



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Unknown Suburbs: Azerbaijani Settlements of the Gardabani Municipality

2020

POLICY STUDY



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Introduction

Since declaring its independence, the Georgian state has been struggling with the integration of its ethnic minorities. The regions densely populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians have been passively involved in the social and political processes in Georgia. The combination of the legacy of Soviet 'national policy,' an ineffective educational system and socio-economic problems hinder the integration of these regions.

This paper will be devoted to the Gardabani municipality, an administrative entity with a significant Azerbaijani population. Several factors have determined the choice of this region for this study. Firstly, geographically speaking, the region represents a suburban area of the cities of Tbilisi and Rustavi. It can be considered as a part of 'greater Tbilisi/Rustavi' or a 'Tbilisi-Rustavi agglomeration.' Secondly, despite its proximity to Georgia's political and economic center, the Azerbaijani community in this region has been leading a parallel life and is disconnected from the country's social and political dynamics. Simultaneously, very little is known about this region and very little research has been carried out on its multi-ethnic population. Unlike the neighboring Marneuli municipality, which has been receiving increasing attention from academia, the media and the non-governmental sector, the Azerbaijani population in Gardabani remains neglected by academic and non-governmental bodies. For instance, there is no comprehensive academic research on the linguistic, historical, ethnologic, social and religious parameters of Azerbaijanis in Gardabani. The absence of reliable works leads to myths and uncertainties regarding Georgia's Azerbaijanis. Thirdly, the Gardabani municipality has been an artificially fabricated landmass with at least two culturally and geographically unrelated regions which leads to the lack of interaction between the ethnic Georgian and the Azerbaijani population.

Nevertheless, the Gardabani municipality has a significant potential due its strategic geographic location. Several strategic pipelines and the Georgian railway cross the region. In addition to infrastructural and economic development, using the potential of human resources is crucial in regional development. Incorporating the Azerbaijani population of the region in Georgia's domestic socio-political dynamics and removing the ethnic boundaries will reinforce the development of the region.

This paper will discuss the economy, religion, education, women's rights, organized crime, politics and inter-ethnic relationships in the Gardabani municipality. This paper is a first endeavor to describe this region's Azerbaijani population. I hope that this paper will become a source of guidance for practitioners, scholars, journalists and NGO activists and assist them to implement their projects in this region. I also hope that it will lead to more comprehensive research on this region.

Methodology

In 2019 I conducted comprehensive fieldwork in the Gardabani region. I visited the town of Gardabani, Tzakend, Nazarlo, Kesalo, Vakhtangisi, Jandara, Mughanlo, Aghtaklia, Karatakia, Ponichala and Karajalar. Throughout my visits, I recorded semi-structural in-depth interviews with 21 respondents of the following categories: elderly people, students, political activists,

teachers, religious figures, journalists and women's rights activists. In addition, I spent five days in the village of Nazarlo in order to have a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Azerbaijani villages. Interviews were conducted in the Georgian and Azerbaijani languages. The interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and are stored in the GFSIS's archive. Mindful of ethical and security considerations, the research ensures the anonymity of the respondents.

Aside from the interviews, the research relies heavily on the censuses of 2002 and 2014. These materials were crucial in order to illustrate the demographic and migration dynamics of the region. Furthermore, the official websites owned by Georgia's Ministry of Education enriched the paper with invaluable data about the schools in the region.

Key Findings of the Research

Economy

- Large-scale immigration to the Russian Federation and Turkey took place following the collapse of the USSR.
- Lilo market, Istanbul Bazaar in Rustavi and the car market in Rustavi play a vital role in the local economy.
- The number of ethnic Azerbaijani employees in the private sector (banks, markets, etc.) has increased.
- The urbanization process has been reinforced and the most popular destinations for locals are Tbilisi and Rustavi.
- Unemployment severely affects the local economy.
- Tourism does not exist in the Azerbaijani settlements of the Gardabani municipality.
- Industrial objects in Rustavi affect the ecology of neighboring Azerbaijani villages of the Kalinino territorial entity.

Religion

- The number of Sunnis and Shias is almost equal, while Sunnis slightly outnumber Shias.
- There was no massive mobilization of jihadi militants to the Syrian conflict.
- Some young Shias tend to convert to Sunni Islam.
- The Salafi community exists in the region. Their majority is concentrated in Ponichala whereas in the Gachiani zone and Nazarlo they are represented sporadically.
- The sectarianism between the Shia and Sunni population is in its infancy.

Education

- The 4+1 program played a positive role in the integration of young Azerbaijanis.
- Azerbaijani schools face a shortage of teachers.
- The process of building new kindergartens in Azerbaijani settlements has begun.
- The popularity of Georgian schools among Azerbaijani parents is growing year by year.

Politics

- The results of the last elections suggest that ethnic Azerbaijanis in Gardabani tend to vote for the opposition parties.

Women's Rights

- Arranged and underage marriages and the kidnapping of brides have been extremely problematic.
- Ethnic Azerbaijani women play a marginal role in the political and civil sector of the Gardabani municipality.

Organized Crime

- The influence of “thieves-in-law” has been expanded in the region.
- The illegal narcotics trade is thriving in Ponichala and to some extent in the Gachiani zone.

Inter-ethnic Relations

- The potential of ethnic conflict is extremely low.
- The debate over the municipal borders and status between the villages of Mughanlo and Sartichala has been problematic.
- Residents of remote villages such as Kesalo, Nazarlo, Vakhtangisi and Jandara have limited interaction with ethnic Georgians.

Geographic Dilemma

The Gardabani municipality is situated in eastern Georgia and administratively belongs to the Kvemo Kartli province. Sharing the border with Azerbaijan, the municipality has accommodated numerous strategic objects such as the railway connecting Georgia with Azerbaijan as well as several oil and gas pipelines. Gardabani is among the most geographically and ethnically diverse regions of Georgia. The southern part of the region is dominated by the arid Gardabani plateau whereas the northern part fluctuates between mountains and plains. The municipality incorporates several major clusters of Azerbaijani-majority settlements. The first cluster is known as the Gachiani zone, lies between Tbilisi and Rustavi and comprises the villages of Aghtaklia, Karatakia and Karajalar. Apart from these settlements, the village of Ponichala (alternative name of Soghanlugh) is located in the vicinity of this area but was included in the metropolitan area of Tbilisi in 2006.¹ The railway divides these villages from two large Georgian settlements, Gamarjveba and Poladaantkari. The second cluster occupies the territory between Rustavi and Gardabani and consists of villages bound to the Kalinino territorial entity, namely: Tazakend, Kalinino, Birlik, Akhalsheni and Ambartapa. The third cluster is located between Gardabani and the Georgian-Azerbaijani border and represents the villages of Nazarlo, Kesalo and Vakhtangisi. Other compact settlements of Azerbaijanis are the town of Gardabani itself and its satellite village of Kvemo Kapanakhchi as well as the semi-isolated villages of Jandara and Mughanlo situated in the northern part of the region.

