orders and *tariqat*. The dominant order in Kurdish society is the Naqshbandi order, which is one of the 12 main "mother" (*usul*) *tariqat*. It has been seen in various ways throughout the history and culture of Kurdish society, as well as throughout its relationship with the Turkish state. The *tariqat* has maintained its existence despite pressure from the Turkish state to secularize. It has been subject to internal ideological transformation, and its religious agenda has been reformulated around material interests. The Naqshbandi order is the most active of the Sufi *tariqat* in the political arena of Turkey today, and serves as a unique model of an Islamic sociopolitical movement. It is the most applicable tool for social interaction between politics and religion in Turkey and has played a significant role in the development of political Islam. Having formed a powerful sociopolitical and religious network, this *tariqat* is also a unique bridge between the Turkish and Kurdish societies.

Despite the principle of laicism declared by Atatürk, Islam (in its various manifestations) has been a powerful weapon for the authorities' attempts to control society throughout the history of the Republic of Turkey. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) in power today is no exception; the party uses Islam adroitly in their relations with the Kurds (Ozcan 2005). With the Naqshbandi Sufi *tariqat* as a strong leaning post, the AKP managed to gain the support and trust of a considerable section of Kurdish society, both in their rise to power and in the years that followed, thus counterbalancing the atheistic leftist ideas of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) with an ideology of Islamic unity.

The other school of Islam popular among Kurds is the Nurcu movement,[2] founded by a theologian of Kurdish origin, Said Nursi (1876–1960). Nurcu is a synthesis of ideas put forward by Nursi, a Hanafi interpreter of Sunni Islam, and of Sufi mysticism, based on a pan-Islamic agenda. After the death of Said Nursi, different religious movements based on his ideology appeared, one of which consists of the teachings of Fethullah Gülen. These teachings consider high-quality secular education to be a prerequisite for the progress of the Islamic world; they support the compatibility of Islam and modernity and emphasize the necessity of dialogue with other religions (from a position of Islamic superiority). Gülen added pan-Turkism to Nursi's pan-Islamic ideas, trying to unite Turkic people and Turkic-language states under the umbrella of Islamic ideology.

Until recently, this was considered one of the most important tools for the implementation of Turkish foreign policy, especially in their relationships with Turkic-language communities. The movement had a unique and important soft power function.

The Kurds constitute a considerable number of Nurcu followers. Most of the children of the Kurdish elite study in Nurcu educational and religious institutions. This educational emphasis on the ideology of the Nurcu–Gülen movement and its activities reveals a paradox: the Kurds have subscribed to an agenda that unites people of Turkic origin and is absolutely Turkish nationalist in essence, as well as to an institution that served and had significant reconnaissance value for the interests of the Turkish state. For Kurds, membership in the Nurcu movement was an easy way to start a successful public and political career during the years of the AKP's rule. At any rate, this was the situation before the Erdoğan–Gülen conflict over the distribution of power, which turned the former ideological allies into sworn enemies.[3]

Alevism[4] is a comprehensive religious movement that is popular among the Kurds of Turkey, but that faces contrasting opinions in academic discourse. Alevism took shape as a religious movement as early as the pre-Ottoman period, penetrating the territory of what is now modern Turkey from Persia, mainly through Kurdish tribes. Alevi Kurds always faced pressure from the Sunni Muslim authorities, both during the time of the Ottoman Empire and throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. This is why the Alevis have always led a closed lifestyle within their community, trying to avoid contact with the outside world—particularly Sunni Muslims—and have hidden their religious identity, applying the Islamic practice of *taqqiya*.

Considered heretics, the Alevis of the Ottoman period were often subjected to deportation and massacres. The Alevis are also known to bear the epithets "Qizilbash" and "Bektashi".[5]

The Zazas, whose ethnic origins are again a topic of discussion in society and in academic circles, are also followers of Alevism (Bruinessen 2000a). Are the Zazas perhaps Kurds—living concentrated in the Dersim (Tunceli) vilayet of Turkey where they are geographically isolated from the Sunni Kurds, speaking Zazaki and practicing Alevism—or are they another Iranian ethnic group? We should note that Alevism has historically united the Turks and Kurds into a single community, constantly putting the latter first in issues of national identity. Is Alevism transnational—are they perhaps Alevis first, and then Kurds? At times, Alevism has manifested more powerfully as a religious identity than a national identity. The Alevi Kurds participated in the Kurdish anti-government movements of the 1920–30s. They even collaborated with the Kemalists, thinking that the principle of secularism declared by Atatürk would save them somewhat from clashes with Sunni Islamists. This was how it remained until the Dersim incidents in 1936–38, when the government decided to make administrative changes to the Dersim region and rename it Tunceli, which was an attempt to gain more control and better manage the Alevis, who had had semi-autonomous status until then. These changes caused discontent among the Alevis and led to armed conflict between them and the authorities. Today, the Alevi Zazas demand that the authorities recognize the 1936–38 Dersim incidents as genocide.

The issue of national and ethnic identity is very relevant to the Alevi Zazas today, as it is to the Yezidis. The Zaza minority is polarized: some consider themselves Kurdish and participate in the Kurdish anti-government movement and the partisan activities of the PKK (although their numbers in the ranks of the PKK are quite small, and their participation is sometimes forced). The parliamentary elections that took place on 1 November 2015 provide a partial picture of how the Zazas self-identify, at least politically. In Dersim (Tunceli province), the pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halklarin Demokratik Partisi*, Peoples' Democratic Party), whose chairman Selahattin Demirtaş is Zaza, received 60.91 per cent of the votes on 7 July 2015 (general election for the Grand National Assembly) and 55.85 per cent of the votes on 1 November 2015 (snap second elections for the Grand National Assembly) (Seçim Haberler 2015). This is quite a big achievement for the HDP, because Alevis are usually sceptical of pro-Kurdish parties and would traditionally vote for the CHP (Republican People's Party). A decisive factor here was the Zaza identity of the charismatic S. Demirtaş.

Our studies among the Alevi Zazas of Dersim have shown that there are many people in this community who consider themselves to have a different ethnic identity than the Kurds. They stubbornly lay out their differences—both ethnic and religious—and base this on language, religion, culture and historical facts.

In recent years, due in part to internal political processes in Turkey, the academic and public interest towards other religious denominations and their followers has increased significantly.

Perhaps academia will never be able to give clear answers to all the controversial questions regarding the ethnic and religious identity of the Kurds, but at this stage we can state that the specific religious characteristics of Turkey's Kurdish community function as a considerable dividing and aggravating factor. They are a serious obstacle to the consolidation of the Kurds and the formation of a united ideology and vision for the future.

These religious differences are also used by both by the Turkish authorities and external powers as potent ways to influence and gain leverage over the Kurdish community, as a means of controlling and guiding Kurdish processes for their own political gains and interests.

There is some justification for adding another group to this ethno-religious list: the Yezidis. However, in contrast to the clear ethnic term "Kurd" and the clear religious terms "Sunni", "Alevi", etc., the term "Yezidi" has a disputed religious and ethno-religious meaning. The migration of Yezidis into the current territories of the South Caucasus happened during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Yezidis escaped religious persecution from the Ottoman Turks and the Sunni Kurds who tried to convert them to Islam (Avanesov 1963).

The Yezidi (Ezdi) are an ethno-religious group whose main identity is religious—Yezidism or Sharfadin (also called Shams or sun worshippers in their own words). The exact number of Yezidis is still unknown and controversial.

Current estimates of their population is around 500,000 mostly living in Iraq (Pichon 2015). There are 35,308 Yezidis living in Armenia (according to the last census), around 18,000 in Georgia (Garcés De Los Fayos 2014) and there was also a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000 before the civil war in Syria (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2015). In Iraq there are two main concentrations of Yezidis: one in the Shaikhan district, where their most important sanctuary, the shrine of Sheikh 'Adi at Lalish is located, and one around Mount Sinjar. There are also Yezidis living in Western Europe (mainly in Germany) and in the Russian Federation (mainly in the regions of Krasnodar, Vladimir, Yaroslavl and Moscow).

The founder or the reformer of Yezidism is considered to be Sheikh 'Adi ibn Musafir (1073–1163), called Shihade or Hadi by Yezidi people. According to legend, all sheikh families derive from him. Annual pilgrimages are made to his shrine at Lalish, Iraq.

Yezidism is a syncretic doctrine which combines the belief in a sole God with the veneration of a Holy Trinity—Melek Taus (Peacock Angel), Sheikh 'Adi and Sultan Yezid (all being incarnations of God). Melek Taus, characterized as a fallen angel, is the main member of the Holy Trinity. Muslims and Christians understood this figure as the embodiment of evil, and therefore often accused Yezidis of being "devil worshippers". This was the ideological argument for several persecutions and massacres by Muslims. Yezidis believe in transmigration of souls and in gradual purification through the cycle of reincarnation. The souls of sinners may be reborn into animals, but after an expiatory period they may pass again into human form. One of the foundational myths of the Yezidis concerns their origins. According to the Yezidis, unlike all other peoples on earth who are descended from both Adam and Eve, they themselves are descended from Adam alone. In one version of their creation legend, there were 72 Adams, each of whom lived ten thousand years, and each of whom was more perfect than the previous one (Joseph 1919). The 72nd Adam married Eve. The angel Jabrail put drops of blood from the foreheads of Adam and Eve into four jars, which were then sealed for nine months. When the jars were opened, those containing Eve's blood were empty, whereas Adam's blood had produced a girl and a boy (Shahîd ibn Jayâr, "the Son of the Jar"). These two children of Adam became the ancestors of the Yezidis.

The Yezidis recognize two sacred books considered to be written in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries. The *Kitab al-Jilwa* (Book of Enlightenment) is believed to have been dictated by Sheikh 'Adi. Most of the text is concerned with the Peacock Angel, who speaks in the first person, vaunting his power and promising rewards to his devotees. Some parts of the book have been encrypted through letter substitution. The *Masxafe Resh* (Black Book) discusses the creation of humanity, how the power of evil tempts one to disobey God's commands, and certain taboos (against wearing the colour blue; eating lettuce, beans, pumpkin, fish, cock, gazelle, etc.; urinating while standing; bathing in a public bath or wearing trousers while sitting; saying the name of their God; etc.).

Important religious observances include daily prayer at sunrise; specific practices and abstentions on Wednesday, the holy day of the week; the New Year's festival, Nowruz; and the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Sheikh 'Adi at Lalish.

Yezidi society has a caste system with three main components: the sheikhs, *pir* (clergy) and *murid* (laymen) (Cherchi et al. 1996). Each Yezidi is entitled to spiritual tutors from the sheikh and *pir* families, as well as a "brother" or "sister" of the "next world", because spiritual tutorship is one of the main elements of Yezidi society in terms of cultural and religious self-awareness.

Yezidism holds three main principles for preserving the Yezidi community: a ban on caste mixing, a ban on mixed marriages and the pursuance of Yezidi religious canons.

Yezidism has no system for forgiveness. Once one has broken a Yezidi religious canon, one cannot be readmitted to Yezidism nor considered a Yezidi community member. For example, a Yezidi who marries a non-Yezidi can no longer be admitted by the community. Only those born into the Yezidi community can belong to the religion; the Yezidis do not accept any converts or re-converts. However, the recent developments in Sinjar (Iraq) showed that there can be some exceptions to the general rules, as hundreds of Yezidi women kidnapped and enslaved by ISIS were viewed as victims and readmitted to the community after being freed. This is an unprecedented phenomenon, as Yezidis don't normally forgive women who have had physical relations with men of other religions (Furlani 1940).

Identity issues: ethnicity vs. religion

There is significant academic and political discourse concerning the perception of Yezidi identity, whether it is a separate ethno-religious group or just a religion. The first group of scholars and political leaders uses the term "Kurdish nation, Yezidi religion", which shows Yezidism as a religion but not an ethnicity, while the second group refers to Yezidis as a separate ethnicity. The first group argues that although the vast majority of Armenian Yezidis consider themselves ethnic Yezidis, Kurds claim that there is no such ethnicity and that these are ethnic Kurds who practice the Yezidi religion. Indeed, they accept this as the original religion of ancient Kurdish people, who were later converted to Islam. It is quite common in the academic sphere to consider Yezidis ethnic Kurds. For example, the Kurdish writer Karlen Chachani argues that 'Kurds are one people, who speak one language, and have one Kurdistan. There is no such thing as a Yezidi nation, or a Yezidistan' (Abrahamian 1992). Christine Allison says she has met many Yezidis in Armenia who believe they are also Kurds. Philip Kreyenbroek affirms: 'The Yezidi religious and cultural tradition is deeply rooted in Kurdish culture, and almost all Yezidi sacred texts are in Kurdish' (Krikorian 2006).

One of the main arguments used by scholars viewing Yezidis as ethnic Kurds is the language both Kurds and Yezidis speak: Kurmanji, the northern

dialect of Kurdish. It belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo–European language family. Armenia's Yezidis use the Cyrillic alphabet for writing, although depending on location the Yezidis have used other diverse scripts: Arabic (in Syria and Iraq), Latin (in Europe and Turkey) and Armenian (in Armenia).

The second group of scholars and local political leaders, while accepting that the language is similar, refuse to call it Kurdish and call it Yezdiki instead (in the case of Armenian Yezidis). They argue that different ethnic groups can speak the same language, using French-speaking Arabs and Frenchmen as an example. Moreover, some Armenian Yezidis argue that there are certain words and terms that are specific to Yezdiki and not preserved in Kurdish. Sheikh Hasane Mahmood Tamoyan, deputy president of the National Union of Yezidis in Armenia, is one of those who denies any connection between Yezidis and Kurds or Kurmanji. Sheikh Hasane stated that Yezidis are a separate nation as 'Yezidism cannot be considered the name of the religion only, because no nation in the world is named after its religion'. He further claimed that the 'Yezidi alphabet is the alphabet of the Yezidi people', as there are no religious alphabets (Abrahamian 1992).

Despite the possible ethnic and linguistic similarities, our research shows that there is a large gap between Yezidis and Kurds, mainly due to the religious differences which often make these two groups hostile to one another. Yezidis are considered "devil worshippers" by the Sunni Muslim Kurds, who have continuously persecuted them. Muslim Kurds (as well as other Muslims) are accused of major anti-Yezidi persecutions and atrocities, including participation in the Armenian genocide of 1915–1924 in which thousands of Yezidis were also slaughtered.

However, a small minority of Yezidis in Armenia (2,162 people, according to the 2011 Armenian census) consider themselves to be ethnically Kurdish and not Yezidi (National Statistical Service 2013). This minority is still Yezidi from the point of view of religion, but tends to separate its religious identity (Yezidi) from its ethnic identity (Kurdish). The appeal of being a Yezidi–Kurd may be based on the desire for their smaller group to belong to a greater ethnic entity (Kurds) with a potential large homeland (Kurdistan). A significant number of intelligentsia fall among this group.

Concluding the above data, there are some academic challenges in examining the Kurdish/Yezidi ethnic and religious identity discourse. We will analyze these intermingling identities more closely in the following section by isolating the Armenian case.

The Kurdish/Yezidi community in Armenia

Yezidis are the largest ethno-religious minority group in Armenia. Their community is a conservative and rural one which draws attention from scholars due to its well-preserved religious and oral traditions (Omarkhali 2014). They live in different parts of Armenia, mainly in the northwestern

provinces (*marzer*) of Armavir, Aragatsotn, Ararat, Yerevan, Kotayk, Shirak and Lori. There are more than 22 rural Yezidi settlements in Armenia; and in Aragatsotn, for example, there are around 19 Yezidi villages. The largest Yezidi village in Armenia, with around 4,300 residents, is Verin Artashat (in Ararat). Some of the other Yezidi villages are RyaTaza, Jamshlu, Shenkani, Derek, Avshen, Sadunts, Sangyar and Sipan in the Aragats district; Baysz, Metsadzor, Barozh, Gyalto, Tlik, Gabaghtapa and Sorik in the Talin district; Shamiram in the Ashtarak district; and Yeraskhahun and Ferik in the Etchmiadzin district. In 1917, many Yezidis living in the Ottoman Empire had to leave the Kars vilayet and settle in today's Armenian Aparan and Talin regions and in several settlements in the Ararat valley. As a result, contemporary Yezidis in Armenia are represented by the Sipki, Hasni, Zukri, Ortli and Rashki tribes. The representatives of these tribes who had to remain in Turkey were mostly converted to Islam and assimilated with the Kurds.

During the Soviet period, Yezidis were registered as Kurds and weren't considered a separate ethno-religious minority, unlike in contemporary Armenia where Kurds and Yezidis are registered as different nations. The Kurds of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, who were living outside their historical motherland, organized themselves and created their own institutional bodies to preserve their ethnic identity, language and cultural values.

Ironically, the Soviet era was a turning point for Armenian Kurds/Yezidis in terms of discovering and studying their own history and culture, as well as maintaining their ethno-cultural identity by practicing their language, religion and culture freely. The Kurdish/Yezidi minority was one of the largest in Soviet Armenia. According the census of 1926, there were 15,262 Kurds/Yezidis, making up 1.7 per cent of Armenia's population, and by 1989 the number had risen to 56,127 or 1.6 per cent of the population (Hakobyan 2016).

It is noteworthy that the first Yezidi school in Armenia was opened in 1920, and the *Shams* (Sun) alphabet textbook was created in 1921 by Armenian scholar Hagop 'Lazo' Ghazaryan. The first film about Kurdish life, called *Zareh* (1925), was also shot in Armenia. In 1930 the first Kurmanji newspaper, *Ria Taza* (New Path), was established by Armenian writers Hrachya Kochar and Harutyun Mkrtchyan to publish the literary works of Kurdish/Yezidi writers. In 1934, the Kurdish branch of the Armenian Writer's Union was established. More than 50,000 books in Kurmanji, Armenian and Russian were published on all aspects of Kurdish/Yezidi culture and distributed worldwide (Abrahamian 1992). The first Kurdish/Yezidi State Theatre, Alagyaz, was also formed in Armenia. Later, in 1955, Kurmanji Radio Hour broadcasted its first programme; it continues to operate daily to this day. Public Radio of Armenia is the only state radio station with programmes in Kurmanji, which has made it possible to keep up contact between Armenian and Kurdish communities abroad and stimulate the formation of national self-consciousness among Kurds.

In the 1970s, Yerevan State University opened a Kurdish Studies Department, which was later closed due to a lack of enrolment. In 1969, a Kurdish Studies Department was also founded within the larger Institute of Oriental Studies at the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, which did research on Kurdish/Yezidi history, philology, culture, Armeno–Kurdish/Yezidi relations, etc.

In 1988, along with perestroika and the process of reassessing national and religious identity, a strong Yezidi movement led by Yezidi religious leaders Azize Amar, Karame Salon, Sheikh Hasane Mahmood Tamoyan and Hasane Hasanyan began in Armenia. Their goal was to be officially recognized by the government as their own ethnicity, separate from the Kurds. As a result of the third All-Armenian Yezidi Assembly on 30 September 1989, the Yezidis were registered as a separate minority in the 1989 USSR population census. Thus, 88 per cent of those formerly classified as Kurds identified themselves as Yezidi, aiming to be represented separately from Muslim Kurds (Asatrian and Arakelova 2002). In order to restore their national and religious identity, leaders of the Yezidi community (under Sheikh Hasane's initiative) opened their own school in Yerevan in 1990, and in 1991 began to publish a separate bi-weekly newspaper, *Dinge Yezdi* (Yezidi Voice). On the other side, Kurds began to issue *Zagros* (formerly called *Mesopotamia*), the official magazine of The National Council of Kurds in Armenia. Both *Zagros* and *Ria Taza* exist thanks to community contributions and annual support from the Armenian state budget. The newspapers reflect upon issues within the community and developments in the Kurdish problem in the region.

Nine new Yezidi and Kurdish NGOs were then established (Ministry of Culture of RA n.d.) and the Yezidi Clerical Council was registered at the Committee of Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of Armenia. As of 2016, the Yezidi community is represented in almost all public sectors. There are a great number of Yezidi NGOs, such as the Yezidi National Committee, the World Union of Yezidis, the Yezidi National Union of Armenia and the World, the Yezidi National Union, Sinjar Yezidi National Union, Media-Shangal Yezidi National Union and others. In parallel, there are several Kurdish NGOs operating in Armenia: the Kurdistan Committee, the Organization of Kurdish Intellectuals and the National Council of Kurds in Armenia. The latter now coordinates the works of the other organizations.

