



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Georgia's Fertile Crescent: Marneuli Municipality

2021



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Introduction

The recent Covid19 pandemic has disrupted Georgia's economy and social life. Among the regions suffering most from these disruptions is Marneuli municipality. During the first wave in the spring of 2020, the Georgian authorities introduced a strict lockdown in Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities. Several weeks of lockdown resulted in local farmers coming out in protest at being unable to sell their agricultural goods, an event which attracted the attention of the Georgian media. Other affairs in Marneuli that have received extensive media coverage are tensions or violent acts accompanying electoral campaigns, and the series of bride kidnappings and arranged marriages occurring in the rural communities of the region. The remainder of regional developments tend to be neglected by the national media, meaning wider Georgian society knows little about the social, political and cultural aspects of the region. This limited knowledge creates fertile soil for the forming of various stereotypes and clichés about the local multiethnic population. In fact, Marneuli municipality has been witnessing very dynamic ethno-political processes of late. Moreover, the region has big potential for further economic development, and a unique cultural heritage accommodating different ethnicities, among them Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Armenians, Greeks, as well as several religious communities. Marneuli also represents an important regional transport junction connecting Georgia with Azerbaijan and Armenia.

To date, limited academic research has been carried out in Marneuli municipality. The region's languages and dialects, ethnology, history, religion, economy and social structure remains understudied. The present report aims to shed light on the key trends being seen in the region's economy, religion, education, politics, interethnic relationships, media and civil sector. The author hopes that its publication will assist academia and the civil sector in achieving a better understanding of the region. This publication is a continuation of the author's broader project devoted to Georgia's Azerbaijani community. The first phase of the research covered the Azerbaijani settlements of the Gardabani municipality, followed by a second phase dedicated to the Marneuli region. With further logistical and material support from GFSIS leadership, the Azerbaijani communities of Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Kakheti and Shida Kartli regions will also be covered in future works.

In order to complete the paper, the author spent more than two months in Marneuli municipality between February and July 2020. During the first phase, the author spent three weeks in Qizilajlo and accessed the settlements of the region's northern area. The second phase of research was conducted in June, when the author spent two weeks in Kachagan. This phase covered villages located in the vicinity of the Red Bridge and Shulaveri. During the final phase, the author was in Sadakhlo, which was used as a base for visiting villages located near the border of Armenia. Owing to the logistical constraints, the author did not manage to visit Akhkerpi village. In addition, he was unable to enter the villages of Lezhbadin, Khutor-Lezhbadin or Didi Mughanlo. The information about that villages was collected from the residents of neighbouring Kurtlar and Baydar villages. Throughout his research, the author visited the majority of the villages and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with a wide range of locals, including elderly people, farmers, teachers, political and civic activists, spiritual leaders, students, and women with a diverse ethno-religious background.

Key findings of the research

Economy

- A large number of locals have immigrated to Azerbaijan, post-Soviet countries, Turkey and Poland;
- The Marneuli Bazaar and animal market are important regional trading hubs;
- The new highway connecting Georgia and Armenia will bypass Marneuli town, which will affect the local economy;
- Agriculture and commerce remain the main sectors of Marneuli's economy;
- The tourism sector is almost nonexistent in Marneuli;
- A problem with waste management exists in the rural areas of Marneuli;
- The majority of industrial objects in Marneuli have collapsed since the early 1990s;
- The road connecting mountainous villages such as Opreti and Akhkerpi with the rest of the country is in bad condition;

- Marneuli region is witnessing rapid urbanization, with the rural population moving to Marneuli town, or the cities of Rustavi or Tbilisi.

Religion

- Shia Muslims constitute the majority of the region's Azerbaijani population, while Sunnis, representing up to 35%, dominate in several clusters in settlements;
- Several Shia organisations are present in Marneuli;
- Small Salafi communities are present in the region;
- An Armenian clergy is not present in the Armenian settlements;
- The Georgian Orthodox Church in Marneuli receives more generous funding from the state budget than other confessions;
- Inter-confessional dialogue does not exist in the region.

Education

- The number of ethnic Azerbaijani parents sending their children to Georgian schools or Georgian sectors has increased;
- Kindergartens do not exist in the majority of Azerbaijani settlements;
- Informal education courses exist in several settlements and in Marneuli town;
- The number of ethnic Azerbaijani students studying in Tbilisi is high.