¹ Decision of the Parliament of Georgia N 4173 (2006). On the Alteration of Administrative Borders of Tbilisi, Gardabani and Mtskheta Municipalities. Available at: www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/44278?publication=0

Figure 1. Major Azerbaijani Settlements in the Gardabani Municipality²

Village / Town	Census 2002	Census 2014
Gardabani	11 858	10 753
Ambartapa	131	700
Tazakend	1856	1185
Kalinino	1156	377
Birlik	1655	179
Akhalsheni	1184	420
Jandara	3118	1468
Kesalo	5612	4793
Nazarlo	5808	4850
Mughanlo	3558	4210
Aghtaklia	4229	1811
Karataklia	2936	1550
Karajalar	4141	4136
Ponichala	5698	4452

During the period of the Russian Empire, contemporary Gardabani was a part of Tiflis Uyezd of the Tiflis Governorate. Its territory used to be divided into two districts, each of which had an administrative status: Karayazskiy district (the southern part) and Sartichalskiy district (the northern part).³ After the Soviet invasion, the Karaya district (Rus. *rayon*) was established which eventually was renamed as the Gardabani district in 1947.⁴ Synchronously, in 1948 the new industrial city of Rustavi was built which was separated from the Gardabani district and formed a separate administrative self-governed entity.⁵

Additionally, in terms of the present-day administrative borders, the Gardabani district contained 23 other large settlements until 2006; namely: Tskhneti, Kojori, Kiketi, Ponichala and others. As the result of the alteration of the administrative borders in 2006, the respective entities were incorporated within the metropolitan area of Tbilisi.⁶ According to the last 2014 census, the total population of the Gardabani municipality was around 81 876⁷ while the figures for the 1989 and 2002 census were 115 140 and 112 886, respectively.⁸ This sharp loss of population could have resulted because of the stagnant economy as well as by mechanically changed administrative boundaries. The population of the Gardabani municipality is multi-ethnic in which ethnic

2 National Statistics Office of Georgia. Available at: www.geostat.ge/ka

3 Ethni Caucasus. Available at: www.ethno-kavkaz.narod.ru/rngeorgia.html

4 K. Jakeli and V. Jaoshvili, (1977) *Kartuli Sabchota Entsiklopedia [Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia]*. Vol. 2, pp. 695-696

5 V. Jaoshvili, D. Muskhelishvili and L. Chilashvili, (1984) *Kartuli Sabchota Entsiklopedia [Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia]*. Vol. 8. p. 510

6 Decision of the Parliament of Georgia N 4173

7 National Statistics Office of Georgia

8 Ibid.

Azerbaijanis constitute 43.53% (around 36 000) while Georgians represent 54.23% of the total population.⁹ The administrative center of the municipality is the town of Gardabani with 63% of Azerbaijani residents.¹⁰

Economy

The economy of the municipality was mainly agricultural during the Soviet period. Almost all Azerbaijani villages of the region had at least one state-owned Soviet farm (Rus. *sovkhos*). Animal husbandry and sheep breeding were the major sector of agriculture. According to the locals, the *sovkhos* of the village of Jandara alone possessed several thousand heads of livestock.¹¹ Transhumance was widely practiced by the locals by utilizing the mountainous pastures of the Lore province of northern Armenia in summertime and the local pastures in wintertime.¹² In addition, the dense network of irrigation channels was developed during the Soviet rule.¹³

Aside from agriculture, iron and steel, chemical and other industries proliferated in Rustavi in the mid-20th century and employed a sizable number of ethnic Azerbaijanis. Simultaneously, the conserve factory, the knitting factory, the building materials factory and the paperboard factory were functioning in the town of Gardabani until the early 1990s.

The demise of the Soviet Union led to the collapse of the *sovkhos* and eventually to the decline of the agricultural sector. In parallel, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict affected the transhumance and deprived local sheep farmers of large summer pastures. Additionally, the unequal distribution of the previously state-owned lands and other properties during the process of privatization impacted the local economy. The engines and other metallic devices from the factories were dismantled and sold as scrap metal. All of these events caused poverty and unemployment which led to waves of immigration abroad. The first wave occurred in 1990s when thousands of ethnic Azerbaijanis moved to the Russian Federation or other post-Soviet states. Large expat communities from Gardabani exist in Minsk, Vladikavkaz, Magnitogorsk, Moscow and Petrozavodsk. The second wave of migration occurred in the 2000s when migration to Turkey was intensified. Male immigrants from Gardabani found employment in industrial objects or trade in Turkey while women found work mostly as babysitters. Owing to the mutual intelligibility between the Turkish and Azerbaijani languages, migrants from Gardabani do not face communication problems. The third wave began following the visa liberalization between Georgia and the EU. The most popular destination for new migrants is Poland as well as Germany where some Azerbaijanis from Gardabani are employed by members of the local Turkish diaspora.¹⁴ People from Gardabani are also settling in the larger cities of Georgia. Residents of the Gachiani zone and Rustavi, for instance, prefer to settle in Rustavi while residents of Mughanlo prefer migration to eastern neighborhoods of Tbilisi such as Varketili.¹⁵

9 The ethnic composition of the region is available at: CSEM's interactive map: www.csem.ge/interactivemap/

10 CSEM's interactive map

11 Respondent N21. Elder from Jandara. Recorded on 27 October 2019

12 Respondent N12. Elder from Nazarlo. Recorded on 14 May 2019

13 K. Jakeli and V. Jaoshvili, (1977). p. 695

14 Respondent N3. Political activist from Gardabani. Recorded on 20 February 2019

15 Respondent N17. A primary school teacher from Mughanlo. Recorded on 5 October 2019

Nowadays herbs, livestock and sheep husbandry are the prevailing agricultural sectors in the region. Herbs are usually grown in small 600 square meter household plots, predominantly in the Gachiani zone and Nazarlo, Kesalo and Vakhtangisi. Resellers are purchasing herbs in villages and then supplying markets in Tbilisi and Rustavi. Part of the production goes to export to Russia. Remarkably, residents of Jandara have been growing sorghum and selling brooms made of it in many locations, including Zugdidi and Khashuri.¹⁶