Due to Armenia's tolerant national and religious minority policy, Yezidis do not feel discriminated against and share equal rights with citizens of Armenian descent (personal interviews with W. Eşo, 19/6/2014, B. Murazi, 18/2/2015, K. Hasanov, 3/6/2014). They have always integrated well into Armenian society and had freedom of religion and non-interference in their cultural traditions; according to them, the Armenian government does not treat the Armenian majority preferentially. In 2006, UNICEF supported the Armenian government's project to publish a textbook for ethnic minorities, and new Yezidi language (Yezdiki) textbooks were published and distributed among Yezidi schools around the country in 2007. On 29 September 2012,

the Zariat temple, the first Yezidi temple outside of their homeland in Lalish, was opened in Armenia's Armavir province. The construction of this temple was financed by a Russian Yezidi from Yaroslavl. The 2007 US Department of State Human Rights Report states: 'As in previous years, Yezidi leaders did not complain that police and local authorities subjected their community to discrimination' (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2008). The only problems they indicate are of a socioeconomic nature, but Yezidis and Armenians both suffer from the same economic hardships (Yoffe 2007). Moreover, Yezidis confirm that Armenia was one of very few states to help the Yezidis in preserving their cultural and religious identity and traditions.

However, one of the main problems for Yezidis is underrepresentation in the legislative and executive bodies of Armenia. There are also some reports of Yezidis wanting to immigrate to Europe, particularly to Germany, because of discrimination and persecution, although in practice this may be part of a strategy of inventing anti-Yezidi stories in order to receive beneficial refugee status in the EU (Yoffe 2007).

Armenian and Turkish policy towards Kurdish/Yezidi groups

Perceptions of soft power policy are linked to the state's use of a number of different cultural manipulation mechanisms to serve its own political interests. In this context, the aforementioned fluid identifications can be viewed as a good basis for manipulative policies. The following analysis will show how Kurdish and Yezidi groups became the objects of national policies. We concentrate especially on soft power policies in contrast to military power. We will separately analyze first Armenian and then Turkish policy.

The nature of Armenia's state soft power policy is debatable, depending on one's point of view. There have been several reports in recent media on the Armenian state's possible involvement in Kurdish/Yezidi ethno-religious fragmentation, claiming that Armenia is realizing a soft power policy to divide the Kurdish nation. These claims were also made by some of our interviewees, who reported cases of government support for Yezidi national and religious identity, considering it implementation of a unique domestic soft power policy. For example, some of them point out the approval of the construction of a Yezidi shrine in the Armavir region and the support for Yezidi schools and kindergartens.

However, it is not logical to regard the Armenian internal soft power policy as splitting the Kurd/Yezidi identity, given that the Yezidi identity already has a long history in Northern Iraq, where they are autochthonous. Because of their national and religious Yezidi identity, they have been persecuted and brutally slaughtered by ISIS in the Sinjar Mountains since summer 2014 (as of late 2016, the number Yezidi of victims is reported to be around 17,000). Many women and young Yezidi girls (9–14 years old) were captured, enslaved and raped by Islamists. Hundreds of Yezidi families fled to Turkey and settled in refugee camps in Batman and Silopi.

These claims about Armenia's policy of support for Yezidi culture view it as destructive towards the Kurdish/Yezidi community, rather than as an important step towards democracy and human rights development in Armenia and towards recognition of the Yezidis' right to ethnic and religious self-identification.

Our research among Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi community, involving social and political leaders and experts, shows a rather paradoxical case of Armenia not having a coordinated or clearly formed soft power policy towards the Kurdish/Yezidi community. Joseph Nye's original "soft power" concept is not always applicable to the few existent cases or political situations, as they are not state-directed and continuous. The lack of a structured soft power policy can be considered poor strategic planning in need of improvement on the part of post-Soviet Armenia. So, we can conclude that there is no significant coordinated soft power policy implemented by the Armenian state towards the Kurdish/Yezidi community.

In contrast to Armenia, where the Yezidis are a small minority (1.3 per cent), Kurds compose approximately 18 per cent of the total population of Turkey[6] and are concentrated in the southeastern vilayets (districts) where they compose the absolute majority: Diyarbakir, Bitlis, Van, Siirt, Shanliurfa, Mardin, Batman, Ağri, Mush, Erzurum and Hakkâri. Standards of living in the above-mentioned vilayets have been four to five times lower than the middle standard of living in Turkey for decades, as a consequence of discriminatory economic policies implemented by the government (Hasratyan 1990). Approximately 60–70 per cent of the population here is mainly engaged in agriculture. As a rule, large enterprises compose a very small percentage (McDowall 2007). Despite the refugees from Iraq, there is only a small number of people identifying as Yezidi living in Turkey today, reportedly 5,000 people (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2013). They mainly reside in southeastern Turkey in Yezidi villages and in Batman and Mardin. According to the data of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, around 37,000 Yezidis lived in Turkey in 1912 (Prothero 1920).

The Kurds' relationship with the Turkish government has been very difficult and contradictory since the formation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. The Lausanne Peace Conference de jure denied Kurdish ethnic identity within the newly-formed state. As a result, Kurds, being Muslims, did not get the status of a national minority. This issue deepened after 3 March 1924, when Atatürk abolished the Ottoman Caliphate. With the separation of religion and state, Islam became less important to the Turkish state-building process. Thus, the last ideological link connecting Kurds and Turks and the most important symbol of Turkish–Kurdish brotherhood was eliminated (Tan 2010).

It is hard to disentangle Kurdish and Islamic sentiment in the first insurrection against Atatürk's regime, but the attachment to Islam in these insurrections took the form of attachment to an Islamic leader, usually a *tariqat* sheikh. Generally, the religiosity of the (Sunni) Kurds is expressed

through their loyalty to a sheikh. Modernist and fundamentalist currents in Islam have not made serious progress among the Kurds.

Kurds began to distrust the Turkish state, which had made Turkism the state ideology instead of religion. Though Kurds composed the majority of the population of the eastern vilayets, the Kurdish language and Kurdish culture in all its forms were prohibited. The Kurds were theoretically considered "Turks", but were deprived of their national and civil rights and were still practically being considered "Kurds". Turkish propaganda activities took huge strides towards implementing this policy. Historiography, literature and media tried in various ways to prove that Kurds had Turkish–Oghuz origins.

The policy of assimilation and negligence towards the rights of national minorities was always part of the constitutions of the Republic of Turkey.[7] Before the AKP came to power, the government's approach to the Kurdish issue was a 'policy of denial, oppression, fear and assimilation' (Tan 2010, p. 252–253). Especially in the developed western regions of the country, where Turkish customs and traditions were dominant, most Kurds assimilated into Turkish society. They took on Turkish traditions, began to dress like Turks, spoke Turkish and lost their national self-definition. Thus, the state realized a clearly designed strict assimilation policy towards Kurdish national self-consciousness (Barkey and Fuller 1998).

However, some Kurds resisted Turkish policy with the help of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has organized the most comprehensive and long-lasting Kurdish movement in Turkey in the last few centuries. The key to the PKK's success is that it refused the religious, tribal principle typical of Kurdish political groups and based its activities on Kurdish national self-definition. It's indisputable that the PKK had a primary role in awakening Kurdish national self-consciousness.

Coming to power in Turkey in 2002–2003, the AKP opened a new phase for the Kurdish people. The Islamic factor and general democratic liberties were integrated into Turkey's Kurdish policy. This was quite a bold step, considering that it contradicted the principle of laicism, one of the main doctrines of Kemalism. Over the previous few centuries, ideas for a solution to the Kurdish problem were the subject of broad inner political and public discussion in Turkey. The new AKP policy had certain results: the abolition of the taboo around Kurds and new geopolitical developments gave Kurds in Turkey a chance to establish their ethnic identity and be successfully integrated into regional activities. They also try to carry out their own ethnic and religious soft power policies towards the Kurdish communities in neighbouring countries. The AKP has a large number of Kurdish voters, conditioned by the socioeconomic reforms carried out by the government in the regions populated by Kurds. The AKP even began successful negotiations with the PKK, resulting in a declaration of peace (Alasor and Sarkisian 2015).

It was obvious that the Turkish government was trying to achieve its objectives through interactions with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. The negotiations between the AKP and Ocalan in 2013 resulted in Ocalan

declaring a ceasefire and the PKK starting to leave the territory of Turkey. These negotiations were conducted by the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), led by Hakan Fidan.

On 7 February 2016, then-Prime Minister Davutoğlu announced in Mardin that Abdullah Ocalan will not participate in the regulatory process of the Kurdish issue. After isolating Ocalan, the Turkish government launched major military actions against the PKK and political persecution towards the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

During the recent armed conflicts, 483 Turkish soldiers were killed and 2,859 were injured. According to the official Turkish data on armed actions against the Kurds, 7,078 Kurdish guerrillas were killed, including PKK losses during a Turkish Air Force bombing in Iraqi Kurdistan (Hürriyet 2016). It is clear that since the snap elections in November, the political situation has changed and Erdoğan has developed a new plan for the Kurdish issue.

Foreign soft power-policy towards the Kurdish/Yezidi community in Armenia

The Kurdish/Yezidi minority in Armenia is at the crossroads of different political interests and is therefore the object of different actors' policies. In the following section, we will examine the different aspects of any potential soft power policy implemented towards Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi community.

According to data collected during our fieldwork in Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi villages in the Kotayk, Shirak and Aragatsotn provinces, cooperation between Armenia's and Turkey's Yezidis is intertribal and personal in nature. Despite affiliation to the same tribes, relations between Armenia's Yezidis and Turkey's assimilated Kurds were disrupted by their religious differences. However, some interpersonal communications among Yezidi groups have been restored. Boris Murazi, the president of the Sinjar Yezidi National Union NGO in Armenia, stated in his interview that he has visited the Yezidi refugee camp in Batman, Turkey several times, has personal contacts there and sometimes engages in cooperation with them. His latest trip was several months ago, after the August 2014 events in Sinjar, Iraq, when he visited Batman with a group of activists to bring humanitarian aid and moral support to those in survival camps. Thus, we can state that there is cooperation between Yezidis in Armenia and Turkey, but not systematically.

On the other hand, cooperation between Armenian and Iraqi Yezidis seems to have broadened in recent years, both at the state level and personally or socially. Formal meetings between Armenian and Northern Iraqi statesmen have taken place in Yerevan and Erbil on a periodic basis. In the context of developing political and economic cooperation between Armenia and Northern Iraq, a decision has been made to open an Armenian consulate in Erbil. In addition, regular Yerevan–Baghdad–Erbil flights began to operate on 26 February 2015.

State policy, in turn, results in an intention to develop ties on a personal and social basis. Armenian Yezidi youth, especially those involved in local NGOs, seem to have a willingness for broader communication with the Iraqi Yezidi minority, as they feel more emotionally connected to them than to Turkey's Yezidis.

The closed border between Turkey and Armenia makes any direct cooperation difficult. For this reason, there is evidence that communication between the Kurds on either side of the Araks river is primarily coordinated through transnational Kurdish organizations based in EU countries and elsewhere.

The main discussions are about the transnationally organized PKK having contact with Armenia's Kurds/Yezidis or even having a presence in Armenia. During our interviews and informal talks, we found no empirical evidence of the PKK's presence in Armenia. The PKK is a political organization with strong military elements, which is also recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey and many other states, so its presence in Armenia does not correspond to Turkish state interests in the present geopolitical situation. Considering the existence of its Kurdish minority, Armenia may be reluctantly drawn into the Kurdish problem in Turkey. At the same time, there is an internal barrier to PKK penetration: Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi community has no great interest in the PKK's activities. Still, there is some indication that the PKK is implementing a soft power policy towards Armenia's Kurds/Yezidis. During our interviews, several Kurds/Yezidis stated that the PKK is trying to influence their community's youth through Kurdish organizations based in European countries (such as the Kurdish Institute of Paris, Kurdish Institute of Brussels[8], etc.) by offering them education and work opportunities in Europe. Several Yezidis also said that different European Kurdish organizations have offered them financial support for propagating the ideologies of the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. These Yezidis not only refused, but were deeply offended. They viewed it as a dishonour to their identity and religion and an attempt at assimilation. On the other hand, Brussels-based pro-PKK Kurds expressed their concerns about Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi community during informal talks, claiming that Yezidis are ethnic Kurds who should not identify themselves separately, and Yezidism is the original religion of ancient Kurdish people. Thus, the PKK uses the ethnic factor as one of its most powerful soft power tools to emotionally impact the Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi community, while downplaying the religious factor.

The PKK's main interest in Armenia's Yezidi/Kurdish community is to influence them ideologically and use them in pro-PKK projects, keeping in mind the possibility of the future creation of Kurdistan and the opportunity to use Armenia's Kurdish factor to that end. However, as noted above, they don't achieve the desired results because Armenia's Yezidis prefer to emphasize their ethno-religious identity as an established and respected national minority in Armenia.

So, we can state that one of the main obstacles for cooperation between Turkey's and Armenia's Kurds/Yezidis is the major difference in religious

discourse, specifically Yezidism vs. Sunni Islam, which affects perceived identity and enlarges the ideological gap between them.

Concerning the relations between Armenia's (non-Yezidi) Kurds and the PKK and Turkey's Kurdish parties, there might be some contact on a personal level, but there are no organizational connections. This is evidenced by European Kurdish NGO members expressing their disappointment with Armenia's Kurdish community, which is not willing to cooperate with them.

There are nonetheless some interpersonal communications between the Kurds/Yezidis living in Turkey and in Armenia. Kurdish scholars such as Yaşar Kemal and politicians such as Osman Baydemir have visited Armenia and its Kurdish/Yezidi community over the last several years to try to find ways to cooperate with Armenia-based Kurdish/Yezidi organizations. This shows that despite the closed borders and Kurdish/Yezidi ethno-religious discourse, some cooperation exists between Turkey's and Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi people.

Thus, we can conclude that in this context, religion is implemented as soft power in two ways: towards and by Kurdish/Yezidi people. The Kurdish/Yezidi transnational organizations, such as NGOs, private universities and schools, foundations and media try to implement a "state-like" policy towards the global Kurdish/Yezidi population, often using elements of soft power. This is usually realized through EU-based organizations, due to the rather large and influential Kurdish/Yezidi communities in Europe. We have done research on the most active Kurdish institutions—the Kurdish Institute of Paris in France and the Kurdish Institute in Brussels—as well as had meetings and informal workshops with Kurdish community leaders and representatives, academics and journalists. What we found is that Kurdish, pro-PKK organizations are bigger and more widely represented in France, Belgium, Sweden, Germany and Austria. Moreover, most of the EU-based Kurdish organizations are propagating PKK ideology and Kurdish nationalism. Their main target groups are Kurds/Yezidis living in the EU, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Armenia is also targeted, but not as much, because of the small size of its Kurdish/Yezidi minority and lowered expectations of its influence. According to personal meetings and workshops in the Kurdish Institute of Paris and Kurdish Studies Institute in Brussels, the interests of these two organizations are much more connected to Turkey's Kurds than to Armenia's. Meanwhile, both have personal contacts with the Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi community and occasionally try to implement small-scale educational projects and student exchanges to attract Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi youth. However, they are not satisfied with the reaction in the Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi minority because the predominant Yezidi community in Armenia often rejects any EU-based pro-PKK Kurdish support, preferring better and more developed cooperation with the German and Northern Iraqi Yezidi minority. European Yezidis mainly reside and organize in Germany, and they support the Yezidi identity formation that has become a mark against Kurdish nationalist identity formation over the last few years.

One of the main barriers for the realization of this Kurdish soft power policy is the identity of Yezidism, which has a closed community structure and is hardly open to foreign penetration. Kurdish organizations from Turkey and the EU are trying to realize consistent soft power policies towards Armenia's Yezidis, using ideological, cultural and linguistic factors as psychological tools to convert them to Kurdish identity. At the same time, Armenia's (non-Yezidi) Kurdish community is not of great interest for the external influence of non-Armenian Kurds, because of its small numbers (around 2,100 people in all of Armenia). Therefore, Kurds from outside Armenia are more interested in the Yezidis, who are Armenia's largest minority group. The efforts and policies towards Armenian Yezidis haven't had noticeable results yet, because the strong religious identity of the Yezidis acts as a barrier against external influences.

Conclusion

Religious and ethnic identities play influential roles in how nations and NGOs are politically positioned towards the Kurdish conflict, and how Kurdish groups are allied across different nations. The dual religious–ethnic identity is a real barrier for Kurdish nation-building, and is thus easily subjected to foreign influence. Religion is one element of identity that can be particularly manipulative. The religious differences amongst the Kurds (Naqshbandi, Nurcu, Yezidi, Alevi, etc.) are potent ways to influence and gain leverage over the Kurdish community and are used by both the Turkish authorities and external powers to control and guide Kurdish processes for their own political gains and interests. This is especially relevant in the communities that are still in the process of identity formation. These fluid identities are the main targets for soft power policies.

The original understanding of 'soft power', as an element of a state's foreign policy, is seemingly not quite applicable to this study because Kurds do not have a state. However, the analysis shows how the religious factor can become an element of international relations even among non-state actors. Thus, we can consider this a specific case of soft power transformation and draw the following conclusions.

Generally, unclear or fluid ethnic and religious identity markers can become a matter of division because of the regional political situation. In this context, the PKK and Kurdish transnational organizations primarily support Kurdish ethno-nationalism. In terms of Turkey's minority policy, there is a new tendency in recent years towards acceptance of religious minorities, including Yezidis and Alevis. This can divide the larger Kurdish community into smaller subgroups, thus acting against national consolidation around the PKK. Religion is used as an instrument of soft power in the AKP's Kurdish policy to separate the Kurdish community from the PKK. Therefore, Turkey realizes a fluid and situational policy towards Kurds and Kurdish trans-national organizations using Islam as a soft power tool.

At the same time, the Armenian state supports Yezidi identity as a specific ethno-religious identity. Consequently, Yezidis integrate in Armenia and only loosely cooperate with Kurdish groups outside Armenia. Thus, religious identity turns out to be a relevant factor in transnational soft power policies.

Notes

1 The term "Sufi" was first applied to Muslim ascetics who clothed themselves in coarse garments of wool (*şüūf*). From this comes the form *taşawwuf* for "mysticism". (Trimingham 1971)
2 This movement has quite an influential ideological foundation, based on Said Nursi's renowned work *Risale-i-Nur* (Letters of Divine Light), which is a 6,000-page interpretation of the Qur'an. Nursi's followers are called Nurcular (from the word *nur* meaning "light") and the movement is called Nurcemaat.
3 On 15–16 July 2016, President Erdoğan blamed F. Gülen and the movement he led for the attempted military coup in Turkey, which was followed by the political persecution and arrests of those people who had had any connection to the movement.
4 There are varying points of view in the academic discourse on the origins of Alevism. In particular, one view says that it did not originate as a division of Islam but rather formed over a number of years as a result of the fusion of Christianity—including Christian sects—and Islam, carrying over the influence of some pagan traditions as well. This explains the presence of different elements of those religious denominations in the Alevi creed and ceremonies. There does not exist a single accepted version of the etymology and origins of the name "Alevi". The Alevis themselves cannot clearly define the history of their name. A majority of them link it to the name of the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, Ali, who is also the husband of his daughter Fatima, thus explaining the major influence of Shi'ism on Alevism.
5 Kurdish tribes had come from Safavid Persia and mandatorily wore red headdresses, which they would wrap in such a way as to produce 12 layers, each bearing one of the names of the 12 imams. Later, the name Qizilbash took on a negative and pejorative meaning, perceived as a "faithless rebel" or an "immoral person." Bektashi is related to the name of one of the main saints of Alevism, Haji Bektash Veli. According to tradition, he is from the tribe of Ali. Perhaps the main reason for linking Alevism to Ali is the need to not be perceived by the Sunnis as unreligious or faithless. We should note that both Turkish society and the authorities have always had different attitudes towards the Qizilbash and the Bektashi. The latter enjoy a more respected status.
6 It is practically impossible to present data on the Kurdish population of Turkey as the official data and the numbers from the Kurdish side do not match. The perceptions of the "Kurdish community" are also diametrically opposed. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, there are 22,691,824 Kurds in Turkey, mostly born in Kurdish cities in the southeast of the country. Therefore, out of Turkey's 74.7 million citizens, more than 30 per cent are Kurds. These records only include people who have been registered at official government institutions (Dakak 2012).
7 Article 88 of the 1924 Constitution: 'The name Turk as a political term shall be understood to include all citizens of the Turkish Republic, without distinction of, or reference to, race and religion (…)' (Earle 1925). 'Everyone bound to the Turkish State through the bond of citizenship is a Turk. The child of a Turkish father or a Turkish mother is a Turk'. (Sentence repealed on October 3, 2001; Act No. 4709)

(Article 66 of the current Constitution as of 2016) www.anayasa.gov.tr/icsayfalar/mevzuat/1982anayasas%C4%B1.html.

8 The Kurdish Institute of Brussels was established in 1978. Its goal is to foster cultural and social development of the Kurdish community in Belgium and in Kurdistan. The Kurdish Institute of Brussels is recognized by multiple government ministries and the city of Brussels. It collaborates with research units at universities and high schools, cultural and community centers, peace organizations, human rights organizations and NGOs. See www.kurdishinstitute.be/kurdish-institute-of-brussels-1/

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8 Iran's soft power policy in Armenia
Cultural diplomacy and religion

Tatevik Mkrtchyan

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic of Iran has emerged as one of the main reliable allies of the Republic of Armenia. Armenia's main southern transit route and strategic access to Asia and the Middle East passes through Iran, while there is no eastward or westward access due to the blockaded borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan on either side (Ministry of Defence 2007). Iran recognized Armenia's independence three months after its declaration in 1991, and since then the two countries have strengthened their political relationship time and again. They have committed themselves to numerous common projects in the economic, cultural and educational fields as well as in the spheres of energy, sport, environmental protection, healthcare, agriculture and interprovincial relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012).