Politics

- The ruling party has been winning in all elections; however, the percentage of votes gained by the opposition have also increased;
- Owing to the fierce competition in the 2014 and 2016 elections, the ruling party changed its attitude and began to nominate ethnic Azerbaijani candidates;
- The business and political circles in Baku still have an impact on locals during the elections;
- The domestic political landscape of Marneuli is divided between several ethno-political clans.

Interethnic relationships

- Relations between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis are good, but both ethnicities fully support their kin states in the Karabakh conflict;
- Despite the proximity of the settlements, there is a lack of interaction between ethnic Azerbaijanis and Georgians;
- Some Azerbaijani activists and spiritual leaders worry about the symbolic politics of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Marneuli.

Media and the Civil Sector

- The majority of the Azerbaijani population watches Azerbaijani TV channels for news, and Turkish programmes for entertainment;
- Several regional TV and radio stations exist in Marneuli;
- The NGO sector has been active in both urban and rural areas.

Geography

Marneuli municipality is located in the eastern part of Georgia. It is bordered by the Gardabani municipality to the north and east, to the west by the Tetrtskaro and Bolnisi municipalities, and to the south by Azerbaijan. Geographically, Marneuli falls into three physical areas. The eastern part of the region is separated from the rest of the municipality by the Yalguja mountain range and is dominated by arid landscape. The central area of the region is spread across the Marneuli plateau, fed by three rivers: the Algeti, Khrami (Ktsia) and Debeda. The south-western area is dominated by forested mountains.

The settlements in the Marneuli municipality can be subdivided into several clusters. The first cluster is made up of Marneuli town and its surrounding villages. Marneuli town represents the administrative and economic centre of the region, and is situated in the northern part of the municipality. The administrative boundaries of the town incorporate two large villages, Sarvan and Jandara. It is surrounded by a large Azerbaijani-populated village called Qizilajlo to the west, and the villages of the so-called Algeti zone to the east, namely Algeti, Sabirkend, Tazakend, Azizkend and Hajisakend. To the south-west, Marneuli town borders a settlement zone consisting

of the small Azerbaijani village Alvari, a large former German colony called Tamarisi, today inhabited by settlers from the Imereti and Svaneti regions, and Dioknisi, which is populated by eco-migrants from Mountainous Adjara. The majority of the urban population in Marneuli is Azerbaijani, while Georgians represent a minority.

The second cluster of settlements is spread along the highway that connects Georgia with the Armenian border. This cluster begins with the Azerbaijani-populated Didi Beglari and Patara Beglari, the mixed Azerbaijani-Armenian village Norgiughi, and Tsereteli and Saimerlo, populated by Georgians who migrated from the upper Imereti region in the mid-20th century. These are followed by settlements belonging to the Shulaveri territorial entity: Shulaveri, a mixed Georgian, Azerbaijani and Armenian settlement, emerged around the train station and wool factory, with the nearby large Azerbaijani villages of Akhlomamudlo, Araplo, Yenikend, Seithojalo, Zemo Sarali, Kvemo Sarali, and Imiri, and the Georgian (Adjaran) village of Maret. Turning to the left of the highway near Shulaveri, we can find Azerbaijani villages Zemo Kullar, Kvemo Kullar, Kirkhilo, Dashtapa, Armenian settlements Tseteli Sopeli and Budionovka, and Maradisi, which is populated by Georgian eco-migrants from Adjara. This zone finishes to the south with the Azerbaijani villages of Akhlo-Lalalo, Damia-Georarkh and Kirovka (alternative name Mamey), and a small Armenian village called Damia.

The third zone of villages is spread along the Khrami and Debeda rivers. Villages located on the left embankment of the Khrami River are the large Azerbaijani settlements of Mughanlo, Kurtlar, Baydar, Lezhbadin, Khutor Lezhbadin and Doliskana, while the Kachagan, Tekalo, Khanjighazlo, Kirech Mughanlo, Kasumlo, Aghmamedlo, Ulashlo, Beitarapchi, Kushchu, and Bayatlo villages are situated between the Debeda River and the Babakar mountain range.

The fourth group of villages is located in the vicinity of the highway connecting Tbilisi with the Georgian-Azerbaijani border crossing point known as the Red Bridge. The villages located in this area are: Ambarovka, Keshalo, Ilmazlo, First Kesalo, Second Kesalo, Kapanakhchi, and Algeti Vineyard.

West of the highway, in the Shulaveristskali Gorge, are the following settlements: Shaumiani, a small Armenian town; settlements of Georgians displaced from the former South

Ossetia Autonomous Oblast; Khikhani, populated by Adjaran eco migrants; Akhkula (Azerbaijani); and Sioni and Tserakvi (Georgian).