In most cases, the population keeps their livestock in cowsheds behind their houses. The highest concentration of livestock is in Jandari due to the large available pastures. The dairy manufacturers arrive to the villages every morning for purchasing products from the local farmers. Despite the sharp decline, sheep husbandry and transhumance is still a vital source of income for many local farmers. The summer pastures of the Armenian highlands have been substituted by the mountains of the Tsalka and Dmanisi municipalities. Admittedly, many sheep owners have benefited from the creation of new export routes to the Middle East.¹⁷

Another crucial sector of the economy is commerce. Many Azerbaijanis from Gardabani have been trading at the Lilo market (predominantly from Mughanlo and the Gachiani zone), the Istanbul Bazaar in Rustavi (predominantly settlements close to Gardabani) and the Rustavi car market (predominantly from Ponichala). Furthermore, ethnic Azerbaijani women have been selling herbs and other vegetables in many bazaars of Tbilisi such as Navtlughi, Desertires and others. It is noteworthy that Mughanlo is among the few Azerbaijani villages that has gained population since 2002. The local school teacher believes that the upward demographic trend has been caused by the good income from the Lilo market and, therefore, there is no necessity to move abroad.¹⁸

Despite the existence of the combined-cycled thermal power plant in the town of Gardabani, very few local Azerbaijanis are employed there. The number of Azerbaijani employees in the industrial objects of Rustavi is also insignificant. According to my interviewee, none of the residents of Mughanlo are employed in the large poultry farm in Sartichala owned by Chirina.¹⁹ A small number of locals are also employed in the recently constructed high-tech greenhouse near Gardabani owned by the Planta company.²⁰ Some of the residents of the village of Jandari have been working in the construction of pipelines owned by British Petroleum, especially if the contractor company was Turkish.²¹ The number of Azerbaijanis working in the private sector, especially banks or supermarkets, has increased. As one local has mentioned:

“In the past years, they were transporting ethnic Georgian employees from Rustavi. Nowadays, they’d prefer to employ local young Azerbaijanis fluent in Georgian.”²²

16 Respondent N21. Elder from Jandara. Recorded on 27 October 2019

17 “Sakartvelodan Iranshi Tskhvis Eksportis Ganakhleba Igegmeba” [“Sheep Export from Georgia to Iran to be Resumed”], *Business Media*. Available at: www.bm.ge/ka/article/saqartvelodan-iranshi-cxvris-eqsportis-ganaxleba-igegmeba/12443

18 National Statistics Office of Georgia

19 Respondent N17. A primary school teacher from Mughanlo. Recorded on 5 October 2019

20 More detailed information about Planta’s greenhouses is available at: www.thouse.ge/new/1039-planta-saqartveloshi-yvelaze-masshtaburi-sasatbure-meurneoba

21 Respondent N16. A student from Jandara. Recorded on 27 October 2019

22 Respondent N3. Political activist from Gardabani. Recorded on 20 February 2019

Transport communication between the local settlements and larger cities (Tbilisi and Rustavi) is highly problematic. The train journey of Gardabani-Tbilisi (via Rustavi) is scheduled twice a day but does not meet the increasing demands of locals. Existing public transport is comprised of old minibuses (the so-called *marshrutka*) which is highly uncomfortable and overcrowded. The population of the Gachiani zone believes that the proposed over ground metro line connecting Tbilisi and Rustavi, which should pass through Gachiani villages, will boost the economy of these villages. In addition, my respondents from Ponichala positively evaluate its unification with Tbilisi. According to one local:

“After we became a part of Tbilisi, our streets are paved, we have natural gas, water, internet and a regular bus line. Tbilisi provides better services.”²³

Based on the case of Ponichala, residents of Gachiani believe that the inclusion of their villages within the urban area of Tbilisi or Rustavi will improve their quality of life.

Another issue is the communication between the villages of the Gardabani municipality located on the left side of the Kura River (Nazarlo, Kesalo, Vakhtangisi and Kvemo Kapanakhchi) and the villages of the Marneuli municipality situated on the right side of the river (Keshalo, Ilmazlo, Kapanakhchi). Historically, residents of these areas represented one community and used to be connected by a bridge. Nowadays the bridge does not exist which makes communication difficult. As one local mentioned:

“If I want to visit my relatives there, I have to go through Rustavi, which is too long. A bridge would make communication easier.”²⁴

Residents of Tazakend and the neighboring villages are complaining about the pollution stemming from the industrial objects of Rustavi, especially the concrete and manganese factories. The locals believe that the water, soil and the air has been contaminated and many residents of these areas are suffering from cancer and other diseases.²⁵

Religion

Although the absolute majority of the Azerbaijani population in the Gardabani municipality are Muslims, Georgia’s official statistics do not distinguish different denominations of Islam. My estimates are primarily based on the calculation of the population of traditionally Sunni and Shia settlements. However, the accuracy of such estimates could be affected by Shias recently converted to Sunni Islam (the so-called “new Sunnis”) and the residents of the mixed Shia-Sunni urban areas in Gardabani whose population is from different villages. In this regard, the numbers of the respective two categories is unavailable. The traditionally Sunni settlements in the Gardabani municipality are: Karajalar, Kapanakhchi (neighborhood of the town of Gardabani), Keshalo, Nazarlo and Vakhtangisi. In addition, approximately 25% of the population of the village of Janadara are also Sunnis. Shias, on the other hand, have been historically living in Karatakliya, Aghtakliya, Tazakend, Mughanlo, Kalinino, Birlik, Botanika, Akhalsheni, Ambaratapa and represent

23 Respondent N6. A member of the Salafi community from Ponichala. Recorded on 2 November 2019

24 Respondent N15. A primary school teacher from Kvemo Kapanakhchi. Recorded on 10 June 2019

25 Respondent N4. A doctor from Tazakend. Recorded on 10 September 2019

approximately 75% in the village of Janadara. In addition, our respondents believe that Shias constitute the majority in the town of Gardabani but the information on their exact proportion is unobtainable.²⁶ Taking into account the number of the population of these villages, I can estimate that the population of traditionally Sunni settlements reaches 17 000 whereas the population of traditionally Shia villages is around 11 000 plus a population of 6 000 of the Shia-majority in the town of Gardabani. Therefore, the estimated percentage of Sunnis and Shias in the Gardabani municipality is almost equal while Sunnis most likely slightly outnumber Shias. Ponichala, which is no longer a part of the Gardabani municipality, has traditionally been a Shia village. In the future, more accurate statistics could be obtained by the improved methodology and questionnaires of the upcoming census.