On the website of the Ministry of Foreign affairs of Armenia, there are more than 80 signed documents (memoranda and bilateral projects) in the abovementioned spheres. Thus, the Republic of Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran are strategic partners in the region and their relations can be described as extremely cordial. From the start of their diplomatic relations, the two countries have had no border or economic disputes and no ethnic or religious rivalries. Armenia–Iran relations have a long history and strong potential for further development. This assessment is uncontroversial within both the Armenian population and the expert community.

This chapter will focus on one specific aspect of Armenia–Iran bilateral relations: the role of religion as one of the cultural variables of Iran's soft power in Armenia. Iran's soft power in Armenia is part of Iran's broader Islamic-cultural foreign policy, which is implemented through sociocultural and scholarly activities. In this chapter, the motives and factors affecting Iran's cultural policy in Armenia, which can be considered cultural diplomacy, will be analyzed to identify the specific ways in which religion is integrated into this policy.

Cultural diplomacy, a type of public diplomacy and soft power, includes the 'exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding' (Waller 2008, p. 74). The idea that successful cultural diplomacy can promote

better understanding of a country is not new. Mitchell (1986) characterizes cultural diplomacy by saying that it is essentially involved in strengthening a country's cultural influence, by funding touring artists or promoting the study of the country's language and culture in universities abroad, for example. The purpose of cultural diplomacy is for the people of a foreign nation to develop an understanding of the nation's own ideals and institutions, in an effort to build broad support for its economic and political goals. In essence, 'cultural diplomacy reveals the soul of a nation', which in turn creates influence (Nye 2004). Though often overlooked, cultural diplomacy (as a way to enhance soft power) can and does play an important role in achieving national security aims. Joseph Nye (2004) underlines the significance of public diplomacy, since soft power grows out of culture, out of domestic values and policies and out of foreign policy.

By the definition used in this chapter, soft power draws on 'the national resources that can lead to a country's ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes' (Nye 2011, p. 20–21). Hard power is a country's economic and military ability to buy and coerce, and soft power is the ability to attract through cultural and ideological appeal (Nye 2004). Soft power is something that policymakers can actively pursue by linking resources to expected outcomes and thus facilitating attraction (Nye 2005). The nature of soft power is deeply social and responsive to the existing expectations of multiple actors. A successful agent of soft power has to be aware of and sensitive to the demands of its specific context. Soft power implies agenda-setting and communication with other actors, functioning in an interactive milieu and in constant communication with other powers. Each country applies its soft power in a socially complex milieu that consists of multiple interactions between rivals, partners or opponents. Soft power is always relational and contextual, and its success directly depends upon its incorporation into the fabric of international society (Kornilov and Makarychev 2014).

Some scholars emphasize that the importance of the international cultural agenda depends on the developments of the information age, because cultural products are increasingly swept into the transnational communication and economic flows caused by globalization (Kim 2011). Particularly, Nye and Owens (1996) stressed that 'to be culturally powerful—or even culturally significant—in today's world, a country must exercise control over these flows', meaning that cultural diplomacy can be defined as the politicization of culture by foreign policy. Cultural diplomacy in the information age uses information technology, and Iran's case is very interesting in this regard. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has repeatedly stressed the importance of cyberspace for creating a shield to 'prevent youth from being led astray' by 'worldwide fallacies', and has proclaimed this as 'the first responsibility of the scholarly and religious society—the clergy' (Ayatollah Khamenei 2016). Particularly, he said: 'today, cyberspace is like an endless desert from all whose

sides we can move forward (…). Every person who can work with a computer is a medium' (ibid.). The newly created Supreme Council of Cyberspace has been declared equipped with the necessary knowledge and capabilities to share and spread true knowledge and information. Moreover, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, in a meeting with the officials, directors and members of the IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) supervisory board, elucidated the objectives of the 'planned, extensive and all-out soft war of the hegemonic system against the Islamic Republic, saying that changing people's beliefs is the most important objective of this sophisticated war'. Stressing the unique role of IRIB in this serious battle, Ayatollah Khamenei underscored the necessity of shrewd and meticulous planning for the fulfilment of its responsibilities (Leader.ir 2015). Thus, this chapter will also include radio broadcasting and various websites as tools of Iranian soft power.

One of the difficulties in the literature related to soft power is that it focuses on the attempts to influence and/or the results of soft power. Both are difficult to measure, especially in terms of influencing how a foreign country sets its agenda or its preferences, as we cannot know for sure what led to a change in these areas. I argue that one can learn more about a country's foreign policy from its soft power capabilities and activities than from its de facto influence (such as agenda setting which is difficult to observe). Thus, this article focuses on the resources and capabilities of Iranian soft power in Armenia. In this chapter, soft power is viewed as one of the tools that Iran uses in its foreign policy. Iranian culture, including its religion, is the medium through which the Iranian state supports a positive perception of itself in Armenia. Interestingly, Iran's approach to public diplomacy is not a simple image-making policy, but rather stems from US-based research centres. The Western concept of soft power fits Iran's anti-Western policymaking well. It is largely cultural and mostly reflects on Persian heritage with some references to Shi'a Islam that will be the focus of this chapter.

In describing and examining Iran's activities, we will answer the following question: which instruments does Iran deploy in Armenia? In particular, we will analyze religion's role and the way it is implemented in Iran's cultural diplomacy. Given that there is no major Islamic community in Armenia, Iran's policy cannot be considered to primarily support Shi'ism there. Furthermore, the basis for missionizing in Armenia is low compared to other countries with large Muslim populations. The case of Iran's soft power policy in Armenia will demonstrate that the role of religion in transnational relations can be limited for cultural and civilizational relations.

The data for this research stem from official governmental publications in Armenian, including reports and the latest documentation of political and cultural relations between Iran and Armenia, as well as the websites of ICRO.ir and of the Iranian cultural attaché in Armenia. The radio broadcasting websites IRIB.ir and Parstoday.com in Armenian are also some of the main research sources. Armenian news websites are the sources for media coverage of Iranian activities in Armenia.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, the historical and geopolitical background of bilateral relations will be discussed. Second, specific Iranian tools of cultural diplomacy and soft power policy in Armenia will be analyzed, focusing on the role of religion. The final part of this chapter will analyze the means and performance of Iran's cultural diplomacy in Armenia.

Historical and geopolitical background

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has reoriented its foreign policy towards actively spreading Shi'a Islam and supporting Iranian-style Shi'ism in foreign countries. However, foreign policy is not limited to the ideological component. When the countries of the South Caucasus became independent in the 1990s, Iran's foreign policy pragmatically evaluated the geopolitical situation. Georgia, becoming strongly allied with the West, was not a possible partner, and Iran's relationship with Azerbaijan was difficult. In contrast, Armenia was an attractive partner. The development of positive neighbourly relations between Armenia and Iran is based on a number of components (Mkrtchyan 2015, pp. 226–228). The following section of this chapter focuses on two aspects: their respective diasporas and the geopolitical constellation.

First, the two diaspora communities provide an economic and cultural link between the two countries. In particular, the presence of the Armenian community in Iran is an important element of Tehran's bilateral relationship with Armenia. For centuries, a sizeable and fairly prosperous Armenian community has resided in Iran. Around 100,000 Armenians are now reportedly living in Iran, most of them in Tehran. Moreover, the Armenian Apostolic Church of Iran has between 100,000 and 250,000 adherents, making it the largest Christian minority in the country (Moniquet and Racimora 2013, p. 5). The actual population of today's Iranian Armenian community varies according to different estimates from 70,000–90,000 (Abrahamyan 2010) to 120,000 (Vardanyan 2007) to 150,000 (Semirdjian 2013) to around 200,000 (Mirzoyan 2010). Despite the confusion over numbers, one area of agreement is that the Armenian community of Iran has continuously enjoyed a certain amount of political, religious and cultural protection. Armenians in Iran are recognized as a religious rather than national minority, including guaranteed representation in the parliament and in the local councils. There are more than 200 churches across the country. Christmas is officially recognized although it is not a national holiday, and it is not uncommon to see decorated Christmas trees in the streets of north-western Tehran during the holiday season.

In contrast, the Iranian minority in Armenia is small. According to the 2011 census, which included an optional question on religious affiliation, the number of Muslims in Armenia was 812, which is 0.027 per cent of the total population. However, various research publications, as well as information provided by non-governmental organizations, estimate the number of Muslims in Armenia to be around 8,000, where 80 per cent of them are resident non-citizens who stay in Armenia for extended periods of time. The majority of

these Muslims are from Iran; others come from elsewhere in the Middle East and India. Most of them are businessmen, students or diplomats. The ratio of Shi'as to Sunnis is about 3:1.[1]

According to Article 17.2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, the church should be separate from the state. Freedom of activities should be guaranteed for all religious organizations in accordance with the law (Armenian Constitution 2015, Article 17.1). However, the Republic of Armenia recognizes the exclusive historical mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church as a national church for spiritual life, the development of national culture and the preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia (Armenian Constitution 2015, Article 18.1). There is no law, or any other legal framework, that applies specifically to Islam. There are no rules restricting Muslim dress in public. In the streets of Yerevan as well as in the regions bordering Iran, people wearing hijab and other elements of Muslim dress can be seen; they are mainly students, tourists or employees of diplomatic missions from Muslim countries and their family members. Furthermore, Muslim monuments are included in the list of sites of historic and architectural value that are protected and maintained by the state. As then-Minister of Culture Hasmik Poghosyan stated in 2013, 'Armenia will take any possible steps for the [inclusion] of the Iranian Blue Mosque of Yerevan into the UNESCO List of Cultural Heritage' (Armenpress 2013).

In addition to the diasporas, there are geopolitical and economic reasons for the Armenia–Iran partnership. For Iran, good relations with Christian Armenia create a positive international image, and tiny Armenia became a means of global reconnection for Iran considering its almost 30 years of isolation. For Armenia, the relationship with Iran presents an opportunity to gain approval from other Islamic countries and was seen as helpful during the difficult time at the beginning of Armenian independence. Many Armenians think that Iran has played the role of Armenia's "lifeline", especially in the years of the Nagorno-Karabakh War.

After gaining independence, Armenia gradually began to establish close, friendly relations with Iran in all spheres. Leaders of both countries welcomed the strengthening of their relationship on many occasions and committed themselves to numerous flagship projects in the fields of transport and energy. At present, the Armenia–Iran intergovernmental commission has a serious role in arranging their bilateral economic relations. It has indicated arrangements in the fields of trade and economy, banking affairs, transport and communication, agriculture, healthcare, etc. The first session of the intergovernmental joint commission for the coordination of Armenia–Iran relations was held in 1995, and the 13th session was held in 2015 in Yerevan.

Bilateral trade between Iran and Armenia has been expanding steadily for several years now, as the two countries have dismantled barriers for their respective goods. Interestingly, while economic developments and projects have their political calculations on both sides, in terms of investment the Iranian side has more leverage for expanding its economic projects with Armenia.

Following Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union in 2013, two major discourses appeared: one of new opportunities, if both sides are eager to expand their economic relations, and another about the obstacles which may hinder future economic ties. Many Iranian diplomats in Armenia stated that they are not satisfied with the trade index, saying that it should be at least three times higher (Armedia 2015). Experts explain this as less based on the dependence of bilateral relations and mutual interests, and more as a result of the interdependence of regional and global actors. For example, economic developments within the Armenia–Iran relationship cannot surpass the interests of Turkey and Russia. Nonetheless, trade turnover between the two countries has increased almost every year with some exceptions. According to the data provided by the Armenian National Statistical Service, trade between Armenia and Iran was $340 million in 2012, and $300 million in 2013. However, the index of foreign trade showed steady growth over the previous years (2009–2012). Although the trade numbers were lower from 2013 to 2015, the governments still want to strengthen their economic relationship.

The memorandum of understanding signed by the governments of the Republic of Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran on 5 June 2016, enacting a visa-free regime for the citizens of both countries, has been in force since 6 August 2016. Before this step, both sides repeatedly agreed that visa liberalization between Iran and Armenia would stimulate contacts between people, especially between business cycles, and would contribute to the development of tourism which is one of the prospective directions for bilateral relations.

Another prospective field of Armenia–Iran relations is military cooperation, which started in 2002 when the memorandum of understanding on military cooperation was signed (A1plus 2002). This cooperation had limited possibilities and a narrow scope, considering the sanctions imposed on Iran. Armenian Deputy Minister of Defence Davit Tonoyan stated in January 2016 that the dropping of sanctions creates a new basis for the expansion of relations with Iran in the areas of military and defence cooperation (*Armenian News* 2016).

Iran's view on Armenia–Iran military and defence cooperation falls within the framework of Iran's policy of all-round cooperation with the states of the region. On a visit to Yerevan in 2007, Iranian Defence Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar said,

> Iran attaches great importance to peace, stability and security in the region and we comprehend the necessity of such visits for strengthening relations with all states of the region. Iran–Armenia military cooperation is not aimed at third countries. (PanARMENIAN 2007)

Cultural diplomacy and religion

Backed by the two factors of diaspora relations and geopolitics, Iran has developed specific tools of cultural diplomacy and soft power in Armenia. Terms like "friendly", "very deep-rooted", "historical ties", "ancient ties" and

"very specific cultural proximity" are commonly used during the meetings of the presidents and foreign ministers of Iran and Armenia, as well as on their official websites. The cultural and civilizational proximity of the two nations is stressed during cultural events organized by both parties. Armenians and Iranians are presented as people who have long lived together peacefully, although historical memory recalls battles in the fifth century. The importance of such intercultural relations has always been stressed by both parties. The main idea behind this cultural diplomacy is that 'the relations formed in the sphere of culture provide a solid foundation for the development and deepening of Armenia–Iran relations in the political, economic and other spheres' (Armenian News 2015).[2] The deep-rooted intercultural relations between Iran and Armenia were also stressed during a meeting of the Catholicos of All Armenians and the minister of culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran on 11 July 2015 (The Armenian Church 2015).

Cultural diplomacy revolves around the themes of dialogue, understanding and trust. The goal of Iran's cultural diplomacy is to influence the Armenian audience and use that influence, which is built up over time, as a sort of goodwill reserve to win support for policies. It seeks to induce a positive view of the country's people, culture and politics. Through its cultural diplomacy in Armenia, Iran engenders greater cooperation between the two nations. Iranian cultural diplomacy also includes aid for changing the policies or political environment of the target nation, which in turn prevents, manages and mitigates conflict with that country.

As Armenia itself supports constructive relations with Iran in terms of geopolitics and economy, Iranian cultural diplomacy in Armenia is based on a positive footing. This policy encompasses presenting a comprehensive understanding of Islam and Iranian culture and civilization, promoting ethics and Islamic sciences, introducing celebrities and the grandeur of Islamic and Iranian history, building active contacts to strengthen the bonds of friendship, promoting knowledge of the Farsi language and literature, and last but not least encouraging the understanding of mutual cultures and human experiences.

Nevertheless, there is a difference of religion—which can be understood as a part of culture—between the two countries. In the case of Iranian soft power in Armenia, one can assume that religion plays an interesting role as an independent factor. Instead of creating difficulties, the religious difference has turned out to be a positive factor in bilateral relations. In spite of the long presence of Muslim authorities, the majority of Armenians have remained strongly attached to their Christianity and have not changed their religion throughout history. The two governments like to emphasize that "Christian Armenia" and "Islamic Iran" can maintain a positive relationship and that the two religions can live together peacefully. Shi'a Islam and Christianity were both considered minority cultures in the respective countries. Consequently, the parties mutually have no fear or need to influence the other party's religion, at least in terms of rhetoric. Moreover, while promoting and spreading

religious content in Armenia, Iranian efforts mainly emphasize the universal values and philosophical aspects of Shi'ism. In almost every speech by an Iranian supreme leader, president, cultural attaché or ambassador, one will hear of universal and common values for humanity (justice is one common theme). For example, Iranian Ambassador Seyyed Kazem Sajjad said at the commemoration of Ashura in the Blue Mosque: 'The Iranians respect the moral values and struggle for the justice (…). The aim of today's event is to show the whole world that Shi'ite Muslims are very peaceful and that they live next to Christian Armenians very peacefully and respect mutual religious rituals.'

The main institution responsible for the promotion of Iranian and Islamic culture abroad is the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), subordinate to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The purpose of the ICRO is to promote:

> [C]ultural ties with other nations and communities; consolidation of cultural ties of the Islamic republic of Iran with other nations; [offer] proper presentation of the Iranian culture and civilization; preparing the grounds for unity among Muslims; revival and promotion of Islamic culture and teachings in the world; and information dissemination about the principles and realities of the Islamic Revolution. (ICRO 2014).

The ICRO is Iran's de facto public and cultural diplomacy organization.

A brief look at the activities of the ICRO reveals that Iran is mostly interested in two types of activities. The first is cementing its cultural ties with its neighbours, and the second is introducing Iranian culture and history to countries in Africa and Europe. The ICRO's cultural centres engage in activities which reflect mostly on culture, religion and philosophy. Their cultural diplomacy includes Iranian music, film, calligraphy, painting and literature. Religious activities including Qur'an events and competitions, publication of books about Shi'ism, religious lectures and conferences are held under the umbrella of religious philosophy. Farsi language teaching is another dimension of cultural diplomacy which is very important in enhancing Iran's soft power. Last but not least is the support for academic Iranian and Islamic studies programs.

Before 2015, the Iranian Cultural Centre in Yerevan organized most of the events and activities. During the last two years, the Iranian Embassy in Armenia has become more active. The explanation for this is twofold: first, Armenia became a higher priority in Iran's foreign policy, and second, the newly appointed ambassador is more actively engaged in Armenia–Iran bilateral cooperation and is eager to expand mutual understanding and acknowledgement.

As a component of soft power in Armenia–Iran relations, religion is used as a cultural–religious tool rather than as a field of competing worldviews. When mentioned by Iran as an aspect of the Armenia–Iran relationship,

religious content is used to stress similarities and proximities in terms of culture and cultural values. They do not provide any Iranian religious education in the form of propaganda, promotion of Shi'a creeds or conversion of Christian Armenians to Islam. Instead, both sides emphasize that all activities are cultural interactions. The Islamic dimension is presumed not to be contradicting Christianity, but rather supporting Armenian values by sharing universal human similarities.

Means and performance of Iran's cultural diplomacy in Armenia

The cultural centres which constitute the backbone of Iran's cultural diplomacy are all sub-branches of the Islamic Cultural Relations Organization (ICRO). Thus, the Supreme Leader of Iran dispatches representatives to cultural organizations and Islamic centres abroad. In general, these centres cannot contradict their religious ideology and mainly have the same general framework, though the activities vary from country to country. Thus, in Armenia and partly in Georgia, they normally organize cultural events, language courses, bilingual translations, journal publication, conferences, and inter-religious and intercultural dialogue, while in Azerbaijan the religious aspect is given a special focus.

The Cultural Centre of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Armenia is a branch of the Iran-based ICRO. As mentioned on the organization's website, their main aim is the 'revival and dissemination of Islamic tenets and ideas with a view to spreading the true message of Islam to the people of the world' (ICRO 2014).

The Iranian Cultural Centre organizes the events for each year. Most of the cultural events and activities in Armenia are held in February, as a commemoration of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and/or in the beginning of June, as a commemoration of the death of Imam Khomeini.

The activities of the centre in Yerevan can be classified as either permanent or individually organized. In this section, I will discuss the Blue Mosque, Farsi courses, publication activities, radio broadcasting, academic conferences and other cultural activities including the Nowruz festival in Yerevan.

The Blue Mosque

In terms of both architecture and cultural activities, the so-called Blue Mosque in Yerevan is the centre of Shi'a Islam in Armenia. The mosque was built in 1766. During the Soviet era, the mosque cancelled its services and housed the History Museum of Yerevan. Following Armenia's independence, the mosque was renovated with support from the Iranian government and was considered a cultural centre until 2013. Since then, Iranians consider it a place of religious worship in addition to its cultural and educational roles. Moreover, a centre named Dar al-Qur'an was opened there in 2013.

The centre was founded for the purpose of conducting Qur'an study lessons for all Muslims, offering courses on the Qur'an and calligraphy and providing religious counselling (Ghazanchyan 2016, Erfan.ir 2010).