A further cluster of villages is situated in the vicinity of the Georgian-Armenian border. Sadakhlo, one of the most populous villages of Georgia, is surrounded by the Azerbaijani villages of Tazakend, Burma, Khuldara, and Molaoghly. Higher in the mountains are Tsopi (Armenian-Azerbaijani), Gulibaghi (Armenian), Khojorni (Armenian-Azerbaijani), Opreti (Greek), Chanakhchi (Armenian) and Akhkerpi (Armenian).

Economy

During the Soviet Period, Marneuli municipality was among the leading agricultural regions of the Georgian SSSR. A substantial amount of tobacco, vegetables, grains, and fruits were produced in the local collective farms (sovkhoz). Animal husbandry was also a well-established sector of the economy, with local sovkhozs having access to the vast winter pastures of the Yalguja and Babakar mountains, and summer pastures in mountainous Armenia.¹ Marneuli also had a well-developed industry. Among the key industrial objects were a wool factory in Shulaveri, large oil and grains storage bases in Marneuli town, and a large industrial warehouse in Qizilajlo. Additionally, various minor textile, ice cream, wine, and construction material factories functioned in the region.²

The collapse of the Soviet Union, as in other regions of Georgia, led to the demise of the collective farms and factories in Marneuli. The resulting sharp increase in poverty and unemployment led to the migration of locals abroad. The migration pathways can be subdivided into four main directions. The first destinations were the kin states of the local ethnic minorities. For Azerbaijanis, it was the capital of Azerbaijan – Baku. The migration towards Azerbaijan started even before the dissolution of the USSR, when a substantial number of Azerbaijanis migrated for higher education and career growth. The new wave of impoverished Azerbaijani migrants from

¹ Respondent N1. An elderly man from Algeti.

² Respondent N2. A retired police officer from Marneuli town/Saimerlo.

Marneuli joined the existing networks and communities of Georgian Azerbaijanis (often referred to as “Graz”) in Baku.³ Similarly, many Armenians of Marneuli migrated to Armenia’s capital, Yerevan,⁴ while the vast majority of the Greek population of Opreti used the immigration and repatriation schemes of Greece and moved to Greece in the early 1990s.⁵

The second major direction was the Russian-speaking post-Soviet states, such as Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. The newly established diasporic networks became employed mostly in commerce and industry.

A third migration wave began to Turkey in the early 2000s. The mutual intelligibility between Turkish and Azerbaijani, simplified visa system for Georgian citizens, and surplus of available industrial jobs, facilitated migration of the residents of Marneuli to Turkey.

The final and fourth wave of migration to Europe began in the 2010s, seeing Azerbaijanis (mostly men) migrating to Poland due to the available work visa schemes. Furthermore, some Azerbaijanis were able to establish links with Turkish diasporic networks in Germany and obtain a work permit there.⁶ At the same time, a number of Armenians from Shaumyan have migrated to the US, France or even Argentina, via Armenian diasporas.⁷

Today, the major sector of Marneuli’s economy is commerce. The favourable geographic location of the region, which serves as the crossroads of several regional and international highways, and its proximity to the capital Tbilisi, makes it an important trade hub of the Kvemo Kartli region. One of the largest trading centres is a wholesale market (bazaar) located in the town centre of Marneuli. Both agricultural products and clothing are available there. As the locals explained, the commerce sector is dominated by the residents of Qizilajlo village.⁸ Three decades ago, two additional large bazaars existed in Marneuli municipality. The first was in Kasumlo, near the Georgian-Armenian border. This predominantly agricultural bazaar was closed in the early 1990s after the outbreak of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and several incidents between the

³ The word “graz” in Azerbaijani slang is a short form of Gürcistan Azərlləri (Az. Georgian Azerbaijanis)

⁴ Respondent N3. An elderly man from Shaumyan.

⁵ Respondent N4. A resident of Opreti.

⁶ Respondent N5. A resident of Qizilajlo

⁷ Respondent N3. An elderly man from Shaumyan.