All Shia Muslims of Gardabani belong to the Ithnaashria (twelvers) branch of this denomination. Shia mosques exist in the following settlements: Mughanlo (two mosques), Aghtaklia, Karatakliya, Gardabani city, Jandari and Ponichala.

During the Soviet period, the local Shia population had superficial knowledge on the doctrine of Shiism. According to one respondent:

“We knew Kurban Bayram, Shahsey-Vahsey and that’s it. We didn’t know about the difference between Shias and Sunnis.”²⁷

The revival of Shiism began following the collapse of the Soviet Union when a group of missionaries from Iran arrived in Gardabani’s Shia settlements. Simultaneously, a group of Shias from the Imişli district of Azerbaijan opened basic courses on Shia Islam at the Gardabani mosque. According to our respondent, who was among the first students of Islam in Iran, the missionaries were ethnic Azerbaijanis and they did not have the language barrier with the locals.

“They arrived here... they spread information about religion and based on that, we decided to travel [to study in Iran].”²⁸

There was a small group of Azerbaijanis from Gardabani that studied in Iran’s city of Qom with in-depth courses in Arabic, Persian and Islam. Some of the graduates continued working as Akhunds or Sheikhs upon return. Remarkably, Shia clergy from Gardabani actively supported the creation of a separate Shia spiritual directorate, a separate body from the spiritual leader of Azerbaijan, Allahshukur Pashazadeh - a grand Mufti of the Caucasus. One local spiritual leader recalls these events:

“It was a very hard time. It has its roots in early 2006 when the events began. About 25 educated people gathered and founded a congress and decided that [Azerbaijan] is our neighboring country, we respect them, we speak the same language, but we are living in our state and we need to have our own religious center. Why should we have to be dependent on another state? The roots were in these years. After five years, our state decided to create this center. It was 2011. After it was created, Vagif Akperov from Tbsi, Meidani, was appointed as a Sheikh.”²⁹

26 Respondent N3. Political activist from Gardabani. Recorded on 20 February 2019

27 Respondent N2. Active member of the Shia community of Aghtaklia. Recorded on 4 February 2019

28 Respondent N2. Active member of the Shia community of Aghtaklia. Recorded on 4 February 2019

29 Respondent N2. Active member of the Shia community of Aghtaklia. Recorded on 4 February 2019

It is noteworthy that the current leader of Georgia's Shia Muslims' Spiritual Directorate, Ramin Igidov, is originally from the town of Gardabani. Shia Muslims from the Gardabani municipality have their Madrassa (Islamic informal education center) in the village of Ponichala as well as an event hall and library in the Ortachala neighborhood of Tbilisi. Some of the village mosques, like in Aghtaklia, also provide basic courses in Shia Islam. During the last five years, Shia believers from the Gardabani municipality have been joining pilgrimage tours to the holy Shia places in Iraq's Karbala, organized by the leaders of the Imam Ali mosque in Marneuli. According to a respondent, they are traveling by land via the Kermanshah province of Iran.³⁰

A remarkable phenomenon is the Said family which claims to be direct descendants of the prophet Muhammad. The family opened a mausoleum of their ancestors in a private house located in Jandara, which has become an object of pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) from both local Sunnis and Shias. Aside from the religious practice, the Said family historically had a role of informal leadership, arbitration and mediation in the local community. Nevertheless, the young generation of Shias is challenging the religious legitimacy of the Said family and explains their existing practice as elements of folk Islam. Similar objects of pilgrimage for Muslims of Gardabani, such as the tombs of Aslan Beyli Haji Efendi and Haji Halil Ojagi, exist in Azerbaijan and mountainous Armenia, respectively, but these practices were abandoned following the demise of the Soviet Union.³¹

The vast majority of Sunni Muslims in the Gardabani municipality are followers of Hanafi madhab. The mosques, controlled by the Muftiate of Eastern Georgia,³² are located in Karajalar, Kesalo, Jandara, Vakhtangisi and Nazarlo. Basic courses in Sunni Islam also exist in the village of Nazarlo which are run by the Imam of the local mosque - a graduate of Islamic schools in Azerbaijan and Egypt. According to him, the Sunni spiritual tradition was almost completely erased during the Soviet period and revival began following its collapse. Overall, compared to Shias, the vast majority of Sunni Muslims in Gardabani do not pursue the Islamic lifestyle.

Another important group in the Gardabani municipality are Salafis - the adherents of the ultraconservative reformist movement in Sunni Islam. The local Salafis can be subdivided by two groups. The first can be conditionally classified as the followers of Hanbali Madhab, widespread in Saudi Arabia. According to an active member of this community:

“We are the followers of Hanbali Madhab. But if it's necessary, we can borrow some practices from Hanafi, Shaffi and Maliki Madhabs. All of them are Muslims.”³³

The community exists in Ponichala. It has been registered as a religious organization called the Georgian Muslim's Union which acquired the status of a legal entity of public law. In 2017, the organization even had a legal proceeding in the constitutional court to receive compensation for the harm inflicted by the totalitarian Soviet regime but the lawsuit was unsuccessful.³⁴ This community does not own a mosque and so they perform their prayers in a private house. The

30 Respondent N2. Active member of the Shia community of Aghtaklia. Recorded on 4 February 2019

31 Respondent N12. Elder from Nazarlo. Recorded on 14 May 2019

32 The Sunni Muslim's Spiritual Directorate of Georgia is subdivided into the Western and Eastern Muftiates, responsible for Adjara and Azerbaijani Muslims, respectively.

33 Respondent N6. A member of the Salafi community from Ponichala. Recorded on 2 November 2019

34 www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3629285?publication=0

community members describe themselves as law abiding citizens and stress the necessity of loyalty to the government.