The Blue Mosque now functions as a mosque, mostly for Iranians residing in the country. It is currently the only active mosque in Armenia. Since 2013, there is a permanent imam from Iran who leads Friday prayers and religious festivals. Before 2013, the mullahs or imams came to the mosque temporarily for festivals, marriages or divorces. At the main entrance, there is a board with the following text in three languages (Armenian, Farsi and English): 'Activities: Religious ceremonies, Persian language courses, library and permanent photo gallery. Time of visit: 10:00–13:00, 15:00–18:00'. There are three other boards with announcements on the property. The first two are located near the main entrance, with notes in Armenian and Farsi; the third is near the library next to the mosque and has only Farsi posts on religious rituals and festivals. Thus, the area of everyday religious practice is separated by language barriers from the more open and public space.

Interestingly, before 2016, Iranian Muslims celebrated religious festivals within their community as closed events. However, in 2016 the main Shi'ite festival, called Ashura, was opened to the public. Armenians as well as Yezidis participated in this festival. Iranian Ambassador Seyyed Kazem Sajjad said in an interview with Public Television Company of Armenia: 'This is first time we open the doors of Blue Mosque for every interested person. This year along with prayer ritual which was held in the past years inside the Mosque religious march has been organized with the presence of a lot of guests and interested persons' (Public TV 2016).

This shows that the Blue Mosque, a religious place with an internal function for the Iranian community, also has an important intercultural function. It could become a place for intercultural communication where others, especially Armenians, can acquaint themselves with Iranian cultural and religious values.

Farsi instruction

One of the permanent offerings at the Blue Mosque is free Farsi courses, which were started more than 10 years ago. There are two rounds of admission for these free language courses per year. The groups accommodate school children up to adults (up to 60 years old). Over the years, the average number of students in the groups has been 10 to 20 persons. Besides this, there are Farsi classes with financial support from the Iranian Cultural Centre at several schools in Yerevan (numbers 6, 43 and 200) and in other cities and villages (Dvin, Gyumri, Karbi and Garni).

Why do Armenians want to learn Farsi? Many people choose to because of their interest in the language of a neighbouring country, and participate in the free courses organized by the Blue Mosque or Iran's cultural attaché. Additionally, the presence and expansion of Iranian companies in Armenia

and the increase in tourism from Iran have provided a practical motivation for Armenians to learn the language, for ease of communication.

Besides the free language courses, more than 30 academic courses on Islam and Iranian studies are offered at Yerevan State University within the departments of Arabic, Turkish and Iranian studies (Faculty of Oriental Studies), including BA, MA and PhD programs. However, there is no institution for training imams in Armenia.

Publications, translations and dissemination of Iranian literature

There have been at least two magazines consistently published by the Iranian Cultural Centre, *Mihr* and *Parsian* (until 2012). *Mihr* has been published every three months since 2001 (four times a year). They are not officially religious, but are rich in Islamic content. Both are written in Farsi and Armenian. The journals' content covers Iran (in Armenian) and Armenia (in Farsi). The centre posts all this information on its website (http://yerevan.icro.ir), and has also published a number of books and brochures with religious content.

Another dimension of Iranian cultural diplomacy is translations to and from both languages. Since 2005–2006, the Iranian Cultural Centre in Yerevan has started translations of Iranian classic and modern poetry. In 2006, the Qur'an was published in Armenian (Hayastan Press).

The publication of the Encyclopaedia of Iranian Armenians was another interesting cultural event. The encyclopaedia was first published in Farsi in 2002, by Janet T. Lazaryan, and was then republished with some revisions in 2009. At that time, Mr. Shakiba, the director of the cultural centre, proposed translating the encyclopaedia into Armenian. By 2013, the presentation of Janet Lazaryan's Armenian translation of the book was already organized. The book consists of 30 parts, including 550 famous Iranian Armenians (clergymen, parliamentarians, martyrs and soldiers of the Iran–Iraq war, doctors, artists, writers, architects and others) whose lives spanned from 1604 to 2012 in Iran.

In 2015, on the 36th anniversary of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the Iranian Cultural Centre organized several cultural activities related to publication in the Blue Mosque. The online version of the journal *Mihr* was launched at this event.[3] On the journal's website, the aim of its affiliated Armenian–Iranian cultural club is described thus:

> Being close neighbours in the region from the old period of their origin and development, Armenian and Iranian nations according to their destiny are always in touch with their language, traditional and varied common cultural features. The club in Armenia is come about to favour the consolidation of cultural and scientific contacts of our two nations, as well as for intimacy of our civilizations' acknowledgement and multilateral relations.[4]

According to Vaghinak Sargsyan, the general editor of *Mihr*, the journal's main goal is to introduce an Armenian audience to Iranians' gains in the scientific, cultural, educational and other spheres. 'We try to be a bridge for strengthening Iran–Armenia friendly relations', (Iran Armenian Radio 2015) he added.

A compact disc of Iranian fairy tales translated into Armenian was also launched at the event. The translator said that it is very important that even children who cannot read be able to listen to these fairy tales, which at their core are about kindness, humanity and beauty. Another CD presents Khaghani's translated works. An Iranian poetry event was held at the end of the day.[5]

In the words of the cultural centre's director, the main goal of the centre's activities is to introduce Iranian culture and literature to the Armenian people in their own language, through various media including books and CDs.

Radio broadcasting

IRIB World Service is the official international broadcasting radio network of Iran (http://worldservice.irib.ir/fa). The radio network was founded in 1956, with the aim of familiarizing different nations of the world with Iran's history and culture as well as with its various regions and historical sites. Following the Iranian Revolution, elaborating on the revolution's stances and the ideals of the Islamic Republic was high on the network's agenda. IRIB World Service currently broadcasts in 32 languages, including Armenian (http://armenian.irib.ir/home1/about-us). Since the Islamic Revolution, one of the aims of Iranian foreign policy has been strengthening regional cooperation. For this purpose, the radio programmes work to strengthen the ties between Iran and other countries. In Armenia, this policy has intensified since 1991.

The Armenian section of the Iranian broadcasting station includes 2.5 hours of Armenian-language programming per day, and an additional programme for foreigners. The programmes provide news and an introduction to Iranian culture, but they also contain religious elements like the recitation of Qur'an verses at the beginning of the show.

The archive of Armenian online radio reveals the following Iran-related programmes:

- *Firdousi as eternal hero*. Seven broadcasts between 2011 and 2016; each program lasted 13–14 minutes.
- *In the world of Iranian fairy tales*. Thirty broadcasts between 2011 and 2016; each broadcast lasted 13–16 minutes.
- *Let's learn Persian*. One hundred programmes between 2011 and August 2016; very helpful lessons for people who want to study Persian for free (http://armenian.irib.ir/interpretation10/itemlist/category/115?lang=en&start=120).
- *Iranian modern film art*. Seventy programmes between 2012 and 2014.
- Tour to Iran, Iranian studies, etc.

Study of the sections and content of the radio programmes shows that culturally-based soft power is the most commonly used type of Iranian soft power in Armenia.

Academic conferences

Almost every year, conferences or round tables are organized in Yerevan on the initiative of the Iranian Cultural Centre. These events include the participation of Armenian educational and scientific institutions that are involved in Iranian or Islamic Studies, such as the Institute of Oriental Studies at the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, the Faculty of Oriental Studies and the Centre for Civilization and Cultural Studies at Yerevan State University, and Yerevan Brusov State University of Languages and Social Sciences, where Farsi is taught as a second or third language. The topics of these yearly conferences vary from year to year: the Islamic Revolution and its gains; Imam Khomeini, his ideas and concepts in Iran and in the world; Armenia–Iran relations; etc.

Every year on 3–5 June, the Iranian Cultural Centre and its Armenian counterpart organize a conference dedicated to the commemoration of the death of Imam Khomeini. The subjects of these annual conferences are very similar, presenting Imam Khomeini's ideas and concepts. All these conferences are covered not only by Parstoday.com and Armenian Radio as a part of IRIB World Service, but also by Armenian mass media including Public Television Company of Armenia, Public Radio of Armenia and several news agencies.

For example, the last two years' conferences were held on 4 June 2015 and 3 June 2016, at the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia and Yerevan State University, respectively (Begijanyan 2015, YSU 2016). The 2015 conference commemorated the 26th anniversary of Imam Khomeini's death with the publication of a biography titled *Analysing the Ideas of Imam Khomeini*. The Armenian–Iranian international conference held in 2016 was dedicated to the 27th anniversary of the death of Imam Khomeini. Both conferences were attended by Yerevan State University Rector Aram Simonyan; Dean of the Faculty of Oriental Studies Gurgen Melikyan; Head of Iranian Studies Vardan Voskanyan, the ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and students, lecturers, guests and representatives of the Iranian Embassy. After opening remarks, the participants made reports about the impact of Imam Khomeini's ideology on Iran's foreign policy and global policy, his humanistic attitudes towards ethnic minorities, etc. The conferences did not spread a religious message. Nevertheless, they strongly emphasized the positive and humanitarian values of Imam Khomeini's thinking. A portrait of Imam Khomeini was placed in the middle of the round table at some events and no critical contributions were part of the conference.

In 2012, when Iran and Armenia celebrated the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries,

several conferences were held dedicated to Armenia–Iran diplomatic relations. On 13 March 2012, a conference titled 'Armenia–Iran: 20 Years of Cooperation' was held at the National Academy of Sciences, and on 25–26 April of the same year, a conference titled 'Armenia–Iran: Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue' was held at Yerevan Brusov State University of Languages and Social Sciences.

The Iranian Embassy and the Iranian Cultural Centre also organize annual activities for the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution; for the last several years these events have been known as Iranian cultural days. In general, these cultural days start on 28 January and last until 10 February. The events are multidimensional, including meetings of Iranian and Armenian intellectuals and exhibitions of Iranian modern art in the Artists' Union of Armenia or other galleries. In 2013, an Iranian film week was held in the Blue Mosque in Yerevan for the first time, along with an exhibition contest on the topic of Iran and the Iranian Revolution for the Armenian students taking free Farsi courses.

Exhibitions and concerts

Almost every year, the Iranian Cultural Centre (and sometimes the Embassy of Iran in Armenia) organizes exhibitions in one of the art galleries in Yerevan. In recent years, there have also been concerts and movie showings or weeks of Iranian films, as well as visits by literary, artistic and theatrical groups to and from Iran.

The director of the Cultural Centre of the Iranian Embassy in Armenia, Majid Mushqi, expressed gratitude to the municipality of Yerevan for the opportunity to hold the exhibition 'Cultural Dialogue' in the Yerevan History Museum from 29 March until 9 April 2016. The exhibition includes 70 samples from the museum's Iranian collection. According to him, these kinds of exhibitions are an opportunity for numerous tourists from Iran to familiarize themselves with the museum. 'The exhibition is very important from the point of view of tourism development. Wherever you go you usually try to find something from your country. Here each visitor can find a cultural dialogue which is the symbol of our friendship', said Majid Mushqi.[6]

Nowruz in Yerevan

Nowruz, the Iranian New Year celebration, is the main Iranian festival which is covered by almost every Armenian news agency. Nowruz is the day of the vernal equinox, and marks the beginning of spring in the Northern Hemisphere. It usually starts on 21 March (or one day before or after) and lasts 13 days. Iranian tourism during these days has become more and more popular in the last few years. Many Iranians frequent the centre of Yerevan, and Armenians are generally very tolerant of their arrival during Nowruz. The local population's response to Iranians celebrating Nowruz in the Armenian capital varies; while some are irritated, others express happiness or indifference.

In 2016, the Iranian Embassy in Armenia organized a reception, an exhibition of Iranian handicrafts and a joint Armenian–Iranian concert in the Aram Khachaturian concert hall to celebrate Persian Nowruz.[7]

Besides Nowruz, the media sometimes publish speeches and press conferences made by the ambassador and the cultural attachés of Iran in Armenia. Interestingly, all the events organized by Iranians over the last several years have gotten extensive media coverage. Thus, any Iranian activity in Armenia could have an impact, which is of course hard to measure.

Conclusion

The use of cultural elements in international relations targets the emotions and subconscious feelings of the audience. Religion is an appropriate factor in in this kind of foreign policy.

For geopolitical reasons, Iran is one of the main reliable neighbours of the Republic of Armenia. Bilateral relations between the two countries have promoted effective cooperation in the fields of energy, sport, environmental protection, health care, agriculture, education, science, culture and interprovincial relations. From a soft power perspective, Armenia is a priority in Iran's neighbourhood policy, and Iran's cultural policies successfully enhance its soft power in Armenia. The transfer of Iranian cultural knowledge, art, ideas, beliefs and customs supports and ensures Iran's political and economic goals. Hereby, the two cultures—including their religions—can be interpreted as proximate, and as the main cultural tools for strengthening and developing bilateral relations. Religion and religious differences are in no way used as a separating paradigm here. In contrast, religion is used in a positive way by the Iranian government to strengthen its political relations with Armenia. Thus, the religious difference can facilitate not only political and economic relations, but also assist governments in their national interests.

The specific political relationship between the two countries leads Iranian foreign policy to transform its religious message into a cultural and moral stance, by stressing the universal values and meanings of Iranian Shi'a Islam. Even a conference commemorating the death of Imam Khomeini or the Islamic Revolution is presented under the umbrella of the universal and humanistic character of Shi'a creeds and beliefs. For now, Iranian soft power in Armenia does not show any intention of religious influence or proselytism, as both states have been tolerant towards their respective Muslim and Christian minorities.

Iran works to strengthen its bilateral relations with Armenia in economic and security issues. Cultural diplomacy and civilizational interactions are part of this strategy. The fact that the difference of religion between the two countries does not hinder their alliance suggests that the soft power strategy holds an additional communicative value. Iranian activities in Armenia can be interpreted as proof that different religions are not necessarily an obstacle

to good bilateral relations. Cultural diplomacy in Armenia–Iran relations offers a counter-narrative in which diverse peoples and their traditions can coexist, strengthening each other through mutual understanding and building new traditions together.

Describing the activities and initiatives of the main Iranian organizations shows that the Iranian community in Armenia has started to open its religious activities to the public. Iran has realized that the celebration of its religious festivals and ceremonies in Yerevan holds a political meaning alongside the religious one. In 2016 they invited many Armenian and Yezidi guests to celebrate the very important festival of Ashura publicly, with extensive media coverage on Armenian public television. Through their cultural activities, Iranians try to promote understanding of Iranian culture; they reach out not only via language, literature and historical narratives, but also via religious activities.

Thus, Iran's long-term relations with Armenia are gradually expanding, including the religious component that supplements Iran's soft power. Simultaneously, the tendency towards further relations provides a platform for increasing Iran's soft power capabilities and resources in Armenia.

Notes

1 For more details, see Karamyan 2014, p. 35–36.
2 Meeting (9 July 2015) of President Serzh Sargsyan and Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance of Iran Ali Janati (*Armenian News* 2015, Armedia 2015).
3 The link of the online journal is http://mihr.ir/index.php/2014-12-23-10-21-34/2014-12-23-10-22-36.
4 See http://mihr.ir/en/index.php/1/2.
5 Video about the events available from: http://armenian.irib.ir/gallery/video/item/61590.
6 For more about the exhibition see: www.yerevan.am/en/news/erewani-patmowtyan-t-angaranowm-bats-vel-e-mshakowyt-neri-erkkhosowt-yown-khoragrov-tsowts-ahandes/.
7 Armenian–Iranian concert to mark Nowruz, available from: www.shoghakat.am/en/telecasts/9005.

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Part IV

The EU–Russia framework

9 Face to face with conservative religious values

Assessing the EU's normative impact in the South Caucasus

Eiki Berg and Alar Kilp

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, the EU has evolved as a shaper of norms and a definer of what is "normal" in international politics. It became an exponent of a number of core norms, the most important of which were peace, democracy and human rights, and encouraged other countries to adopt this normative agenda for their own good. The idea of Normative Power Europe (Manners 2002) rests on the widely shared understanding that instead of exerting military power, which is not really an option, the EU may increase their leverage "softly" by imposing liberal democratic norms on the third countries interested in closer relations with the union. As this softer approach still includes conditionality clauses, financial inducements and persuasion, it diverges somewhat from what Joseph Nye (2004) has described as truly soft power, i.e. 'the ability to get others to want the same as you want, without coercion or payment', based on such commodities as cultural appeal, political values and legitimate policies (for more on that, see Nielsen 2016).

Be that as it may, the EU's normative power might win hearts and minds, or gain influence and effect change, especially when the attraction derived from the well-regulated single market and the prosperity which integration has brought to the participating states overshadows the coercive aspects. The EU can be normative and espouse soft power at the same time, given that the prospect of membership is appealing enough for the third countries to go through a reform process that would bring them in line with the prescribed norms. In practice, the EU has strengthened its soft power potential while keeping its doors relatively open. It has also wielded significant normative power in much of its extended neighbourhood—the agenda for cooperation under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) frameworks is defined, conditioned and assessed within the normative context imposed by the EU. There seems to be no contradiction between what the EU is (normative power), what it has (a sufficient level of appeal) and what it does (channel its power).

Unlike the countries neighbouring the South Caucasus states, such as Iran, Turkey or Russia, the EU does not have at its disposal—and has never relied on—religious channels of influence. As a substitute, the EU has sought to influence regional developments by promoting a number of liberal and emancipatory values, such as individual freedoms, tolerance, and cultural diversity and multiculturalism. Given that the EU relies on the Western secularist discourse combining human rights, democracy and the rule of law, the whole discourse welcomes the role of religion only after acknowledging a legal framework for human rights and developing the foundations of a democratic society (Massignon 2007). In other words, new "converts" to Europeanization are expected to adopt predictable behaviours and standards acceptable to the EU before they can practice their own rite in the name of religious freedom.

As follows, the EU has developed its own direct instruments of normative impact that deserve to be studied, with all comprehension that the EU targets not specific social or religious groups, but reform-minded political elites and the societies of the South Caucasian states at large. These are human rights dialogues aimed at ensuring sustainable development, peace and security through the promotion of human rights and democratization in third countries. Moreover, these dialogues set the overall framework for cooperation between the EU and the third countries, as the EU has expressed commitment to integrating human rights issues in all its actions (Council of the European Union 2009). It is the constellation of these actors that is decisive in the reform process and for assessment of the EU's normative impact, while public opinion research is another (soft power) indicator at play.

In this chapter, we study the role that the EU's normative power has had in influencing the South Caucasus countries' reform processes. First we look into the instrumental toolbox that the EU uses in leveraging its power within the normative framework. Then we see how the three South Caucasian countries are engaged in human rights dialogues and with what results. In parallel to this we explore the regional context and see how religious affairs as well as majority–minority relations in general are regulated by the respective states. Given that ultraconservative value systems prevail and traditional religious institutions still have an important role to play in shaping people's mindsets, we are particularly interested in how the EU's attempts to promote its human rights agenda in the South Caucasus have been met either by willingness on the part of authorities to carry out reforms or, on the contrary, by resistance to change. Finally, we examine the reception of the human rights agenda by society at large, with the help of public opinion polls carried out by the Caucasus Barometer in 2013 and the World Values Survey (WVS) (n.d.) in 2010–2014.

Our overall assumption is that the EU's normative policies—including those channelled through the EaP programme—are in contradiction with the dominant and much more conservative attitudes largely sustained by the state and religious institutions in the South Caucasus. If this assumption proves right, then what can explain the fact that EU integration remains an appealing aspiration for large segments of these societies? This is the puzzle we try to unravel in our concluding remarks.

Human rights dialogues

The EU holds regular dialogues on human rights with more than 40 non-EU countries. Each dialogue is established in accordance with the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Dialogues (Council of the European Union 2008). It appears that such dialogues take place at different levels (at the level of experts or heads of missions) and in different forums based on strategic partnerships and regional or bilateral treaties, agreements or conventions. The efficiency of human rights dialogues resides in their capacity to feed other policy areas, such as development cooperation and trade, and higher political dialogues including summits. Although the guidelines stipulate that the objectives of human rights dialogues vary from country to country, keeping it merely as a discussion of mutual interests at minimum, or expressing concern at maximum, still the conditionality applies. The more target countries are willing to discuss human rights issues, adopt strategies which prescribe legislative changes and enforce implementation practices, the more the EU is willing to trade, aid and give development assistance. It is therefore key to embed these dialogues in the overall relationship of the EU to the third country concerned.

In addition, the Council of the EU has adopted two more specific guidelines which enable it to explore the state of human rights issues in the relations between the EU and the countries of the South Caucasus. The EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Religion and Belief (Council of the European Union 2013a) reaffirm its determination to promote, in its external human rights policy, freedom of religion or belief to be exercised by everyone everywhere, based on the principles of equality, non-discrimination and universality. It is widely believed that religious minorities are entitled to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights and form civil society associations to defend their religious rights.[1] The other guidelines from 2013 (Council of the European Union 2013b) concern LGBTI persons, stipulating that any cultural, traditional or religious values cannot be invoked to justify any form of discrimination. The EU will seek to actively promote and protect the enjoyment of these specific human rights, while taking into account the local realities and sensitivities. Yet, in the case that these standards are not met by the third countries, the EU institutions and member states adjust their policies accordingly.