⁸ Respondent N5. A resident of Qizilajlo

locals and residents of Armenia.⁹ The second bazaar functioned in Sadakhlo, also near the Armenian-Georgian border, until 2004. This market sold goods smuggled from Armenia, and was an important point of interaction between Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis. However, the bazaar was closed during the Saakashvili administration as part of the tax reforms.¹⁰

In addition to the large wholesale market, multiple trading spots functioned in the vicinity of the transit roads. On the highway connecting Georgia with Armenia, there are many markets selling detergents. As one local resident explained:

“Here, detergents are cheaper than in Armenia. Armenian lorry drivers buy these detergents at a lot and then resell in Armenia.”¹¹

These markets are mostly owned by Azerbaijanis and Armenians. The open-air livestock market on the highway connecting Marneuli with Tetrtskaro is an important hub for local cattle owners.¹²

The second important sector of the local economy is agriculture. Many rural families in Marneuli have greenhouses on their land plots. Residents of villages located on the embankments of the Khrami, Debeda and Algeti rivers are more focused on growing vegetables, like cucumbers and tomatoes, while the residents of Sadakhlo, Damia-Georarkh and others, in most cases, cultivate strawberries or raspberries. According to a greenhouse owner in Kirkhilo, the average annual income of a greenhouse owner varies between 10 and 20 thousand Lari, depending on the size of greenhouse and the farmer’s expertise.¹³ Owing to the higher price of natural gas, the farmers prefer to utilize firewood to heat their greenhouses during the winter season, which significantly contributes to deforestation.¹⁴ The crops produced in said greenhouses are sold to Georgians, who later sell the products on to the Tbilisi bazaars. The

⁹ Respondent N2. A retired police officer from Marneuli town/Saimerlo.

¹⁰ Radio Svoboda 2009. “The Role of the Wholesale Markets in the Resolution of Ethnic Conflicts” [rol optovykh rynkov v uregulirovanii mezhnatsionalnykh konfliktov]. Available at: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/1622877.html>

¹¹ Respondent N6. A retired police officer from Shulaveri.

¹² Alliances Kvemo Khartli (2011). Livestock Sector Research in Kvemo Kartli Region. p. 9. Available at: <http://alcp.ge/pdfs/958f0af1936d1e8df94fb16fa2194d1b.pdf>

¹³ Respondent N7. A resident of Kirkhilo.

¹⁴ Respondent N8. A resident of Kachagan.

Covid-19 pandemic and the heavy lockdown measures in Marneuli municipality have significantly disrupted the supply chain of bazaars and negatively impacted the local economy.¹⁵

One of the main problems related to the agricultural sector is the unjust partition of previously state-owned agricultural lands after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially, the state-owned lands were rented to individuals, who eventually became the owners of the lands by using loopholes in Georgian legislation. According to the Georgian legislation of the 1990s, the renters were in a privileged position in terms of land privatization. As one resident of Sabirkend said:

“This arrendator [owner of the land] grabbed all our lands. Hundreds of hectares. We have nothing. We sued in court, but nothing came of it.”¹⁶

Eventually, the “arrendators” established a patron-client semi-feudal relationship with the local population. “Arrendators” give their owned land to the local population for rent, which meant no income other than agriculture. In this way, the population became dependent on the good will of the land owners.

In addition, some villages are experiencing problems with irrigation. For instance, two canals near Kachagan, Aghmamedlo and Tekalo are regularly out of order. In Shaumyan, the irrigation system collapsed in the 1990s. In addition, climate change has affected some communities, especially the villages located in the Shulaveriskhevi and Banovcha gorges. In recent years there, the two rivers have dried out in the summer season. One respondent from Sadakhlo recalls how he would fish in the Banovcha River in his childhood. Today, it is dry, and fills with water only in the rainy seasons. According to our respondent from Tserakvi:

“When I was young, we had snowy winters. Nowadays, it rarely snows. The river flowed intensely, and sometimes it was dangerous to cross it. Now you can see that it is like a little stream, so we don’t have water for irrigation.”¹⁷

¹⁵ A. Kvakhadze (2020). “na karantine: Kak vzhivayut azerbaijantsy gruzii” [On Quarantine: How Azerbaijanis of Georgia are Surviving]. Kavkazskiy Uzel. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/347547/>

¹⁶ Respondent N9. An elderly man from Sabirkend.

¹⁷ Respondent N10. A resident of Tserakvi

A number of large plantations exists in Marneuli municipality. Investors from Turkey have established walnut and almond crops, and have an interest in further cultivation of these cultures. As one local from Imiri explained:

“Turks come here because the quality of land is good. They are foreigners and cannot purchase land. So, they find local Azerbaijanis with Georgian citizenship, sign an agreement, and buy the land on their behalf. You see, there are almonds. In picking season, they employ the locals and pay them approximately 30 Lari”.¹⁸

Turkish-owned crops also exist in Aghmamedlo and other surrounding villages. There are Chinese-owned high-tech greenhouses in Tekalo, and Indian Panjabi farmers own agricultural lands near Shulaveri and in the Algeti zone.