The second Salafi community is located all across Georgia's Azerbaijani community. This group initiated the construction of a new mosque but the process was terminated by a decision of Tbilisi City Hall.³⁵ Followers of this group are meeting in the unfinished mosque. As one respondent said, people are visiting this unfinished mosque even from remote parts of the neighboring Marneuli municipality.³⁶ The community is believed to be led by Veysel Orujov - a leader of the Salafi community in the village of Karajala in the Telavi municipality. I have failed to establish contacts with the second Salafi community. Concerning their number, the members of the first Salafi community estimate:

"In Ponichala, we are the majority but if you add their supporters from Rustavi, Gardabani and other regions, of course, they are more than us."³⁷

The group has its adherents in Ponichala, Aghtaklia, Karatakia, Gardabani, Kesalo and Nazarlo as well as in Rustavi and the Marneuli municipality. Members of the first Salafi group believe that the fundamental difference between the two groups is the practice of excommunication (*takfir*). As my respondent noted:

"They are *takfirists*. They can easily label any Muslim as an unbeliever. This is not allowed in Islam."³⁸

Another problematic issue mentioned by an interviewee was their hostile attitude towards Shia co-villagers and the alleged support of ISIS. In reply to my interview question of "Why so few people joined insurgent groups in Syria?" members of first Salafi group replied:

"They didn't have popular support. If they had it, they would have gone."³⁹

Several other respondents from Karatakia and Gardabani stressed the fact that the leaders and sponsors of the second Salafi community are residing in Moscow and are intermixed with the ethnically North Caucasian business and sportsmen circles.⁴⁰

Remarkably, many Salafis are coming from traditionally Shia families. They have been converted to Sunni Islam. The opposite trend of conversion to Shia Islam has not been observed in Sunni villages.

In addition, a small group of the followers of Fethullah Gulen exists in the village of Karajalar. However, more detailed information about this community was unobtainable. Furthermore, during my field trip I discovered tens of ethnic Azerbaijani Protestant Christians who have fled Iran and settled in the town of Gardabani in recent years.

35 "Different Versions of Murder Tell of Divide in Mixed Shia Sunni Village," *Dfwatch*. Available at: www.dfwatch.net/different-versions-of-murder-tell-of-divide-in-mixed-shia-sunni-village-40120

36 Respondent N6. A member of the Salafi community from Ponichala. Recorded on 2 November 2019

37 Respondent N6. A member of the Salafi community from Ponichala. Recorded on 2 November 2019

38 Respondent N6. A member of the Salafi community from Ponichala. Recorded on 2 November 2019

39 Respondent N6. A member of the Salafi community from Ponichala. Recorded on 2 November 2019

40 Respondent N3. Political activist from Gardabani. Recorded on 20 February 2019

Overall, the affiliation to a particular denomination of Islam among the Azerbaijanis of the Gardabani municipality is nominal. It is noteworthy that Sunnis in Karatakliya, Aghtakliya and Gardabani are praying side by side with Shias in Shia mosques. Nonetheless, the sectarian division between Shiites and Sunnis is also in an embryonic stage. For instance, a group of Shias from Ponichala protested against the construction of a Salafi mosque in 2013.⁴¹ In spite of this and other minor incidents, the relationships between these two groups remains peaceful.

Education

According to official statistics, 13 schools of the Gardabani municipality are either fully Azerbaijani or have an Azerbaijani sector (see the graph below). The public school in Ponichala also has both Azerbaijani and Georgian sectors. Only two schools in Azerbaijani-majority settlements, Gardabani and Vakhtangisi, are fully Georgian.⁴²

Figure 2: Public schools in Azerbaijani settlements of Gardabani municipality

School	Main language of education
Gardabani City N1	Georgian
Gardabani City N3	Azerbaijani
Gardabani City N4	Georgian / Russian
Gardabani City N6	Azerbaijani
Aghtakliya	Georgian / Azerbaijani
Jandara	Azerbaijani
Kalinino	Azerbaijani
Mughanlo	Georgian / Azerbaijani
Nazarlo	Georgian / Azerbaijani
Kesalo	Georgian / Azerbaijani
Kvemo Kapanakhchi	Azerbaijani
Tazakend	Azerbaijani
Vakhtangisi N1	Azerbaijani
Vakhtangisi N2	Georgian
Karajalar	Georgian / Azerbaijani
Karatakliya	Georgian / Azerbaijani

Overall, the proficiency level of the Georgian language among the Azerbaijani population of the Gardabani municipality is insufficient. As an initial observation suggests, fluency in Georgian

41 “Ponichalashi Vahabituri Mechetis Msheneblobas Aprotesteben” [“Protest Against the Construction of Wahabbi Mosque in Ponichala”], *Kviris Palitra*. Available at: www.palitravideo.ge/yvela-video/akhali-ambebi/31494-fonitcalashi-qvahabituri-mechethisq-msheneblobas-aprotesteben.html

42 The list of schools is available at: www.catalog.edu.ge/index.php?module=school_info&page=main&district=19&school_type=3

highly depends on two factors: education and interaction with ethnic Georgians. Alternatively stated, the level of knowledge of Georgian is higher in the settlements situated in the vicinity of Georgian villages or cities. Azerbaijanis involved in commerce in Lilo and other places are also capable of communicating in Georgian. According to one respondent from Mughanlo, children from this village often spend their holidays by working along with their parents in Lilo because “in Lilo, they can learn Georgian better than in school.”⁴³ The low level of knowledge of Georgian stems from the Soviet education system. According to one primary school teacher in Nazarlo, Azerbaijani schools had five hours of Russian classes and only one hour was devoted to Georgian which was insufficient.⁴⁴

Another important finding was the aging teachers of Azerbaijani schools. This problem has already been reported by the research conducted by EMC.⁴⁵ According to the research, 58.6% of teachers of Azerbaijani schools in the Kvemo Kartli region are over 50 years of age.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the current teachers are not ready to yield their positions to the younger generation. As one of the young teachers explained:

“For example, we have a biology teacher. She’s about 70 years old. She didn’t retire and didn’t take her salary for one year in advance which is allowed according to the new law. So, she registered for the exams, passed exam in her subject in Azerbaijani but didn’t pass the professional skills test in Georgian because she doesn’t speak Georgian. But the problem is that we have nobody to replace them”.⁴⁷

Nowadays, locals understand the importance of proficiency in the Georgian language which is considered as a key component of any future career. Many parents tend to send their children to Georgian schools in Gardabani or in the Georgian sectors of their villages. Furthermore, some affluent families can afford transporting their children to public and private Georgian schools in Tbilisi or Rustavi. Another problem is the absence of kindergartens, especially in Azerbaijani-majority villages. Kindergartens were recently opened in Mughanlo, Vakhtangisi, Nazarlo, Kesalo and Jandara.

All respondents positively evaluate the 4+1 program, a quota system for ethnic minorities, which allows them to take the national exams in their native language under the condition of spending one extra year in intensive preparation courses in the Georgian language. Hundreds of residents of the Gardabani municipality have graduated from different universities in Tbilisi. The most popular programs are medicine, the humanities and social sciences. However, many of the graduates are still struggling to find a competitive job.