In 2008 the EU initiated the Eastern Partnership, introduced by Poland and Sweden, which covers the three states of the South Caucasus. Since 2009, Armenia and Georgia have been engaged in dialogue with the EU on human rights and democracy issues. This is not the case with Azerbaijan. The European Parliament has expressed its regret for:

> [T]he fact that the EU–Azerbaijan human rights dialogue has made no substantial progress as regards the human rights situation in the country [and has called] on the EEAS [European External Action Service] to step up its dialogue with a view to making it effective and result oriented. (European Parliament 2014)

To that end, the EU has continuously reaffirmed that its support for and cooperation with Azerbaijan must be conditional on the promotion of civil liberties and democratic reforms.

During the seven rounds of EU–Armenia human rights dialogues and nine rounds of EU–Georgia dialogues, the sides have discussed the existing mechanisms for the protection of human rights in these countries. The most salient issues referred to in the country progress reports have been the reform of the judiciary; freedom of conscience and religion; freedom of association; freedom of expression and media; the fight against discrimination (including issues of LGTBI, religious and ethnic minorities, rights of children with special educational needs, etc.); women's rights; gender-based and domestic violence (including sex-selective abortions); and torture and ill-treatment in police custody.

Most of these highlighted issues shake the dominant position of the national churches in Georgia and Armenia and go against the traditional understanding of patriarchal society and deeply rooted religious morals in all the South Caucasus states. In the east, the lever for Europeanization seems to be eroding. Unless there is evidence of the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, human rights defenders, journalists and other civil society activists from jail, there is no reason to expect that Azerbaijan will change under the guidance of the EU's normative power. The way that the three Caucasian countries have been trying to accommodate (or resist) the norm-imposing EU is discussed in more detail in the following sections of this chapter.

Armenia

For centuries the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) was the only structure which consolidated the nation and had the legitimacy to be actively involved in the secular–political life of Armenian communities. The Constitution of Armenia (n.d.) proclaims the protection of freedom of religion and the separation of church and state, but also recognizes the unique and exclusive cultural mission 'of the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church as a national Church in the spiritual life of the Armenian nation' (Article 8.1.). In practice, the status of the AAC in Armenian society has been deemed hegemonic in both religious and political spheres, where its cooperation with the Armenian state plays a key role in the establishment of state hegemony in society (Mkrtchyan 2014). Although religious freedom is generally protected, social acceptance of religious minorities remains low (Karamyan 2013).

In a progress report, the European Commission (2015a) recommended that the draft law on freedom of conscience and religion be finalized, which means that the existing Law of the Republic of Armenia on the Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Organizations (National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia 1991) requires substantial changes (e.g. the existing legislation forbids proselytism within Armenia, but yields to the AAC the exclusive right to proselytize; the AAC enjoys privileges in public education and support from the state budget not granted to other religions). A survey

on religious education at public schools in Armenia raised concerns that the teaching of the subject fosters the development of a negative attitude towards other religious beliefs and their followers, which amounts to intolerance bordering on proselytism (Danielyan *et al*. 2012). From the side of state authorities, inaction prevails.

The dialogue between the EU and Armenia provides a platform for the exchange of views on the human rights situation in both places, and the legitimacy to question an issue stems from the bilateral agreements and regional policies that the EU pursues regarding Armenia. These documents—including the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1999), European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), Eastern Partnership (2009) and Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements (2014), to name a few—have always prioritized the issues of human rights. In return, Armenia adopted the ENP Action Plan in 2006, which prioritized the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the Country Strategy Paper of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) 2007–2010, the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is listed among the top priority areas of the European Commission's assistance (ENPI 2007, p. 17). Moreover, in the National Indicative Programmes of 2007–2010 and 2011–2013, human rights were identified as a sub-priority of support for the strengthening of democratic structures and good governance.

Armenia's human rights concerns were also addressed in the National Strategy on Human Rights Protection (Ministry of Justice 2012), although the action plan stemming from this strategy was adopted only in February 2014. The document identifies certain target groups; protection for children's, women's, disabled persons', and national minorities' rights are of primary concern. Whereas the recognition of the rights of national minorities at the strategic level seems accurate, even in the case of a homogenous population (97 per cent are Armenians), the strategy has not considered other minorities (including religious and sexual minorities) as vulnerable groups and has not advocated for their protection. For instance, as the largest ethnic minority with about 40,000 members, the Kurds receive protection while manifest religious diversity is legally speaking almost nonexistent, both in factual and legal terms (Ogannisyan 2014, p. 54). In addition, the issues of the LGBTI community are some of the most sensitive and controversial topics in the country. These communities face discrimination as they are seen as "evil" or "diseased" and intending to demoralize the traditional ways of life. No policy-level actions have been undertaken to address discrimination towards these communities (European Commission 2015a).

Georgia

Georgia is ethnically and religiously more diverse than Armenia (about 10 per cent are Muslim and four per cent are members of the AAC). Like Armenia's, Georgia's constitution (n.d.) proclaims the protection of freedom

of religion and the independence of church and state, while also recognizing the special role of the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church (GOC) in the country's history (Article 9.1). In 2002, the state and the GOC adopted the Concordat (or Constitutional Agreement), which granted the church exemption from taxation, an exclusive right to provide public institutions with chaplains, exempted its priests from military service and granted the Catholicos-Patriarch immunity from prosecution (Gunn 2015, p. 9). Furthermore, the Patriarchate seems to be the only institution in Georgia which, according to Kakachia (2014), 'demonstratively disobeys secular legislation' and interferes in civil affairs (e.g. it has called upon authorities to ban a gay rally which the Patriarch sees as an insult to Georgian traditions).

Until 2011, the progress reports considered integration of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities a priority in Georgia, but observed no general progress. All religious denominations other than the GOC had to register as organizations rather than as religious communities (Kakachia 2014). In 2011, an amendment to the Civil Code granted other religious groups the right to be registered as legal entities under public law, equal in status to the GOC, and this resulted in the registration of the All-Georgia Muslim Administration, Caucasus Administration of Latin Catholics, Chaldo-Assyrian Catholic community of Georgia and Spiritual Assembly of Yezidis of Georgia (Civil Georgia 2011). In 2014, the Georgian government made funding from the state budget available to the Diocese of the AAC in Georgia, the Roman Catholic Church in Georgia, and Muslim and Jewish congregations (Civil Georgia 2014). Although these reform initiatives were appreciated by the EU (Garcés de los Fayos 2014, p. 23), the GOC saw it as an infringement of its unique status and sovereignty, as well as a challenge to its moral and ideological stance.

The GOC has been increasingly associated with narrow nationalist causes. Religious leaders in Georgia have openly linked the EU with the destruction of values, the erosion of national traditions and the promotion of homosexuality—saying they undermine Georgia's national traditions and spiritual mission. Some of its radical followers were allegedly behind a violent group called the Union of Orthodox Christian Parents, which orchestrated clashes and other unlawful actions against minority groups in 2010 and 2012. The tension peaked in May 2013, when conservative elements protested a rally for the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT), where thousands of people, including clergymen, attacked a small rally of some 50 activists (Kakachia 2014).

The dialogue between the EU and Georgia largely follows the same pattern as the dialogue with Armenia: relations are based on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1999), European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), Eastern Partnership (2009), Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements (2011) and Association Agreement (2014), to name the least and most important ones. Yet, unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia is often identified by the EU as a country which has acted in line with the key recommendations issued in annual progress reports (European Commission 2014).

In 2006, the EU–Georgia Action Plan outlined several priority areas of political dialogue including rule of law, strengthening of democratic institutions and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The country-specific human rights concerns have been addressed in the Country Strategy Paper of the ENPI 2007–2013, the National Indicative Programmes of 2007–2010 and of 2011–2013, and the Association Agenda, which defined specific priorities for the period of 2014–2016 (EU–Georgia Association Council, 2014). Since 2012, annual progress reports have praised Georgia for carrying out reforms. For instance, Georgia has adopted a comprehensive anti-discrimination law (2014) which intended to eliminate every form of discrimination (Article 1). The National Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights in Georgia 2014–2020 is committed to guaranteeing the rights to freedom and religion, to implementing 'effective measures to prevent and conduct meaningful investigations into all crimes committed on the basis of religious hatred and intolerance' (Government of Georgia 2014, 11.c) and to combating 'discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity' (Government of Georgia 2014, 12.c). Recent EU recommendations address the need to provide sufficient resources to the Public Defender's Office for the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation (European Commission 2015c).

The anti-discrimination law (seen as the last obstacle for the country to move ahead in its Visa Liberalisation Action Plan with the EU) was finally adopted after the Georgian parliament reached a compromise with the GOC in 2014. As a result, its Article 5 includes clauses which affirm that legal protection from discrimination for LGBTI people can contradict neither the Constitutional Agreement between the state and the GOC nor the protection of the freedom of religious associations.[2] Another controversial aspect of the anti-discrimination law is that it does not include any punitive mechanisms (Freedom House 2015b). As assessed by progress reports, Georgian authorities have not taken sufficient measures to deal with religious and sexual intolerance, so hate speech against ethnic, religious and sexual minorities continues to be a widespread problem (Council of Europe 2015).

Azerbaijan

According to the Constitution of Azerbaijan (n.d., Article 18) there is no official religion and all religions are equal. The state of Azerbaijan recognizes Muslims under the authority of the Caucasus Muslim Board. In a cross-national comparison, the level of state regulation of religion is significantly higher and governmental favouritism of religion significantly lower in Azerbaijan than in Georgia and Armenia.[3] In general, Azerbaijan treats its "traditional" non-Muslim minorities (Jews, Catholics, Russian Orthodox) well, and most prisoners of conscience are related to Islamic religious movements. Apparently religious freedom is legally protected, yet there has been deepening regress since 2009, when the Azerbaijani government started to curb the freedoms of Muslim minority groups under the banner of the fight

against religious extremism and radicalism. In 2011, the rules for registering a religious community were further tightened and multi-year prison sentences were adopted for leaders of unsanctioned religious services. In 2013, defamation law was extended to include online content and commentary (Freedom House 2015a). Finally, in 2014 further restrictions were adopted regarding the import of religious literature and the operations of NGOs, including those that were advocating for LGBTI people (European Commission 2015b).

Although the EU and Azerbaijan have reached a point in their policy and legal framework which includes the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1999), European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), Eastern Partnership (2009) and Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements (2014), the launch of human rights dialogue has not met substantial progress. The EU has not been attractive enough. Its normative agenda has not been able to win the hearts and minds of those playing the most important roles in the Azerbaijani autocratic regime. Nor has this oil-rich country ever cared about the EU assistance, trade and visa liberalization which remain inaccessible due to non-compliance with European norms and values.

Whereas the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement set up a subcommittee on justice, freedom, security, human rights and democracy as a sub-part of the political dialogue between the EU and Azerbaijan, the first country report assessing progress in Azerbaijan was published only on 2 March 2005. It identified improvement in the protection of ethnic minorities, although vulnerable groups such as ethnic Armenians and minority religious groups were in need of more effective protection. Among the priority areas listed in the EU–Azerbaijan Action Plan (2006) were rule of law, democratization (fair and transparent electoral processes), human rights and conflict settlement. The 2007 progress report considered freedom of religion 'largely secured' in Azerbaijan (European Commission 2008). The country-specific human rights concerns were identified in the Country Strategy Paper of the ENPI 2007–2013 under the priority area of 'support for democratic development and good governance' and included sub-priorities such as rule of law and judicial reform, human rights, civil society development and local government (ENPI 2006). The ENPI National Indicative Programme 2011–2013 reaffirmed that the strengthening of democratic structures, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms were seen at the core of EU–Azerbaijan relations, yet progress in the areas of freedom of expression and freedom of media has been extremely slow (ENPI 2010).

In the eyes of the EU, the measures taken by the Azerbaijani government have been lacking.[4] The EU disapproves of the 2009 religion law and considers it discriminative. This law required re-registration of religious communities (by June 2013, only 577 out of a much larger number of religious communities were re-registered); set higher fines for foreigners or stateless persons disseminating religious propaganda and persons publishing, importing or exporting religious literature without state approval; banned meetings for worship without state permission or in locations not approved by the state;

required all Muslim religious communities to be part of the state-backed Caucasus Muslim Board; and stipulated that only Azerbaijani citizens trained in Azerbaijan can act as Muslim leaders (Corley and Kinahan 2015).

Homosexuality was decriminalized in 2003, but thereafter no comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that would specifically protect LGBTI people from facing 'police harassment and other forms of bias or abuse' has been adopted (Freedom House 2015a). Additionally, the Azerbaijani government has been found to obstruct and intimidate 'human rights defenders working for the rights of LGBTI people', to tolerate hate speech, and to remain passive in taking measures against homophobia (European Parliament 2015). As a result, LGBTI issues do not receive recognition within the governing elite nor in civil society at large. This must be understood against the background of a rather dominant conservative value system and a high level of religious affiliation (European Commission 2015b).

To conclude, EU–Azerbaijan political dialogue has progressed well in the implementation of the Southern Gas Corridor but has undergone significant regression in the areas of democratic transition, protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms (including freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly). As an overall assessment, one could say that the government of Azerbaijan has not committed to the import of European values and norms (Lovitt 2015, p. 8) and the EU's conditionality toolbox does not have an effect when the stimulus for reform is missing. Needless to say, according to the cross-national assessment by ILGA-Europe (2015), Azerbaijan remains one the most discriminatory countries towards the rights of sexual minorities among the 49 contracting countries of the Council of Europe.

Religiosity and societal reception of the human rights agenda

In comparing the three Caucasian countries, striking differences appear. Georgia has been the most keen on adapting its own value system and has become more liberal and reform-minded. Azerbaijan has the least desire to change, preferring to keep things as they are. Armenia falls somewhere in between—accommodation with European norms is welcomed on the surface, yet inaction and a slow approach to improving law enforcement reveals difficulties in implementation. Although all three are Eastern Partnership countries, they move in different directions: Georgia has been interested in integration with Western structures; Armenia was heading along the European track but made a sudden U-turn in September 2014 by claiming allegiance to the Eurasian Customs Union; Azerbaijan has remained undecided. This variation is reflected by the (un)willingness of the political elite of these respective countries to participate in human rights dialogues, to harmonize national legislations with European norms and values, and finally, to implement new regulations in practice. Whereas participating in dialogue is usually perceived as an easy task to fulfil, implementation poses enormous challenges because

all three societies are more religious than secular, deeply traditional and overloaded by conservative values. This section explores the levels of religiosity and societal tolerance along with attitudes towards European integration in the three South Caucasian countries based on public opinion polls.

We have already learned that both the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church are considered national churches with special status and privileges in Armenia and Georgia, respectively. They have played a major role in identity politics and national consolidation efforts. Ninety-three per cent of Armenians and 84 per cent of Georgians belong to the autocephalous churches in their respective countries (National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia 2011; Geostat 2016). Although one could point out Georgian-speaking Muslim groups (Adjarians, Lazi people), Armenian-speaking Protestants remain a rarity and Muslims almost non-existent. Azerbaijan is predominantly Shi'a Muslim (85 per cent) (Presidential Library n.d.), yet politically secular and without any special status afforded to the majority group by the state constitution. Religious affiliation is largely nominal in Azerbaijan; percentages for actual practicing adherents are much lower. According to Valiyev (2005), 'most Azerbaijanis consider Islam a part of their national identity, any mixing of religion with the political sphere is rejected by the vast majority of the population'.

According to the Caucasus Barometer (2013), there are more self-identified religious people—those who consider themselves to be very or quite religious—in Armenia (66 per cent) and in Georgia (58 per cent) than in Azerbaijan (27 per cent). Similarly, the proportion of 'not at all religious' persons is lowest in Armenia (7 per cent) and Georgia (11 per cent), in contrast to Azerbaijan (41 per cent) (see Figure 9.1). These comparative figures allow us to state that in terms of religiosity, Armenia and Georgia sit at one end of the religious spectrum while Azerbaijan has a place at the opposite, more secular extreme. Similar findings were presented by the Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism (Win–Gallup International 2012) which measured self-perceptions of religiosity based on interviews from 57 countries. Georgia and Armenia ranked as some of the most religiously identified populations in the world; Azerbaijan's population was far less inclined to identify as religious, falling between Canada and the Netherlands. When the Caucasus Barometer (2013) asked whether people attend religious services at least once a week, 36 per cent of believers in Georgia indicated their regular worship of God, whereas 85 per cent of Azerbaijani self-identified believers did not abide by the injunction to pray.

The comprehensive data of the World Values Survey (see Table 9.1), which combines multiple dimensions of religiosity, demonstrate a repeating pattern where Azerbaijani society is the least and Georgian society the most religious in terms of self-identification, regular religious practice, the importance of religion in socialization and public trust in religious institutions. Additionally, we see that people in Georgia and Armenia trust religious organizations about five to six times more than Azerbaijanis. We are also able to observe

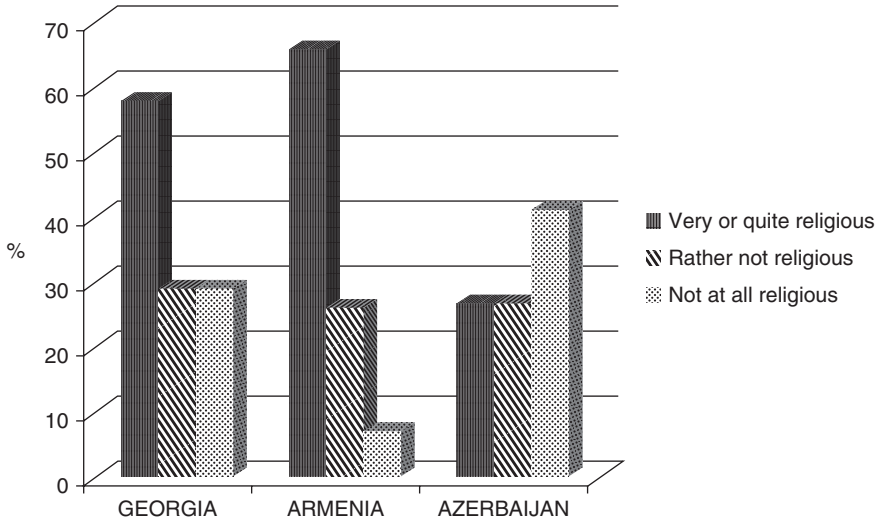

Figure 9.1 How religious would you say you are? (Caucasus Barometer 2013)

Table 9.1 Dimensions of religiosity in South Caucasus societies (WVS 2010–2014)

	Georgia (2014, in %)	*Armenia (2011, in %)*	*Azerbaijan (2011–2012, in %)*
Religion very important in life	84.9	57.5	35.9
Attend religious services once a month	44.2	33.5	9.2
A religious person	97.1	88.5	26.7
A great deal of confidence in the churches (religious organisations)	64.0	43.2	9.9
Religion is an important quality that children should be encouraged to learn at home	63.6	38.1	19.4

that religion plays a much more important role in raising children in Georgia and Armenia than it does in Azerbaijan.

The Caucasus Research Resource Center's (CRRC) study on religiosity in the South Caucasus gives an even more comprehensive overview of the most typical religious practices and effects on people's daily life to the extent that it demonstrates the frequency of fasting related to religious reasons and perceptions

of God in all three countries (CRRC 2013). Yet, what remains uncovered by the CRRC is the question of religious tolerance. This knowledge gap is filled by WVS data (2010–2014) which reveal the interesting fact that Georgian society is not only the most religious but also the most open and inclusive towards other religious traditions (only 16 per cent of respondents did not trust people adhering to other religions at all) (Figure 9.2). On the contrary, the most exclusive society in the South Caucasus in religious terms is Armenia, where people belonging to other religions are the least trusted (only 1 per cent of respondents trusted them completely and 48 per cent did not trust them at all).