43 Respondent N17. A primary school teacher from Mughanlo. Recorded on 5 October 2019

44 Respondent N13. A primary school teacher from Nazarlo. Recorded on 14 May 2019

45 S. Zviadadze And D. Jishkariani, (2018) *Identity Issues among Azerbaijani Population of Kvemo Kartli and its Political and Social Dimensions*. p. 11. Available at: www.emc.org.ge/en/products/identobis-problematika-kvemo-kartlis-azerbajanelebshi-da-misi-politikuri-da-sotsialuri-ganzomilebebi

46 S. Tabatadze and N. Gorgodze, *Etnikur Umstiresobata Skolis Mastsavleblebis Tanabari Shesadzleblobebis Uzrunvelkopa Propsiuli Ganvitarebisa da Karieris Zrdistvis [Ensuring Equal Opportunities for Ethnic Minority School Teachers for their Professional Development and Career Growth]*. Available at: www.cciir.ge/images/pdf/axali%20dokumenti.pdf

47 Respondent N15. A primary school teacher from Kvemo Kapanakchi. Recorded on 10 June 2019

Contrary to the Marneuli municipality, informal education is not widespread among Azerbaijanis of Gardabani. The civil sector expresses a low interest in this region. Only one Azerbaijani art teacher has been employed in the cultural center in the town of Gardabani. In our interview, he complained about the absence of spaces for activities for the young generation.⁴⁸

Politics

The political process in the Gardabani municipality is complex, multi-faceted and vibrant. Since Georgia’s independence, the Azerbaijani population has traditionally been voting in favor of the ruling party. However, following the transition of government after the 2012 general elections, a significant share of the Azerbaijani population voted for the opposition parties for the first time in history. During the last presidential elections, the United National Movement (UNM) achieved victory in almost all Azerbaijani settlements of Gardabani whereas the ruling party Georgian Dream party (GD) won predominantly in Georgian villages.⁴⁹

Figure 3: Elections in Gardabani municipality

Elections	GD	UNM
2013 Presidential	64.54%	20.78%
2014 Local	56.77%	27.86%
By-Elections 2016	70.57%	70.57%
2016 General ⁵⁰	50.02%	33.53%
2017 Local	71.86%	9.4%
2018 Presidential	40.23%	42.63%

The locals explain their support of the UNM by the reforms, the low level of crime and tolerance towards the Azerbaijani population. One interviewee even believed that “he [Saakashvili] banned the use of the word *tatari*.”⁵¹ Additionally, residents of the Gachiani zone stressed that Saakashvili’s administration almost entirely eliminated the drugs trafficking in the region.⁵² It is noteworthy that despite the ongoing confrontation between Iran and Western countries, many active Shias have been fierce supporters of the pro-Western UNM. They explain their choice by the reforms and the level of safety during Saakashvili’s administration. The same can be said about our Salafi respondents from Ponichala, one of whom is convinced that “that time was much better than today.”⁵³

48 Respondent N10. Painter from Gardabani. Recorded on 16 May 2019

49 Electoral statistics are available at the website of the Central Electoral Commission: www.cesko.ge

50 During the 2016 general election, the borders of the Gardabani electoral entity were altered.

51 Respondent N7. Elder from Vakhtangisi. Recorded on 13 May 2019

52 Respondent N1. A resident of Karatakli. Recorded on 4 February 2019

53 Respondent N6. A member of the Salafi community from Ponichala. Recorded on 2 November 2019

During Shevardnadze's administration, fraud was widespread during elections. According to one respondent: "It was a formality. They were writing whatever they wanted in the minutes. They were not elections." Nowadays, there is a number of problematic issues during the electoral process. Firstly, the ruling party actively relies on administrative resources during the electoral campaign. Public servants are often involved in the electoral campaign. Secondly, the practice of 'collective voting' is still widespread and it is practiced by both governmental and opposition parties. Such a practice means making an agreement with the local recognized authorities (for example, the council of elders or the Aksakals or local businessmen) who are responsible for convincing their relatives and extended family to vote for a particular party. And finally, the involvement of the locals in political processes still remains low. Nevertheless, the younger generation, especially Georgian-speaking graduates of Georgian universities, are becoming increasingly active in the political process.

Throughout its history, the Gardabani municipality has always had an ethnic Georgian mayor/governor. Out of 36 members of the local municipal council (*sakrebulo*), 15 are ethnic Azerbaijanis, including two women.⁵⁴ The deputies of the mayor and the head of the *sakrebulo* are also ethnic Azerbaijanis.⁵⁵ The majoritarian MP from the Gardabani municipality is Savalan Mirzoev, who according to locals, is believed to be one of the most influential ethnic Azerbaijanis in ruling party.⁵⁶

Organized Crime

Two categories of organized crime on a large scale have been widespread in the Gardabani municipality. The first is the distribution of illegal drugs. The hotbed of the narcotics trade has been the village of Ponichala and, to a lesser extent, the villages of Gachiani. Frequent crackdowns on drug dealers in Ponichala have been frequently reported by the Georgian media and it is known as one of the major narcotic routes.⁵⁷ According to the locals, the drugs are smuggled from Iran via Azerbaijan. Owing to the absence of language barriers between the residents of Ponichala and Azerbaijanis and Iranian Azerbaijanis, this facilitates the establishing of transnational linkages between illicit actors.⁵⁸ According to one retired state security officer, drug smugglers often use an irrigation channel located on the Georgian and Azerbaijani border by placing the product in the water which flows towards Georgia and the dealer from the Georgian side waits for the drugs on Georgia's territory.⁵⁹ Ponichala turned into a center of narcotics trading in the 1990s due to its proximity to Tbilisi. During Saakashvili's administration, a massive crackdown on drug traders took

54 Gardabani Munitsipaliteti: Opitsialuri Vebgverdi [Gardabani Municipality: Official Webpage]. Available at: www.gardabani.gov.ge/sakrebulo/sakrebulo-tsevrebi

55 Gardabani Munitsipaliteti: Opitsialuri Vebgverdi [Gardabani Municipality: Official Webpage]. Available at www.gardabani.gov.ge/gamgeoba/gamgeblis-moadgileebi and www.gardabani.gov.ge/sakrebulo/sakrebulo-tavjdomaris-moadgile

56 Respondent N3. Political activist from Gardabani. Recorded on 20 February 2019

57 Sakartveloshi 116 narkomovachre daakaves [116 Drug Traders Have Been Arrested in Georgia]. *Sputnik*. Available at: www.sputnik-georgia.com/incidents/20181208/243372482/116-drug-trader-arrested-in-Georgia.html

58 Respondent N5. Activist from Ponichala. Recorded on 2 November 2019

59 Respondent N 22. Retired police officer from Kvemo Kartli Region. Recorded on 5 February 2019

place but following the transition of power in 2012, drug trading is gradually being revitalized. As one of the local residents explained:

“Police arrests only the small dealers, but their bosses remain untouched. They [police] claim that they don’t have evidence to apprehend them. But Saakashvili didn’t care about evidence. He arrested everybody, 40 drug dealers in one night.”⁶⁰

Some of the interviewees believe that some active members of the Shia community are also involved in drug trafficking due to their personal contacts in Iran. Another explanation for the thriving drug trafficking is that in most cases drug dealers do not receive an adequate legal punishment. As one local explained:

“Imagine one drug dealer. He can earn over GEL 200 thousand by selling drugs. So, if the police come, the family members are taking blame in turn. Following the arrest, they are doing a plea bargain and spending a maximum of two years in jail. Especially, if they arrest a woman, it’s easier to release her. So look, they pay approximately GEL 50 thousand as a plea bargain, but 150 thousand or even more remains with the family. Then another turn and so on. They believe that it’s impossible to earn GEL 150 thousand by working in two years.”⁶¹

Furthermore, my interviewees worried that drug traffickers have the support of the local population:

“The shopkeepers, for example, are happy about them. Their shops are thriving and look, they are expanding their shops.”⁶²

The drug trade in Gachiani villages led to the incident in December 2018 when the locals protested against a narcotics trade in the villages’ cemetery. During the incident, the drug dealers opened fire and wounded three locals.⁶³ Following the incident, locals started patrolling around the cemetery at night. As one local explained:

“Someone placed it [drugs] there for their customers who were later picking it up. After consuming [drugs], they began to do dirty things... And people gathered there to protect it. But when we started patrolling, two of our guys were arrested for nothing. Their court case is still going on. The government cannot decide what to do, judge them or not... The young generation decided to protect the territory.”⁶⁴

The second category of organized crime present in the Gardabani municipality is a post-Soviet underworld known as the ‘thieves’ world’ or the ‘thieves-in-law.’ The most influential Georgian Azerbaijani thief-in-law is Nadir Salifov, also known as Guli, has influence in the region. According to Prime Crime, the largest database of Russian-speaking leaders of organized crime groups, Salifov was born in the village of Mamishlo in the Dmanisi Municipality of Georgia. He was initiated as

60 Respondent N6. A member of the Salafi community from Ponichala. Recorded on 2 November 2019

61 Respondent N3. Political activist from Gardabani. Recorded on 20 February 2019

62 Ibid

63 Gachianshi momkhdari intsidenti [Incident in Gardabani]. *First Channel*. Available at: www.1tv.ge/video/gachianshi-momkhdari-incidenti/

64 Respondent N12. Elder from Nazarlo. Recorded on 14 May 2019

a thief-in-law in 2001 and spent more than ten years in the prisons of Azerbaijan. Following his release, Salifov moved to Turkey.⁶⁵ His primary activity is extortion from ethnic Azerbaijani small and mid-level businessmen. As one local explained: “For example, you have money. They are coming to you and forcing you to pay 100 thousand dollars. That’s it.”⁶⁶ For another example, many residents of Mughanlo who are trading in Lilo are forced to pay a ‘tribute’ to Salifov’s group.⁶⁷ One of our respondents believes that Salifov helped the ruling party in the 2017 local elections.⁶⁸ Salifov’s influence is not only constrained to the Kvemo Kartli province but is also spread over Azerbaijan and some regions of Russia. Furthermore, Prime Crime has obtained Salifov’s footage, alongside one of the leaders of Turkish organized crime, Sedat Peker.⁶⁹

Inter-ethnic Relationships

There are several locations where ethnic Azerbaijanis have a point of contact with other ethnicities. The first is the town of Gardabani which has been a multicultural city since the Soviet period. Aside from Azerbaijanis, ethnic Georgians, Russians, Assyrians, Armenians and Kurds have also been populating this town. The relationships between different ethnic groups have been peaceful. Minor incidents, including brawls, took place following the settlement of ecological migrants from the Svaneti region in the 1980s. As the witness of these events recalls:

“There were a series of natural disasters and they [Svans] were settled here. It caused serious conflicts. The locals were unprepared for this. There was no information campaign... Imagine, there is a big difference. People from the mountains were settled here... And here, people are urban citizens, it is an absolutely different society, culture, education, ethnic issues. Everything this mixed together.”⁷⁰

The second location is the neighboring villages of Jandara, Lemshveniera, Mzianeti and Nagebi with an Azerbaijani, Georgian-Svan and mixed Azerbaijani-Georgian population respectively. A dispute over pastures was the major cause of conflicts between Azerbaijani and Georgian villagers. In addition, the old Shia cemetery of the village of Jandara is located in Lemshveniera and many times the local youth used this place for consuming alcohol which caused discontent among the Azerbaijani population. Eventually, the conflict ended by erecting a fence around the cemetery.⁷¹

The third ethnically heterogeneous area is the Gachiani zone and its neighboring Georgian-majority villages, Gamarjveba and Poladaantkari. The locals failed to recall any major accidents between these villages. During my fieldwork, I came across cases of fictive baptizing when Georgians become godfathers of Azerbaijani children and vice versa in order to become their relatives. Despite undergoing the formalities of the baptizing ceremony, the “baptized” Azerbaijanis remain

65 Salifov Nadir Nariman Oghly. *Prime Crime*. Available at: www.primecrime.ru/characters/2396/#courtslnk

66 Respondent N3. Political activist from Gardabani. Recorded on 20 February 2019

67 Respondent N17. A primary school teacher from Mughanlo. Recorded on 5 October 2019

68 Respondent N3. Political activist from Gardabani. Recorded on 20 February 2019

69 Nadir Salifov I Sedat Peker. Turtsiya [Nadir Salifov and Sedat Peker. Turkey]. *Prime Crime*. Available at: www.primecrime.ru/photo/private/10630/

70 Respondent N3. Political activist from Gardabani. Recorded on 20 February 2019

71 Respondent N16. A student from Jandara. Recorded on 27 October 2019

Muslims.⁷² A small number of Georgians are residing in the apartment blocks of the village of Karatakliya and they have peaceful relationships with their neighbors. Additionally, a small Gypsy community lives in Aghtakliya. However, according to the locals, the Gypsy population is completely secluded from the Azerbaijanis and their source of income is begging in Tbilisi.⁷³