The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) (n.d.) has created indices which examine how different governments regulate religion (Government Regulation of Religion Index–GRI), whether special privileges for particular religious groups are provided (Government Favouritism of Religion Index–GFI), what the societal attitudes towards non-traditional or different religions are (Social Regulation of Religion Index–SRI), and which restrictions are placed on the practice, profession or selection of religion (Religious Persecution). As highlighted in the CRRC study,

> Georgia is the least religion-regulating (5.0/10), the most religion-favouring government (8.1/10), and has the lowest level of social regulation of religion (8.6/10) among the three countries. In contrast, Azerbaijan is the most religion-regulating of the three countries (7.9/10), the least favourable towards religion (4.4/10), and has the highest level of social regulation of religion (9.4/10). Armenia lies between Georgia and Azerbaijan on all measures. (CRRC 2013, p. 3)[5]

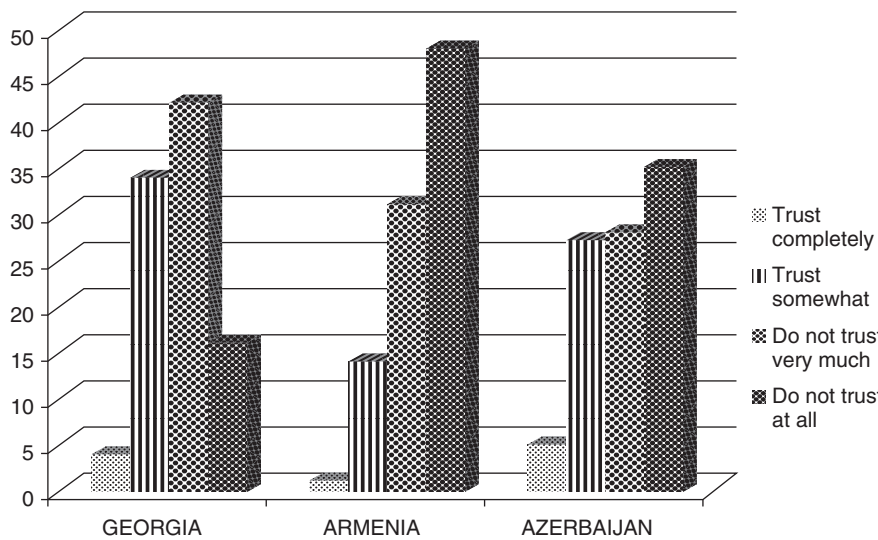

Figure 9.2 How much you trust: people of another religion (WVS 2010–14)

According to some views, there are innate cultural predispositions towards the values of democracy in both Georgia and Armenia, since:

> Western democracy is a product of Christianity; Georgia and Armenia have extensive Christian traditions, therefore the Western democratic institutions should be easily applicable to the Christian environments of these countries. (Matrosyan 2015, p. 167)

This reasoning should also logically apply to that part of the Western value system which supports tolerance, diversity and respect for minorities of all forms. Yet this may be wishful thinking. Being a member of any sexual minority is still automatically considered grounds for the estrangement of that individual. A person who does not wish to conceal his/her sexual orientation has but few real chances to succeed in life or in a public, academic or political career in all three South Caucasian countries. Furthermore, sexual minorities become objects of public aggression, social ostracism and violence.

Freelance journalist Silvia Stöber describes the societal perceptions which highlight masculinity as a safeguard for the survival of society and the family in subsequent generations. Strength and courage are deemed important characteristics; women must be protected, should only be marginally present in public and should serve their husbands in every way. Unmarried heterosexuals over 30 are rarely accepted in society; those with no children and not in a relationship are under enormous social pressure. Most families in the South Caucasus see homosexuals as shameful because their apparently "deviant" behaviour threatens social unity and the continuity of the family. Homosexual men are seen as a source of insecurity and weakened self-defence because it is thought that young men may be "infected" and thereby destroy society from the inside out.[6] In short, those who want to belong in society must adopt traditional values regarding cultural norms, gender roles, clothing habits and religious morals.

What strikes us the most here is the fact that all three countries reformed their legislations to ensure the rights of sexual minorities as a follow-up to their entry into the Council of Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Furthermore, Georgia and Armenia have made a big leap forward in the framework of human rights dialogues conducted by the EU. Yet, at the societal level radical attitudes are slow to disappear. Politicians seek popularity by playing around with society's values and national ideologies. Priests take part in homophobic rallies and warn people not to go against "God's will". Police feel reluctant to step in when ultra-orthodox Christians attack those who promote change. This is all in contrast to Azerbaijan—a very problematic eastern partner which has tried to avoid human rights dialogue at any cost, but where some social habits may increase the general tolerance towards sexual minorities (contrary to what the 2016 ILGA–Europe cross-national assessment proclaimed[7]). Bodily contact in public, such as hugging or walking arm in arm, is all very common in Azerbaijan—as long as it is a symbol of a

close friendship and not seen as affection between same-sex partners. Stöber (2013) notes that the issue of 'homosexuality is raised in public only with the intention to discredit unpopular people'.

Strangely enough, when we turn to the World Values Survey results, the least tolerant society is Azerbaijan's in all possible categories (see Figure 9.3), where 58 per cent did not want to have people of a different race as neighbours, 26 per cent did not want people who speak a different language as neighbours and 58 per cent did not want to have unmarried couples living together as neighbours. Only Armenia beats Azerbaijan in religious exclusivity—57 per cent of Armenian respondents did not like to have people of a different religion as neighbours, while in Georgia and Azerbaijan the percentage of respondents answering in the same way was around 35 per cent. The survey results also confirm that despite the level of Europeanization and integrational depth in the South Caucasian countries, they remain the three least tolerant societies of Europe in terms of attitudes towards homosexuality, and what is more, all three have become significantly less tolerant during last two decades (since the third wave of the WVS in 1996–1997) (Table 9.2).

As demonstrated above, the EU's ability to win hearts and minds may face considerable challenges due to cultural differences over social issues and its mixed record in support of diversity and the human rights agenda. Although Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan have chosen different development tracks and have displayed uneasy and varied allegiances to the imposition of EU norms, all three are conservative societies with intolerant views on sexual minorities. Mchedlishvili notes that 'taking a firm and principled

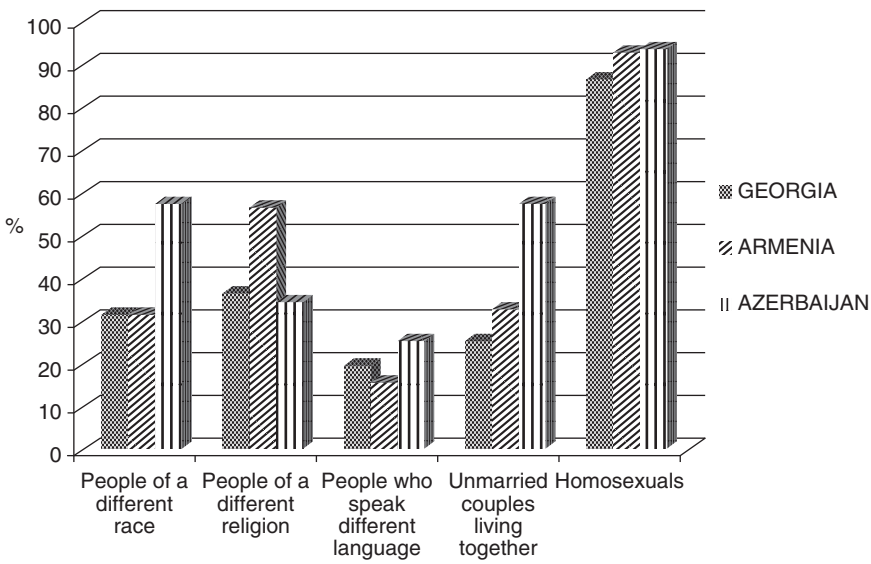

Figure 9.3 Would not like to have as neighbours (WVS 2010–14)

Table 9.2 Value orientations regarding homosexuality and homosexual neighbours (WVS 2010–2014)

	Year	*GE*	*Year*	*AM*	*Year*	*AZ*
Homosexuality never justifiable	2014	86.1	2011	95.5	2011–2012	92.8
	1996	79.4	1997	66.6	1996	83.6
Would not like to have as neighbours: Homosexuals	2014	86.6	2011	92.7	2011–2012	94.4
	1996	77.0	1997	83.3	1996	90.7

line in support of protections for LGBT communities, for example, could come at a political cost' (2016, p. 11), and that this is the biggest dilemma for Europeanization in the region. Whether that has an effect on public perceptions of EU integration will be discussed in the following section.

Impact of religion on support for EU integration

The EU is an important player in the region whose main interest is providing stability and security in its borders by promoting a normative value system, with the sincere belief that transformation of the South Caucasian countries serves this purpose. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan have long associated the EU with social welfare and high living standards, yet inconsistent policies from the recent past as well as the EU's own internal problems and ineffective crisis management may erase its soft power appeal in the eyes of these countries' populations. The idea that Europe represents more than 'affluence, welfare, clean streets [and] an honest police force' or 'secularism which lacks moral fortitude' has not reached a high enough level of public awareness to be safe from political manipulations (Mchedlishvili 2016, p. 12–13).

European integration has been a long-term strategic priority for Georgia. The signing of the Association Agreement and trade agreement (AA/DCFTA) in June 2014 set Georgia's Europeanization process on more solid ground. Armenia decided not to sign an AA/DCFTA with the EU after nearly four years of negotiations and instead joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in January 2015. So far, Azerbaijan has not indicated any interest in joining either the EU or the Eurasian Economic Union and prefers to hold its course of non-alignment. Despite the divergence in foreign policy orientations, attitudes towards European integration remain fairly favourable in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although Armenia's U-turn was justified by national security argumentation, a large segment of the population still met the decision to join the Eurasian Economic Union with anger.

According to the Caucasus Barometer (2013), the largest group of respondents in each of the South Caucasus countries (65 per cent in Georgia, 40 per cent in Armenia and 34 per cent in Azerbaijan) supported their

countries' EU membership. The largest share of non-supporters came from Armenia (23 per cent), whereas Azerbaijanis stood out with their indifference on this question (32 per cent of respondents did not care about their country's Europeanization) (Figure 9.4). Two years later, the support rate for EU membership had dropped to 42 per cent in Georgia while staying more or less the same in Armenia (39 per cent). At the same time, negatively tuned respondents increased their share to 16 per cent of the Georgian sample (Caucasus Barometer 2015). It is important to note that the regional data set did not present findings for Azerbaijan, which explains why we rely on the data from 2013 and not 2015 for cross-national comparison.

Based on these data sets, we will try to unfold a correlation between religiosity and anti-European mood. There are more reasons than not to assume that such a correlation should exist, with the assumption being that very religious people are most likely to reject the EU's normative agenda which goes against the traditional value system and shakes the authority of religious institutions. The most logical outcome would be a clear rejection of EU membership aspirations which might be seen to "let the devil in". What is more, the data we used for analysis dates to 2013. By that time, both Georgia and Armenia were finalizing preparations to meet the AA/DCFTA preconditions set by the EU, in the form of several rounds of human rights dialogues which enabled the start of anti-discriminatory legislation. In May 2012, a diversity march in Georgia took place against the background of aggressive protests by opponents of the demonstration, and at the same time three youngsters burned down DIY, the first gay bar in Armenia. There were clearly heightened tensions in all three countries, yet this angst is not reflected in the public

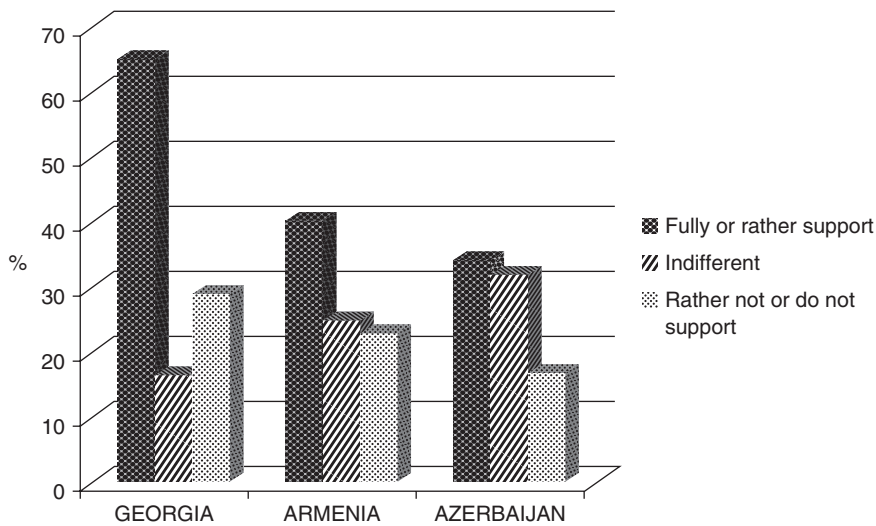

Figure 9.4 Do you support your country's EU membership? (Caucasus Barometer 2013)

opinion polls if we look at how the religious/secular dimension correlates to support/opposition for EU integration (Table 9.3).

'How religious would you say you are?' vs. 'Do you support your country's EU membership?' (Cross-national aggregate data from the Caucasus Barometer 2013)

Quite surprisingly it turns out that the most religious group is also the biggest supporter of EU integration and conversely, the most secular group shows the least support in the cross-national comparison. As the biggest groups from the reviewed sample are the believers (52 per cent) and pro-Europeans (54 per cent), followed by not very religious people (29 per cent) and those indifferent to the EU (28 per cent), and then finally the non-believers (20 per cent) and anti-Europeans (18 per cent), it would be logical to assume some sort of statistical match between the two dominant groups. As predicted, there is a significant statistical correlation—the value of Spearman's

Table 9.3 'How religious would you say you are?' vs. 'Do you support your country's EU membership?' (Cross-national aggregate data from the Caucasus Barometer 2013)

			Support to EU membership			*Total*
			Rather not or do not support	*Indifferent*	*Fully or rather support*	
Religious	Not at all religious	Count	217	301	437	955
		% within rel	22.7%	31.5%	45.8%	100.0%
		% within Eusupp	24.5%	22.1%	16.5%	**19.5%**
	Rather not religious	Count	242	408	762	1412
		% within rel	17.1%	28.9%	54.0%	100.0%
		% within Eusupp	27.3%	29.9%	28.7%	**28.8%**
	Very or quite religious	Count	427	655	1453	2535
		% within rel	16.9%	25.8%	57.3%	100.0%
		% within Eusupp	48.2%	48.0%	54.8%	**51.7%**
Total		Count	886	1364	2652	**4902**
		% within rel	**18.1%**	**27.8%**	**54.1%**	100.0%
		% within Eusupp	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

correlation being 0.064 ($p<0.01$). Thus, the relationship between religiosity and conservative values remains unclear. Whether this has to do with the fact that conservativism is not directly derived from the religious values but rather leans back on the Soviet past, when people were largely cut off from religious institutions but kept adhering to the collective norms prescribed by the Soviet state, remains to be explored in further studies.

If we acknowledge that not all religious people are conservative and that being religious may mean different things to different people, then the support for European integration in Azerbaijan from young urbanites who follow religion in non-traditional ways is as understandable as the many religious Georgians and Armenians who approve of the pro-European course. Being religious in Georgia and Armenia is closely related to ethnic self-identification and belonging to the titular group. Another way to explain this finding takes us to the cultural identification with Europe which obviously is higher in Christian societies than in Muslim ones (Maier and Rittberger 2008). Islam does not have a positive cultural connotation with the EU, which lacks any Muslim-dominated member state (Kentmen 2008, p. 500, 504). The fact that the EU does not currently include any Islamic society might explain why adhering to a religious community may overlap less with pro-European support in traditionally Muslim Azerbaijan than in predominantly Christian Armenia and Georgia.

Conclusions

This article aimed to examine how EU normative policies, in the form of human rights dialogues, shape national legislations and human rights protection measures to be more in line with European values in the three South Caucasian countries. We first gave a brief overview of the tools and instruments available within the EaP framework. Next we drew some comparisons about where Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan stand in their reform processes and what role religion plays in these societies. Finally, we explored the reception of the human rights agenda by society at large, keeping in mind that although these societies may be different, they share a common denominator: a traditional value system, which is most likely in conflict with the EU-imposed liberal orientation.

Based on our findings we can state the following:

First, although religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed in the South Caucasus, the national churches of Armenia and Georgia still have a privileged status before the state. At the same time, governmental favouritism of religion is much lower in Azerbaijan, yet authorities there tend to regulate religious affairs more rigorously than in Georgia and Armenia. The reason why Azerbaijan defends religious pluralism using non-European means (authoritarianism, control, etc.) is that the current regime perceives transnational Islamic movements as a threat to national security. Neither of these options—"privileged status by default" nor "religious pluralism through

excessive control"—provide a neat platform where EU norms and values could be easily transplanted. On the contrary, these countries have seriously challenged the operational basis for EU normative power.

Second, the EU has proven its limited soft power potential in the South Caucasus. It remains attractive but only to a relative degree. Public opinion polls show more favourable attitudes towards EU integration in Georgia and less favourable attitudes in Azerbaijan. This fact also conditions the set-up of EU policy tools that are instrumental in advocating for change. Whereas core elements revolve around the human rights agenda and conditionality is applied, the EU's normative power is challenged by conservative value orientations which are backed up by religious institutions and politicians seeking to maximize their political gains. The relationship between the EU and the South Caucasus countries is not only diversified but also deeply asymmetric—meeting the prescribed norms will not be rewarded with an invitation to accession talks.

Third, Georgia and Armenia have been more engaged in the Europeanization process than Azerbaijan, which has preferred to avoid human rights dialogue and in many ways has not been inclined to cope with the EU's normative agenda. Georgia especially is the only one of the three which has passed a comprehensive anti-discrimination law protecting homosexuals from discrimination. However, the imposition of EU norms has had a minimal effect on the way these societies treat their ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. Accommodation of European norms has been a welcoming act only on the surface, while the implementation of new regulations in practice has been problematic.

Fourth, Armenia and Georgia have the most religious societies, at one end of the religious spectrum, while Azerbaijan sits closer to the opposite secular extreme. At the same time, Georgian society is not only the most religious but also the most open and inclusive towards other religious traditions. Armenian society, on the contrary, is the most religiously exclusive in the cross-national comparison. Although statistics reveal the prevailing negative attitudes towards sexual minorities in all three countries, with the least tolerant society being Azerbaijan's in all possible categories, other expert views emphasize a few existing social niches which may tolerate more diversity in Azerbaijan than in its Christian neighbouring countries.

Finally, despite the different development tracks and varied intensity of relations with the EU, the public support for EU integration in the South Caucasus continues to be a dominant feature not only in Georgia but also in Armenia and Azerbaijan. By 2013 the Europeanization of the region, under the guidance of firm and principled support for the protection of LGBTI communities, had had no effect on public perceptions of EU integration. However, that effect seemed to appear in Georgia two years later. Last but not least, we did not identify any correlation between religiosity and anti-European mood based on a cross-tabulation test. Quite the contrary, the most religious group was also the biggest supporter of EU integration. This fact alone invites continued research on the EU's normative power and its potential to win hearts and minds in the future.

Notes

1 Along this line of thinking, the Hayartun Cultural, Educational, and Youth Centre, an organization affiliated with the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia, has complained about 'an orchestrated action between the state and the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church aimed at destruction of religious minorities' cultural heritage' (Isakhanyan 2014, p. 8).
2 '5.1. No provision of this law may be interpreted as restricting the rights of religious associations on the basis of freedom of religion (including the right to religious worship), provided that the exercise of those rights does not violate public order, public safety or the rights of other persons; 5.2. No provision of this law may be interpreted as contradicting the Constitution of Georgia and the Constitutional Agreement between the State and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia' (International Labor Organization 2014).
3 Cross-state data is accessible from the Association of Religion Data Archives, 'National Profiles', available at www.thearda.com/internationalData/index.asp [Accessed 21 November 2016]
4 In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) also found that Azerbaijan's 2009 religion law yielded national authorities 'unlimited discretionary power' to define and prosecute what they considered (falsely or not) to be illegal religious activity.
5 Here the figures are given on a 10-point scale where 0 means the least regulation and 10 means the most.
6 See *Georgia: Between Modernity and the Middle Ages*, http://www.gwi-boell.de/en/2013/05/30/georgia-between-modernity-and-middle-ages [Accessed 21 November 2016]; *LGBT Rights in the South Caucasus*, www.gwi-boell.de/en/2013/05/30/lgbt-rights-south-caucasus [Accessed 21 November 2016]
7 'Numerous violent attacks were carried out against LGBTI individuals; several murders were reported and investigated throughout the year' (ILGA–Europe 2016, p. 40).

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10 Russia as a counter-normative soft power

Between ideology and policy

Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk

The concept of soft power is usually referred to as one of the most important components of states' policies towards each other, grounded in the force of attraction as opposed to coercion and projection of either military or economic strength. The high popularity of this concept in academic and political discourses can be explained by its ability to conceptualize power through norms and identities, and relate them to non-coercive policy tools.

A product of American political thought after the end of the Cold War, soft power then expanded to describe the non-military policies of other countries and became not only an analytical concept, but also part of the self-descriptive language used by policymakers themselves. The concept worked rather well under two primary conditions: when applied to Western countries, and when describing the power projections of actors motivated by a relatively coherent and consistent set of norms, either promoted as allegedly universal or perceived as having a superior value over other norms. Therefore, soft power is by and large a useful concept in the case of more or less fixed and relatively well-established identities and their concomitant narratives.

Yet it is exactly at this point that the research puzzle starts: what happens to the idea of soft power when it is put into practice by non-Western countries, and when it comes to situations of competing identities and unstable narratives? In these cases, soft power needs problematization and fine-tuning, which is the main purpose of this chapter. Its focus is on the intricacies of Russia's soft power projections in the South Caucasus, with particular attention paid to the role of the religious dimensions of this complex process.

We base our analysis on various sociolinguistic and cultural semiotic approaches, a combination that opens interesting research perspectives when it comes to concepts as complex and rich in meaning as soft power. First, focusing on the semiotic structure of soft power discourses reveals that

> [W]ords alone often cannot carry the power that they often have—the force of affect is needed to explain how words resonate with audiences and have political effects beyond their mere verbal utterance (…) There is no "natural" link between words and the objects, identities and so on that

> they purport to express (…) The attachment of signifiers to signified (…) is dependent upon an affective push prompting the construction of this linkage. (Solomon 2014, p. 729–730)

This approach is of particular importance for soft power studies since attraction is a largely performative and situational concept, especially when it comes to its religious dimensions.