The fourth notable multi-ethnic location are the villages of Mughanlo and Sartichala. Officially, Mughanlo does not represent an independent administrative entity and belongs to Sartichala. Residents of Mughanlo have been demanding separation from Sartichala owing to the unequal distribution of budget resources. However, the residents of Sartichala believe that Mughanlo historically has been a district of the village and should not be separated from it. According to the local school teacher, residents of Sartichala have several times dismantled the road sign with the inscription “Mughanlo.” The last road sign is kept by one Azerbaijani family in order to protect it from theft.⁷⁴

Women’s Rights

The violation of women’s rights in the Azerbaijani settlements of Gardabani has been an acute problem. Among these burning issues is the problem of arranged marriages. In October 2019, the primary school teacher in the village of Kalinino, Hamid Sadikh, was publicly criticized for speaking out against the arranged marriage of a schoolgirl.⁷⁵ This practice is still widespread across the region. One of respondents had this to say about the marriage of schoolgirls:

“It’s not a problem during the early grades. Girls and boys are attending the classes. But after the sixth grade begins: ‘Now you are a big [girl] and you don’t have to go to school’...That means that she will no longer study and is ready for marriage.”⁷⁶

Gender-based restrictions begin from the early grades of school. One respondent noted that “some parents forbade their daughters to sit beside boys in the classroom”.⁷⁷ A respondent from Mughanlo also said that the girls who study in Tbilisi in the 4+1 program are not allowed to rent an apartment in Tbilisi and they are going to university from the village.⁷⁸ After marriage, most of the girls do not continue their studies and do not enroll in universities. A women’s rights activist explained some region-specific trends. According to her, the problem of arranged marriages is more problematic in wealthy villages - Mughanlo and Ponichala. She explains it by the protection of wealth and inheritance. Furthermore, marriages between relatives are frequent among the wealthy families.⁷⁹

72 Respondent N2. Active member of the Shia community of Aghtakliya. Recorded on 4 February 2019

73 Respondent N1. A resident of Karatakliya. Recorded on 4 February 2019

74 Respondent N17. A primary school teacher from Mughanlo. Recorded on 5 October 2019

75 Georgia: Teacher Publicly Punished for Speaking out Against Bridenaping. *Jam News*. Available at: www.jam-news.net/teacher-publicly-punished-in-gardabani-for-speaking-out-against-bridenapping-of-schoolgirl/

76 Respondent N19. A female student from Karatakliya. Recorded on 4 November 2019

77 Ibid.

78 Respondent N17. A primary school teacher from Mughanlo. Recorded on 5 October 2019

79 Respondent N18. A women’s rights activist from Marneuli. Recorded on 9 November 2019

Another problem is bride kidnapping. The strict legislation against this cultural practice has substantially decreased the number of kidnappings but it has not eliminated it. During my fieldtrip to Ponichala, the locals stressed the absence of single girls walking alone on the streets due to their fear of being kidnapped. Many families still refrain from informing the police in the case of these incidents.

“It’s very rare when the case reaches the police. It happened only if the girls’ parents are very stubborn. You know, normally in the village everybody knows each other. People say ‘Never mind, she’s already married. We don’t need additional problems’...They are trying to solve this case peacefully.”⁸⁰

Due to the stigmatization of girls unwilling to marry their kidnapper, in many cases they have no choice but to marry him. One respondent said:

“You know what happens there? It is difficult for this girl to marry a second time. Therefore, they say ‘She’s already his wife and let her be with him.’”⁸¹

Another feature which contributes to the existing status-quo is a lack of political will of the Georgian government and law enforcement to tackle this issue. My respondents believe that in most cases the police avoid confrontation with the Azerbaijani community and they do not interfere in their affairs.

Some restriction on marriages exist in the region. For instance, despite the superficial religious affiliation, marriages between Shias and Sunnis are still problematic. The intermarriages between Georgians and Azerbaijanis, especially in the case of an Azerbaijani bride, are extremely rare and are not welcomed.

The vast majority of Azerbaijani women in the Gardabani municipality are housewives. The older generation of women is involved in cultivating and selling herbs in bazaars and milking cows. They did this kind of similar work during the period of the Soviet collective farms. A very small number of women work in Turkey as babysitters. Some younger women study in vocational colleges of Tbilisi and Rustavi in the “female friendly” specialties such as a female stylist, a makeup artist or a seamstress.

Recommendations

Central Government

- Continuation of building new kindergartens.
- Introducing new scholarship schemes for ethnic Azerbaijani students.
- Improving the curriculum of Georgian language classes and strengthening the teaching of the language.
- Connecting Tbilisi, Gachiani and Rustavi (and Gardabani in the long-term) by the over-ground metro line and increasing the frequency of the Gardabani-Tbilisi train.

⁸⁰ Respondent N19. A female student from Karataklia. Recorded on 4 November 2019

⁸¹ Ibid.

- Incorporating suburban Azerbaijani villages (Gachiani zone, Tazakend, Kalinino, Birlik) in the metropolitan areas of Tbilisi and/or Rustavi.
- Developing the tourism infrastructure near Jandara Lake and creating alternative tourism hiking routes to the David Gareji monastery complex.
- Attracting more investment in the industry and agricultural sectors of the region.

Law Enforcement

- Zero tolerance policy towards the narcotics trade.
- Combating Azerbaijani-speaking members of the “thieves’ world” by close cooperation with the local population, reinforcing preemptive measures with the youth population who are vulnerable for the recruitment to the underworld.
- Reactive and preemptive measures against the arranged marriages and kidnapping.
- Reinforcing preventive counter-radicalization measures in order to minimize the risk of mobilization to the extremist groups.

Local Government

- Assisting the local population to register their agricultural land.
- Constructing a footbridge over the Kura River connecting Kapanakhchi with the villages of Marneuli.
- Creating new sport and cultural facilities for the inter-ethnic communication between Georgians and Azerbaijanis, opening new team sports sections in ethnically mixed areas and organizing multi-ethnic cultural events.
- Incorporating Georgian-speaking Azerbaijani graduates of 4+1 in the public sector: school teachers/directors, mayor’s envoys in the villages, police/security services.
- Improving the public transport connecting the villages of Gardabani with Tbilisi and Rustavi.
- Improving the infrastructure in the region.
- Empowering ethnic Azerbaijani women.
- Tackling ecological issues in Tazakend and surrounding villages.

Media and NGOs

- More active coverage of events.
- Creating a bilingual Georgian-Azerbaijani regional media resource.
- Supporting informal education.
- Raising political awareness among the youth of the Gardabani municipality.
- Facilitating an inter-religious dialogue between Muslim and Christian clergymen.
- Supporting the local NGO sector.