Second, the discipline of cultural semiotics offers a good lens for exploring the process of re-signification, or redeployment of terms in previously unexplored or even "unauthorized" contexts. Re-signification is mostly used by agents located at the margins of political structures who wish to change previous meanings by either expanding the scope of concepts or by folding other meanings into them (Schippers 2009). Re-signification is closely related to language games. Following the logic of Wittgenstein, language has neither ontological stability nor unity; consequently, there is no authoritative, determinate collective "we" that would appeal to a mental or metaphysical source of identity or authority, or unveil 'literal, uninterpreted truth' (Robinson 2009, p. 12–13). The language games approach claims that each concept decomposes under closer scrutiny into a series of 'pictures' of reality with their own 'playful and fluid' (Robinson 2009, p. 12–13) contexts. In this chapter, we develop this argument and project it onto Russia's soft power in the South Caucasus.

Third, the combination of sociolinguistic and cultural semiotic perspectives makes it clear that soft power is not necessarily conducive to 'empowerment through the process of co-optation' (Gallarotti 2011, p. 29); as a 'representational force', it can be used to 'limit the options of the subjects at whom it is directed (…) It aims to close off its victims' options by promising them unthinkable harm unless they comply in word and in deed with the force-wielder's demands' (Mattern 2005, p. 602). This thesis can be applied to Russian soft power in the South Caucasus, which makes it quite distinct from the EU's operationalization of the concept.

This chapter is structured as follows. We start with an academic unpacking of the concept of soft power, emphasizing some methodological issues important for approaching it as a research category. Then we discuss the Russian way of tackling soft power as a policy tool, underlining its specificity in comparison to the EU. In this context, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) deserves particular attention. Finally, we project the concept of soft power onto Moscow's policies in the South Caucasus in general, and Georgia in particular, again explicating the ROC's policy niche. This chapter is based on 30 in-depth interviews with local practitioners—Georgian priests, politicians, experts and officials—conducted in Tbilisi in August 2015 and August–September 2016.

Soft power: an academic screening of the concept

Academically, the concept of soft power can be discussed from different angles. For one, it can be approached from both epistemological and ontological perspectives. On the one hand, the very idea of soft power was initially

conceived as a cognitive tool of analysis and therefore was an element of a variety of academic discourses. Soft power does not engender a theory of its own: it can be conceptualized from competing research perspectives. Realists would claim that developing a soft power strategy could be helpful to "soften" the harder approaches to indispensable military, financial and economic relations. This reasoning might be well in line with the model of 'the prudent, benevolent hegemon that understands the limits of coercive power and so promotes legitimacy and emulation of its values while tolerating pluralism and diversity' (Schweller and Priess 1997, p. 3). Constructivists (Hopf 2013, p. 343) would emphasize the socially determined components of soft power as a cultural and ideational phenomenon, grounded in the operationalization of attractive ideas for engaging with other members of the international society and influencing their policies. For social constructivists, this type of power would be an expression of the acceptance of ideas supported by material resources and institutions.

On the other hand, ontologically, soft power ultimately became the name for a policy tool and thus an allegedly indispensable element of the policy-making techniques that governments design and apply. These techniques are very broad—from using national literary tradition as a crucial element of cultural policy (e.g. Bulgakov diplomacy, see Schillinger 2015) to the practice of hiring an army of paid commentators (known as "bots") on social networks (Klishin 2015).

In addition, soft power can be deployed in debates between universalism and particularism. In the course of its functioning, soft power—like many other political concepts—has acquired the character of a universal policy tool detached from the specific conditions of its emergence and development. Indeed, 'soft power is a product of a particular moment' (Hayden 2012, p. 30). As the Russian analyst Fiodor Lukyanov (2015) mentioned, soft power as a term was coined at the end of the Cold War when the winning side—the West—was looking for plausible explanations for its victory that could extend beyond those particular historical circumstances, as well as beyond materialist explanations. Yet, there is debate as to whether this concept, having originated in specific conditions, can be easily transferable to other situations with different constellations of actors and motivations. There are voices—in particular, in the Valdai Club—predicting that globally, soft power as a concept is in crisis and is facing the prospect of decline (Tsygankov 2016).

Since soft power is neither trans-historical nor universal, but rather a context-specific concept, it might take different forms in the course of its functioning and evolution, and its content might also alter over time, depending on the structures of hegemonic discourse it is embedded in. The binary soft-hard power distinction primarily reflected the dominant Western attitudes in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when other dichotomies were in wide use as well (hard versus soft security, democracy versus autocracy, freedom versus non-freedom and so forth). Yet these binaries lost their cognitive potential and political appeal as the structure of international relations shifted towards greater complexity and lesser validity of simplistic divisions

and partitions. In postmodern discourse, binaries are viewed as irrelevant and lacking in explanatory force. That is why they might be substituted by a group of more synthetic terms such as smart power, hybrid power and so forth.

This has practical repercussions for the South Caucasus: it is typical for Georgian experts to claim that Russia's soft power is wrapped in—and thus is indistinguishable from—hard security tools (Kapanadze 2015, p. 180). There is a strong perception among policy experts in the Eastern Partnership countries that Russia is interested in soft power tools as a prelude to territorial expansion (Grigas 2016). Russia's understanding of soft power might even call into question the appropriateness of applying this concept to Russian regional policies in the common neighbourhood. As a close watcher of Russia's policy towards Georgia observed: 'It is probably time to consider another term, because this power is not really soft and it's not really used in the spirit of the Joseph Nye's definition' (Civil Georgia 2015). Therefore, the conceptual lucidity of the term and its interlacing with opposing concepts is a matter of debate. It can't be ruled out that with sceptical attitudes towards soft power on the rise both in Russia and among its neighbours, the whole concept will be superseded by other terms that might more adequately reflect the increasingly complex and hybrid fabric of Russian forces of attraction in the world.

Finally, the concept of soft power can be tackled from structural and agential perspectives, which will be discussed in detail in the rest of this section. From the perspective of individual agents' policies, soft power is often reduced to branding nations as places with attractive tourist destinations (resort areas, hospitality), world famous cuisine, etc. The image-making ingredients of soft power often serve basically for decorative and demonstrative purposes, aiming at furnishing nation brands with appealing elements, but not necessarily as starting points for communication, socialization and agenda setting.

This is why a structural approach to soft power seems more pertinent: it elucidates soft power's ability to set an attractive agenda that other members of the international society would voluntarily follow, based on such universalizable notions as good and evil or truth and falsehood that can't be constrained geographically and kept within national borders. In this light, soft power is an intersubjective concept denoting the ability to cause spillover effects by changing the policies of other international actors without using coercive means. Soft power can therefore be seen not merely as a tool manipulated by states, but as a complex system of hegemonic relations with a plethora of international partners and interlocutors. Thus, soft power is a structural type of power relations, necessitating not a unilateral power projection, but investments in reshuffling the communicative environment to facilitate the achievement of policy goals, both ideological and practical.

From a structural vantage point, an ideal model for soft power encompasses a number of components. First, it is a discourse-based sociolinguistic construct (Mattern 2005) aimed at normative and analytical framing, conducive to "discourse control" and domination (Rothman 2011). In this context, the role of different public discourses and their producers is central. Along the

lines of Michel Foucault's theorizing, one may claim that the conditions for the emergence of different elements of "discursive power" or "language power" (Antoniades 2003, p. 31), as well as 'heterogeneous discursive zones' and their genealogies, are important elements of soft power research (Widder 2004, p. 416). This is consistent with the constructivist premise of a social construction of reality (Lupovici 2009), with epistemic communities as its key stakeholders. From a Foucauldian perspective, the 'regimes of power/knowledge' are always contextual and situational, and can inform different 'styles of political thinking' (Merlingen 2006, p. 183). Soft power is one of these styles, grounded in promoting images and messages of attraction through a plethora of communicative mechanisms (Flynn 2004).

The second structural element of soft power is its grounding in norms and values. Soft power not only embeds technical tools for either influencing or manipulating policymaking machinery and public opinion in targeted countries, but also contains a strong normative potential often sustained by an identification with certain political values. Therefore, soft power connotes a consensual order based on shared values, expectations, perceptions and understandings, and presupposes a value-laden identity capable of setting the standards of social and political behaviour, mostly based on externalizing successful domestic experiences and projecting them beyond national borders. It is on this basis that soft power techniques incorporate the potential to create positive incentives.

A third structural ingredient of soft power is communication and information management, performed by the state in conjunction with other actors as a crucial element of power projection. A country might possess huge cultural potential for attraction, yet it can be considered a source of soft power only if others accept it in this capacity (Larsen 2014, p. 7). Attraction is not natural, but always constructed and communicated (Mattern 2005, p. 597).

Still, agential level should not be ignored, since soft power is an intrinsically diverse concept that comes in different modalities, three of which seem to be of the utmost importance. The first encompasses cases in which the application of soft power is a matter of principle. The EU is the most illustrative example of this category, projecting its value-based normative power onto neighbouring countries. The essence of EU soft power is in projecting the normative experiences of regional integration within Europe to its periphery. In fact, through a mosaic of dialogues and multilateral cooperation mechanisms, the EU can promote shared governance structures consisting of concentric circles—from those neighbours which accept the *acquis communautaire* to those partners with whom legal harmonization and convergence have to be negotiated. In doing so, Brussels wishes to transform its partners through the force of attraction (Stavrakakis 2005). According to Ringmar, 'the EU has next to no "power over" anything at all—not even, in fact, proper power over its own constituent units—yet it evidently has a considerable amount of "power to"' (2007, p. 202). In this sense, the EU is sympathetic to the concept of soft power as 'the ability to shape the future' (Gaventa 2007, p. 214).

The second type applies to relatively small countries devoid of strong military resources, for whom soft power is a matter of necessity. Due to the American roots of the concept, soft power is often referred to as an attribute of major powers, yet smaller powers might have their own ways and means (though rather modest in practical terms) to practice soft power. For example, Georgia can be an object of Russia's and the EU's soft power projects, yet in the meantime can generate and develop its own soft power resources aimed at rebuilding communication with the two breakaway territories, improving its reputation in the West and positioning itself as a good neighbour to Russia, including as a competitive tourist destination.

At a third agential level, soft power can be considered a matter of choice, since it has an alternative (hard power). This is the case for all strong military actors, including Russia. Soft and hard power can often be complementary rather than antithetical instruments, and soft power resources can be converted into hard power gains, which Russia demonstrated by annexing Crimea in the immediate aftermath of the Sochi Olympics, an event that was designed—and widely perceived—as the heyday of Russia's soft power exposure. It is from here that we start discussing the specific characteristics of soft power in Russia.

Soft power à la russe

The main hurdle of applying the concept of soft power to Russian foreign policy is its dual nature: it is both vilified as a Western tool aimed at undermining Russia and its neighbours from the inside (Monaghan 2016, p. 2), and admired as an effective instrument that allows goals to be attained without the risks of applying force. Some experts claim that soft power as a concept is alien to Russian foreign policy philosophy (Bai 2015), but Russia nevertheless develops its own soft power instruments. This duality, which is deeply embedded in the dominant interpretations of soft power among the Russian elite, has parallel effects: on the one hand, it makes it impossible to reject the concept as allegedly alien and intentionally subversive, if not dangerous, and on the other hand, it weakens the contestation of the concept that Russia itself is eager to put into practice. Therefore, through the idea of soft power, Russia both detaches itself from the West and associates with it, as part of a wider situation of indecision over the impossibility of both integrating Russia with the West and repudiating it.

As one of the countries for whom soft power is a matter of choice, Russia shares a lot with the US but radically differs from most of its post-Soviet neighbours and the EU. American authorship of the soft power concept is largely interpreted in Russia as an indication of the auxiliary status of soft power in great powers' diplomatic arsenals, and as an addition to otherwise force-based foreign policy that many in the Kremlin are definitely eager to imitate. The US serves as an important reference point in Russian soft power debates due to the perpetually available option of switching to a

"real", hard-power-based policy, which Russia has done in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria.

However, Russia's interpretation of the US legacy of the concept is highly selective. Moscow appreciates the alleged freedom that the concept allows for using coercion, but completely discards important—and often overlooked—points of consonance between soft power and the democratic peace theory. The latter is grounded in the assumption that in a community of democratic nations, the use of hard power is impractical and should be avoided by all means, and the promotion of democratic forms of governance can be an efficient strategy. Influencing the behaviour of foreign powers can, in most cases, be obtained through "soft" methods, by coordinating and setting up common discourses on norms, principles and rules.

Yet Russia, duly (but tacitly) comprehending its mismatch with Western standards and norms, not only refuses to relate effective soft power with ideas of democracy, human rights, accountability and the rule of law, but intentionally reduces the whole concept to its technical elements. From the viewpoint of many soft power practitioners in Russia, their mission is basically to establish information channels with societies in foreign countries for simply delivering Russia's official position and, if possible, for engaging foreign opinion makers in some kind of communication (Burlinova 2015a). In other words, the dominant understanding of soft power in Russia radically simplifies the concept to the point of merely clarifying the policies of the Russian government and interacting with friendly social and political groups of "Russia-understanders", but not with those a priori—and in a very primordialist manner—considered Russia's enemies (Fenenko 2016). Russia thus appears to adhere to a rather narrow definition of soft power as an information strategy aimed at supplying viewpoints that differ from the dominant Western discourses, without an overarching aim of developing policy content that might radically change Russia's image abroad (Burlinova 2015a). In this narrow interpretation, soft power is an instrument to persuade the undecided, rather than a tool to deal with rivals, competitors and adversaries (Fenenko 2016). Neither Russia's fine-tuning to meet the expectations of its neighbours nor changing of its pre-existing political agendas is included in this parochial vision. This exclusion attests to the semiotically self-referential and auto-communicative nature of Russia's soft power: 'Russians try to assure themselves that their country is great' (from an interview with a Georgian expert, representative of a US foundation in Tbilisi, July 2015).

In the search for its own, country-specific version of soft power, a Russian expert speaks about a 'model of thousand threads' as a conservative alternative to 'the policy of supporting the opposition. It can be almost completely depoliticized, with progress channelled into sociocultural, economic and scientific spheres' (Sutyrin 2016). Therefore, Russia's operationalization of soft power is a typical example of the appropriation of a Western concept and the attribution of different meanings to it through the process of discursive re-signification. What Russia calls soft power is far removed from the original

meaning of the idea as deeply embedded in liberal thinking. Russia's soft power is an instrument to stimulate the diffusion of illiberal practices and institutions that are ultimately in contradiction with the core liberal ideas of personal freedom of choice and plurality of opinions.

The conceptual ambiguity of soft power in Russia is accompanied by fragmentation within the Russian political class. Soft power is not a concept strategically accepted by all bodies within the Russian government. It is mainly promoted by an agency named Rossotrudnichestvo[1], shared by a certain part of the expert community aware of the debates on soft power in the West and welcomed by institutions that functionally can take advantage of the concept (such as universities and policy think tanks). Other branches of the government might be either insensitive to the soft power agenda, or inimical to having it as an important reference point for Russian diplomacy. Natalia Burlinova, who chairs the "Creative Diplomacy" group, acknowledges that 'Russian bureaucrats are very sceptical to soft power instrument, they don't understand what this is all about' (Khromakov 2016). Soft power played no role in launching a campaign to expel Turkish students from Russian universities in the aftermath of the crisis in bilateral relations (which erupted after the incident involving a Russian military jet shot down by the Turkish military in fall 2015). Furthermore, the annexation of Crimea can hardly be attractive to most of Russia's partners in Eurasian integration; it has only increased their sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis potential Russian incursions.

It is against this background that we can discuss the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in soft power promotion. In the literature, there is a tendency to treat the external activity of the ROC as an intrinsic element of Russian soft power machinery. The ROC indeed positions itself as 'an imperial Church' (Chapnin 2015). The Russian imperial body is reconstituted by various border-transcending practices, which in some cases can be conducive to classical land grabs, but also stretch far beyond them to include religious diplomacy.

The reality on the ground, however, is more complex. Analysis of specific soft power projects (implemented under the aegis of Rossotrudnichestvo, the Gorchakov Fund, the "Creative Diplomacy" group, etc.) attests to a rather limited space for interaction between the state and state-patronized organizations, on the one hand, and the ROC on the other. The ROC itself does not include soft power in its lexicon, preferring to speak about missionary activity in countries with a strong Orthodox presence. This makes the ROC's role in sustaining Russia's soft power diplomacy rather limited in scope, as well as in terms of procedural policies.

Russia in the South Caucasus: soft power projections

In this section, we switch to regional projections of Russian soft power in the South Caucasus. We start with Russia's soft power potential in a field of normative competition with the EU, and then identify the role of the ROC in the system of Russian soft power.

The Russia–EU frame

Russia's soft power in the South Caucasus can be approached from the perspective of its competitive interaction with EU normative power, which creates an inherent ambiguity. Even those soft power promoters such as Natalia Burlinova, who explicitly position themselves within the Eurasian paradigm and call for 'an absolutely autonomous integration project' under Russia's auspices, favour borrowing the EU's experiences of public diplomacy and external communication on a technological level (Burlinova 2015b).

However, distinctions between Russia and the EU are crucial. First, EU policies can be characterized by a combination of normative ends (democracy/peace promotion) and normative means (non-coercive diplomacy). In Russia's case, one might see much less articulated and more diverse normative ends (from Eurasianist ideology to protection of Russian speakers), with a strong reliance on non-normative means (military force and economic pressure). This dissimilarity is substantial, since Russia might use hard power arguments as a means to counter EU soft/normative power. This is the case in Russia's policy towards Georgia (for example, in delineating a border between Georgia and Russian-patronized South Ossetia) and Armenia (in the sense of making Armenia's integration with the Eurasian Economic Union a de facto precondition for protecting them from possible conflicts with Azerbaijan).

Secondly, the EU is a new and experimental type of institutional actor with no legacy of the past, while Russia does have this legacy (traditions of Soviet mentality, inertia, etc.). This explains Russia's heavy reliance on memory politics as an ideational tool aimed at promoting an explicitly conservative agenda in its areas of interest, including the South Caucasus.

Thirdly, in the South Caucasus, as elsewhere in the common neighbourhood, the EU is motivated by the promotion of its norms. In the meantime, the driving motive behind Russia's soft power is the widely spread conviction that Russia is not appreciated enough, which leads to a reactive and self-victimizing policy. Konstantin Kosachev, the former head of Rossotrudnichestvo, on numerous occasions claimed that Russia's "real" achievements are greater than what its image, which is being intentionally blackened, would suggest. In the South Caucasus, this attitude leads to more emphasis on a realist discourse focused on Russia's resources in security and economics, rather than on adhering to a certain type of normative conduct.

Fourth, the EU uses its soft power to expand the scope of choices and alternatives for the countries of the common neighbourhood, and acts in accordance with the concept of governmentality, conceived by Michel Foucault as a power technique conducive to expanding the space for freedom of choice to its objects. Conversely, Russia's soft power is meant to reduce and limit the scope of free choice for its neighbouring countries, and punish those who would prefer to associate with the EU or NATO.

Fifth, the EU adheres to laic/secular liberal norms at the core of its soft power, while Russia uses religious channels and theological connotations

in its diplomacy. Georgia is a good illustration of this instrumentalization of the Orthodox faith as an additional tool for keeping neighbours under Russia's sway.

Challenging the West

Under the third presidential term of Vladimir Putin, Russia reassessed previous attempts to socialize itself into the European normative order as having failed. Thus, Moscow ultimately opted for a strategy of contesting these norms, which inevitably implied constructing new normative borders with Europe. Being explicitly illiberal, Russian soft power aims to reach audiences in neighbouring countries that share anti-EU, anti-multicultural, anti-tolerance and anti-globalist policy tenets. Paradoxically,

> [I]t is actually Russia's reaction, rather than democracy promotion per se, that most strongly influences domestic developments in these countries (…) Russia tends not to explicitly counteract Western efforts at democracy promotion per se but, rather, at first, promotes and supports pro-Russian actors whenever possible inside the countries, and, failing that, moves to undermine the capacity of the "target countries" to pursue integration with the West. (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015, p. 469)

It is through this counter-normativity as a set of ethical and moral demands (Brassett and Higgott 2003) that the foundations for the dominant conceptualization of soft power during Putin's third presidential term have been laid. Russia uses soft power not for the sake of fostering Europeanization and comprehensive modernization, but rather for voluntarily detaching itself from the group of democratic nations sharing common normative approaches to world politics. This strategy is not aimed at engineering new communicative spaces for shared norms, ideas and values, but rather at imposing Russian worldviews on Russia's neighbours. In this respect, soft power might correlate with the Russian neo-imperial project. As its pivotal element, Russia portrays itself as a global harbinger of the return to the era of sovereign nation states, with normative issues playing a key role in substantiating Russian ambitions.

Russia sees an opening in the South Caucasus in light of the EU's Eastern Partnership fatigue and uncertainty with regard to the region, and in the dissatisfaction of the South Caucasus with the EU's policies (Mchedlishvili 2016). Thus, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev claimed: 'Some deem that we should integrate into Europe. We shouldn't integrate anywhere (…) Moreover in today's situation of discrimination and Islamophobia (…) Can we be accepted? No. This is a bitter truth' (Rafigoglu 2015). Economic arguments are an important part of this discursive strategy—as a Russian expert suggests,

> [I]t becomes obvious that neither the US nor the EU can become drivers for Azerbaijan's economic growth, while the access to a newly integrated market of Eurasian Economic Union can play this role. If we add to this

> the strengthening of Russia's positions in the Middle East and the slow but steady economic growth in Russia, economic rapprochement between Baku and Moscow might be pretty rational. (Sputnik 2015)

A similar attitude could be applicable to the entire region:

> [T]he West's involvement in the area has been diminishing, as evidenced by the fact that countries like Georgia have been denied prospects of membership in the Euro–Atlantic structures and the significance of the Eastern Partnership has been waning. Russia's actions have also been a factor, albeit of a secondary and lesser importance. (Falkowski 2016)

Another Russian expert presumes that 'Georgian experts are wary of economic dominance of Turkey and Azerbaijan in their country. Many Georgian specialists indirectly lean towards creation of a counter-weight to this impact, having in mind Russia' (Markedonov 2015).

Russia's strategy of contesting the West contains a strong religious component. In the view of Patriarch Kirill, Russia's identity remains deeply Christian, while Europe has denied the concept of the Christian world and replaced it with the idea of European civilization. Therefore, on behalf of the ROC he proposed to adhere to the 'Christian choice' instead of the 'European choice', while claiming that there is a 'Russian understanding of Christianity' as a national ideal, presumably distinct from a more universal conception of faith (Inozemtsev 2015). Mitropolit Illarion, a former ROC representative to European organizations, predicts the collapse of European civilization unless it restores its true Christian traditions and roots (Illarion 2016).

This discourse might find fertile ground in a country like Georgia that 'is still struggling to come to terms with its past—even as it seeks closer ties with the west' (North 2015). For Moscow, accentuating cultural and religious affinity with Georgia is a political instrument that allows for emphasizing the incompatibility of traditional Orthodox values with the liberal emancipatory agenda of the EU, which allegedly 'calls for respecting sin' and 'forgets about nations and patriotism' (Devdariani 2014). Standing as testimony to this mindset is the parliamentary debate in Georgia on a blasphemy bill that was introduced in 2016 to make religious irreverence punishable by law, prompting concerns about freedom of expression in the devoutly Orthodox Christian society (Lomsadze 2016). The Georgian parliament has also introduced a ban on same-sex marriage (Nikuradze 2016). An interesting consonance of the two societies is the appearance of 'Orthodox Stalinists' in both countries (Desnitskiy 2016)—a paradoxical mix of religious and communist allegiances inimical to democracy.

Soft power and its contestation: a Georgian outlook

Shared Orthodox Christian principles represent a key element of Russian soft power in Georgia. They are promoted by the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and pro-Russian forces as an antidote to Western cultural projection.

This conservative rejection of Western values unites the Russian government and the ROC, and it resonates with the patriarchal and traditionalist attitudes prevalent in Georgian society. The GOC actively impedes the expansion of Western liberal values that aim to increase acceptance of sexual and religious minorities. As a result, the consolidation of Orthodox discourses inherently strengthens Russian influence in Georgia. This was demonstrated by the general elections held on 8 October 2016, which, for the first time in Georgia's post-Soviet history, heralded the entry into the legislature of a political party (the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia) with an explicitly anti-NATO platform.

While the GOC does not officially oppose the Georgian government's policies aimed at greater integration with the EU, it asserts that the West must accept Georgia as it is, along with its traditional mentality. Georgian Patriarch Ilia II has made a number of public statements denouncing what he perceives to be various Western threats to the Georgian people, their religious beliefs and cultural practices. These range from the promotion of LGBT lifestyles to the supposedly destructive influence of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter on children. The GOC has exhibited an unfriendly attitude towards the establishment of European norms on human rights and religious freedom on a number of occasions. For instance, in the early 2000s the GOC turned a blind eye to the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses by Vasil Mkalavishvili, an Orthodox priest who was eventually defrocked. Similarly, the GOC's reaction to anti-Muslim incidents in the villages of Nigvziani and Tsintskaro in late 2012 was largely muted. In addition, at the beginning of Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency the GOC took anti-Turkish positions and even argued that if Russia was considered an occupant, then Turkey might be viewed as an aggressor as well (Interview with the Ombudsman on Affairs of Religious Minorities, Tbilisi, 2015).

Nevertheless, Russia's counter-normative strategy of contesting Europe faces resistance in the South Caucasus. The Georgian case allows for the identification of major perceptual gaps between the two parties. The major source of disagreement is that for Russia soft power boils down to techniques of communication, while for Georgia it makes sense only as a substantive concept. In other words, Russia deems that attractiveness can be produced through information management, while Georgia expects Russia to become a more democratic and less aggressive country (NewsGeorgiaTV 2012); otherwise it will be perceived by many in Georgia as a part of the problem, not a part of the solution. As a Georgian member of parliament says,

> [W]e have adopted Christianity earlier than Russia, and this is an important part of our culture that definitely helps us in dialogue with co-believers, including Russians (…) Yet today we observe strange things [in Russia]. Orthodox ideology became a substitution to the Communist doctrine, with ideas beneficial to the Kremlin being widely circulated. We don't have this [in Georgia]. We have state policy and private beliefs. (Snob 2015)

Georgia, a country trying to strike a delicate balance between Europeanization and its Orthodox traditions, can hardly sustain the ROC's ambitions to put Russia at the centre of global transformations or downgrade the human rights dimension of these transformative processes (Solodovnik 2016). The ROC's sympathies to the Soviet past (Kovpak 2016) are also very unlikely to be welcomed in any post-Soviet countries building their own nation states. The nostalgia for the Soviet past in Georgia, whether in the form of Stalin souvenirs or Soviet-themed restaurants, is more for commercial purposes in the context of a rapidly growing tourist industry than it is actually resonating with the public at large (MIR24 2016).

The Georgian clerical establishment is heterogeneous; it includes a group of priests who hold liberal views, respect human rights and personal liberties and tend to be sceptical towards Russia. As one such priest related, the 'ROC can't be a communication channel between our countries. The Church can't effectively manage political issues. We see what Russia does. ROC is not autonomous and it is not a force of good' (Interview with Father Guram, Tbilisi, 2015). For members of this group, 'Russia is a matter of secondary importance. The West represents more topical issues' (Interview with the Ombudsman on Affairs of Religious Minorities, Tbilisi, 2015).

Even though the GOC and ROC share most rituals of worship and church services, in congregations across Georgia, Russia is largely perceived as an external aggressor. Some pro-Western priests are of the opinion—one that is also widespread in the Georgian expert community—that those who promote Russia as an alternative to the West probably work for the Russian government. As one priest noted, '(…) they [pro-Russian forces] are from the Georgian clergy and even though they cannot be officially "recruited" by the Russian FSB, they have affinity towards Russia, which means that they work for it unintentionally' (Interview with Father Alexander, Tbilisi, 2015). Therefore, there is an opinion in the Georgian expert community that the common Soviet background of both the ROC and the GOC lays the groundwork for close interaction between the Georgian and Russian Patriarchs and President Putin.

Many Georgian supporters of rapprochement with Russia simultaneously adhere to tough nationalist positions towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Markedonov 2015). The ROC's positions are also challenged by Abkhazia's religious circles. Dorofei, the head of the self-proclaimed Abkhaz Church, claims that instead of focusing on canonical services, the Moscow Patriarchate is more bent on fighting Western conspiracies. In his words,

> Russian Orthodoxy, unfortunately, is coming back to its pre-revolutionary way of life that led to revolution and the destruction of the church itself. I am sad about a medieval understanding of the church mission, with priests thinking of themselves as grandees and the ensuing enrichment (…) This explains alienation from the church that has lost reputation among certain groups within Russia. (Koshik 2014)

The schism within the Abkhaz Orthodox Church—between loyalties to the Moscow Patriarchate, the Constantinople Patriarchate and the independents—constitutes a major challenge to Russian soft power in the South Caucasus. In spite of former Abkhaz President Ankvab's direct appeal to Patriarch Kirill, the Patriarch still refuses to recognize the Abkhaz Orthodox Church and take it under his canonical jurisdiction (Kuchuberiya 2013). This position not only creates a feeling of uncertainty between the ROC and the Kremlin's policy of integrating Abkhazia with Russia, but is also lambasted in Abkhazia as undermining its claims for independence from Georgia.

In Abkhazia, clergy of Georgian origin continue to hope for the unity of all canonical territories under the Georgian Orthodox Church (Hieromonk Dorofey 2006). It is not surprising that the Abkhazian clergy's plans to create their own church with assistance from the Moscow Patriarchate were bolstered after the war of 2008. However, the ROC took a pragmatic stance, not recognizing the independence of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church (Diocese). Russian Patriarch Kirill stressed that both Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue to fall under the canonical jurisdiction of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The ROC did not challenge the results of the August 2008 war but followed the principle of respecting canonical territories (Venediktova 2013). As a result, the Tbilisi Patriarchate refused to recognize the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which proclaimed its independence from Moscow.

This is how a representative of the Georgian government described the ROC's role in Georgia's breakaway regions:

> ROC, in fact, plays a double game in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although officially it does not extend canonical jurisdiction over these territories, in practice ROC administers the Abkhaz Diocese. Georgian churches are remodelled in Russian style. For instance, we know that construction of a Russian church commenced in Tskhinvali a few months ago. A Russian bishop from Vladikavkaz regularly attends military parades in Tskhinvali. This is a policy of eliminating any trace of Georgian Orthodox Church. Georgian priests are ousted, which makes the conduct of church services in Georgian impossible. This is an unfriendly policy. (Interview with a representative of the Agency on Religious Affairs of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2015)

According to a Georgian official,

> [Patriarch] Ilia knows that the Kremlin holds the keys. What raises concerns are Russia's imperial aspirations, its occupation of the Georgian lands (…) Since we still have these unsolved questions and the ROC does not violate the canonical rights [of the GOC] with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, we have to talk to Russia (…) Yet this is a trap, and GOC steps into it (…) Actually I think that Moscow is ready to return our

> territories, but the price will be too high. It means no Euro-integration. In fact, it means to capture Georgia. (Interview with Ombudsman on Affairs of Religious Minorities, Tbilisi, 2015)

Politically, the ROC's stance yielded mixed results: the head of the GOC held firm in his insistence that Georgia would ultimately retrieve its lost territories (Rosbalt 2013). In the meantime, he mentioned that Patriarch Kirill of Moscow does everything possible to help restore the unity of Georgia (Georgia Online 2013). Of course, reactions to this statement in Abkhazia were predictably negative (Damenia 2013), which illustrates the potential controversies and political repercussions of the religious aspects of soft power.

Conclusion

The ideational structure of Russian soft power in the South Caucasus is based on moral arguments constitutive of Russia's conservative agenda, and includes substantial religious components when it comes to launching Russia's counter-normative project. Many of Russia's neighbours would confirm that cultural (soft-power-based) and geopolitical instruments reinforce each other (Bonicelli 2014) as elements of Russia's foreign policy. Yet these instruments resonate differently in different countries. Armenia is the most responsive to the appeal for Eurasian integration as a shield against possible security troubles over Nagorno-Karabakh. Georgia is largely disinterested in Russia's Eurasian offer, yet is very susceptible to religious arguments built on a common Orthodox platform. Azerbaijan might share much of Russia's scepticism of European liberalism, yet remains as loath to join the Eurasian Economic Union as Georgia is.

The case of Russia raises a number of new questions pertinent to soft power. One of them relates to the inversion of the concept of attraction, from its taken-for-granted liberal version to something constrastingly constructed as a mix of conservative norms, propaganda and disinformation accompanied by the enactment of military force. Initially, soft power was used in the cultural context of Western standards and norms, which gained predominance long before the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Communist world system. Nowadays, in Russia's case, soft power is a more vague concept whose academic and political validity is contested by many authors. However, what is absolutely clear is that soft power has to be understood as a set of policy technologies that involve think tanks and policy foundations, mass media, education and cultural diplomacy, and are meant to create parallel spaces of information management and political mobilization. These technologies work differently, depending on each country's context.

We have also found that Russia's soft power exists as an object of discourse, yet doesn't always translate into recurrent and self-sustaining policy practices. Thus, it drastically differs from the EU's soft power apparatus with its legal

and institutional backing and the distribution of roles between state and non-state actors. In many respects, Russian soft power functions differently—it is exercised as power at a distance that does not always take institutional form, and relies on mostly informal communicative structures.

As we have seen in the case of Georgia, the integration of religious components into the Russian model of soft power complicated its structure and content, and in the meantime expanded the space for contestation and resistance. Georgia's example demonstrates that Russia projects soft power through interaction between the ROC and GOC. In other words, Orthodox faith is one of the integral elements of Russian soft power in Georgia. At the same time, soft power is not simply projected by Russia; it is actually co-produced and reproduced by local actors (experts, journalists and policymakers), who attach their own meaning to it and in the process adjust it to Georgian realities, which often creates counter-discourses of anti-imperial resistance and contestation.

Note

1 Rossotrudnichestvo became an object of harsh criticism for its failure to practically assist Russian compatriots living abroad, and even in mismanaging state funds; see Regnum 2015.

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Part V

Prospects

11 Prospects for thinking about soft power beyond Joseph Nye

Andrey Makarychev

This book was intended to enrich the extant understandings of soft power with examples from and references to religious discourses and practices that were not originally part of the soft power debate in the West. However, like many other concepts with a strong attachment to their founding fathers, the idea of soft power is very much linked to its initial meanings—articulated, in this specific case, by the American political scholar Joseph Nye. It is Nye's legacy that has widely promoted the idea of soft power in both academic and policymaking circles, and secured its global recognition as one of the most popular and cognitively lucid tools in political analysis.

Yet, as with many widely used concepts, the meaning of soft power may have changed over time. Nye's approach to soft power left many issues unresolved: in fact, he was more interested in distinguishing the hard from the soft in his interpretation of power dynamics than in problematizing and contextualizing what attraction is and how it is socially constructed in different policy environments. For Nye, attraction was more or less evident—a set of cultural practices grounded in liberal normative tradition that appeared unchallenged at the end of the Cold War.

Today, a quarter-century later, some of Nye's overt or covert presumptions need recontextualization and fine-tuning, along with new frames and reference points for conceptualizing soft power. One of these initial presumptions was morally and ethically grounded: after the Cold War, hard power was increasingly considered not only ineffective, but also morally reproachable. By contrast, the newly discovered soft power was—almost consensually—seen as more efficient and grounded in higher moral standards of non-violence and consensus-seeking. However, the distinction between the two types of power along moral lines needs further problematization, since quite often it is an abstention from applying force that might be seen as the morally questionable stand; and some non-violent (and thus considered soft power) techniques of power projection can be contested from ethical and moral viewpoints. This is the case of propagandistic disinformation campaigns, manipulative interference in elections, proselytism, etc.

Another of Nye's initial assumptions was that hard and soft power appear to connote two ideal models. Yet neither of them ought to be taken autonomously; as two extreme poles in an endlessly broad spectrum of modalities of power, they are useful basically for showing contrasts between the two opposing or even conflicting models, but definitely not for covering the whole range of power relations. That is why the most interesting topic of research would be to see what lies between the hard and soft versions of power. For example, how shall we qualify economic instruments of foreign policy? Some of them create incentives (attractive labour market), while others are used for economically blackmailing and even strangulating entire countries (discontinuation of energy supplies). Where shall we place smart power? How are propaganda, disinformation and various manipulative media techniques related to soft power? And how close to hard power is hybrid warfare that encompasses symbolic violence and coercive measures?

In Nye's interpretation, soft power can also be understood as a means of preventing and avoiding undesirable conflicts between states. This might be right in many instances, but soft power can also generate political clashes, hostilities and animosity—for example, between different religious groups. Apparently, considering the contemporary geopolitical situation, the advent of soft power techniques did not decrease the level of conflict in international relations. Moreover, soft power itself appears to be capable of generating its own ideational conflicts with strong explosive potential. This is particularly the case for norms and identities that are constitutive of ontological security and whose major reference points are collective selves with all the inevitable accompanying vulnerabilities. For example, the collision of the EU's liberal normative power and Russia's conservative project (in its "Russian world" or Eurasian versions) has set the scene for the Maidan revolution in Kyiv, with deadly consequences for the whole of Ukraine and beyond. Concomitantly, many governments, instead of embracing soft power and being attracted by its charms, have started developing measures to protect themselves against soft power emanating from their rivals or opponents, such as travel bans, prohibition of activities by foreign organizations (including religious ones), media projects aimed at counterbalancing foreign propaganda, etc.

Finally, in Nye's tradition, we as analysts tend to impute soft power to international actors, presuming—explicitly or implicitly—that these actors themselves use the same definition to describe their policies. Perhaps in many cases this is true, but not always. For example, churches might not think of themselves as soft power actors—they would most likely prefer to characterize themselves as centres of missionary activity or religious diplomacy. To avoid power connotations, practitioners on the ground might prefer to define their mission as nation branding rather than practicing soft power, for example.

Against this backdrop, soft power can definitely be discussed as a political category, yet many of those to whom soft power intentions are ascribed deny political categorization and prefer to define themselves in cultural and religious, rather than political, terms. In particular, churches usually position

themselves beyond politics (see Salome Minesashvili's mention in this volume of the dominant assessments in Georgia of the Pope's visit to Tbilisi as "political"). In the meantime, religious leaders are often supposed and expected to take sides on political issues—in Ukraine on the Russian interference, in Georgia on the prospects of Europeanization, and so forth. Churches in post-Soviet countries have had to clarify their attitudes towards purely laic concepts: the West, liberalism, cosmopolitanism, democracy, human rights, tolerance, discrimination, etc.

Concomitantly, religion became not only a matter of faith, but mostly a tool for national (or imperial) identity-making, from cultural bordering between "selves" and "others" to putting in practice divisive protective measures against foreign intruders. This is particularly the case when ontological security is at stake: those in Georgia who claim that the real threat to their country comes not from Russia but from the West espouse a sense of ontological security that diminishes the importance of the 2008 war and, vice versa, elevates the issues of Western "spiritual aggression" to the highest level of securitization. From this angle, survival becomes a religious and spiritual category, having little to do with geostrategy.

This duality—estrangement from politics and the simultaneous necessity to make political choices—adds new elements to religious actors' soft power roles that represent a fusion of religious activities with educational, cultural, civilizational, ethnic and linguistic programs. The resulting hybridity can be understood in this specific context as a multiplicity of actors and their rhizomatic interconnections with each other, as exemplified by the Gülenist global network, or the "Russian world" machinery that 'rests on the same logic of diffusion that animates the European democratic project, except that the objective is to subvert Western influences by fashioning or leveraging alternative ideas, ideologies, networks, institutions and incentives' (Lankina and Niemczyk 2015, p. 111).

Ultimately, it is only within the disciplines of political science and international relations that the hard–soft distinction remains functional and loyal to Nye's legacy. The switch to the academic vocabularies of other fields of study leads to a double deconstruction of the concept: first, the boundary between the hard and the soft becomes blurred and uncertain, and second, within each model (hard and soft power), a wide variety of different forms and modalities become visible. Religion is an important factor in both contexts: religious affiliations and allegiances might entail—or even reinforce—the application of force and violence, and as such religion can be studied as a peculiar domain for soft power techniques that might be distinct from governmental instruments.

In fact, political science and international relations did almost all they could to make the concept of soft power academically prominent—these disciplines described the specificity of this model of power, explained its distinction from hard power, and related soft power to a particular type of foreign policy conduct. To keep the concept afloat as a meaningful cognitive

instrument, it has to be further unpacked by other disciplines—above all cultural studies, sociology and semiotics. It is within these disciplines that the idea of attraction can be fine-tuned and contextualized, and different variants of soft power can be studied. We find sociological insights into the role of emotions in constructing attraction to be particularly relevant (especially when it comes to issues of religion), as well as contributions from critical discourse analysis on the roles of manipulation techniques in applying soft power, including playing with meanings, resignification and other language games. This might be helpful for understanding why and how in such regions as the South Caucasus the aggregate force of non-Western soft power projections contributes to contesting and challenging the liberal hegemonic narratives that originally gave birth to the very idea of soft power.

Reference

Lankina, T. and Niemczyk, K., 2015. 'Russia's Foreign Policy and Soft Power'. *In*: D. Cadier and M. Light, eds. *Russia's Foreign Policy. Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*. Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 97–113.

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