Another important sector of agriculture is animal husbandry. Some residents of Marneuli own a large number of sheep. Locals prefer to use the Yalguja mountain range as their winter pasture, while in summer they transfer their flocks to the mountains of Dmanisi and Tsalka municipalities. Some of our respondents complained that large expanses of land in Yalguja had been privatized by former local officials. As one local said:

“[Zaza] Lashkhi [a former governor of Marneuli municipality] privatized vast lands in Yalguja. Sheep owners have to pay him. These lands no longer belong to the people... Lashkhi also has a slaughterhouse in Marneuli Bazaar.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Interview N11. A resident of Imiri

¹⁹ Respondent N9. An elderly man from Sabirkend.

The number of families owning cattle is declining by the year. This trend can be explained by the decreasing profits a household can make from owning cows. As one resident of Damia-Georarkh explained:

“Very few people have cows here. My parents still want to buy one or two cows. They want us to have our own milk and cheese. But if you calculate the costs, it is cheaper to buy the products than to feed the cow”.²⁰

However, several foreign investments have been made in the livestock sector. For instance, in the vicinity of Azizkend village, a group of investors from the UAE built an export-oriented livestock farm.²¹

The third rapidly growing sector of the local economy is construction. In recent years, Marneuli has been experiencing a construction boom. Many locals worry that Marneuli town may one day turn into “a concrete jungle”.²² There is high demand from the rural residents of the Marneuli region, as well as those from neighbouring Bolnisi and Dmanisi, for apartments. One local explained:

“Imagine, a boy marries. He needs a separate house to live in. But building a new house is very expensive and there is not enough land. Buying an apartment in Marneuli is much cheaper”.²³

As mentioned earlier, during Soviet times, the outflow of the rural population of Marneuli was directed towards Baku. In recent years, the residents of Marneuli have begun migrating towards Tbilisi, but at a smaller scale than Azerbaijanis from the Gardabani or Sagarejo municipalities. The

²⁰ Interview N12. A resident of Damia-Georarkh

²¹ Interview N13. A political activist from the UNM in Marneuli.

²² Interview N13. A political activist from the UNM in Marneuli.

²³ Interview N13. A political activist from the UNM in Marneuli.

massive enrollment of local students in universities has accelerated this process. The inhabitants of villages located along the Rustavi-Red Bridge highway, on the other hand, prefer to migrate to Rustavi, due to its proximity.

The tourism sector is almost nonexistent in Marneuli. However, there are many locations with great tourism potential, such as the German architecture in Tamarisi, an archaeological site in Imiri where an ancient wine cellar has been excavated, Kushchu (Gagi) Fortress, the unique architecture of Shaumian town, and numerous monasteries in Opreti and Akhkerpi.

Religion

Marneuli municipality accommodates several large confessions and denominations. According to the 2014 census, Islam represents the largest religious group in the region, constituting 82.2% of the population.²⁴ However, the census does not distinguish between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Shia Islam has been historically widespread among the majority of the population of Marneuli town, Qizilajlo, Algeti zone (except Hajisakend), Alvari, Kachagan, Tekalo, Khanjighazlo, Kirech Mughanlo, Kasumlo, Aghmamedlo, Ulashlo, Beitarapchi, Kushchu, Akhlomamudlo, Araplo, Yenikend, Seithojalo, Zemo Sarali, Kvemo Sarali, Imiri, Damia-Georarkh, Akhlo-Lalalo, Kirovka, Dashdapa, Algeti Winery, Zemo Kullar, Kvemo Kullar, Kirkhilo, Dashtapa, Tsopi, Molaoghli (half of its population), and Akhkula. According to our estimates, approximately 65% of the Azerbaijani Muslims in Marneuli are affiliated to Shia Islam.²⁵

Marneuli town has become an unspoken centre of Shia Islam in Georgia. Several Shia religious organisations function in the region. The first is the Religious Council of Shia Muslims

²⁴ National Statistics Office of Georgia. Available at: <https://www.geostat.ge/en>

²⁵ Interview N14. A Shia spiritual leader from Marneuli.

led by Ramin Igidov. Although it has its headquarter in Tbilisi, the organisation controls the vast majority of Shia mosques in the villages of Marneuli, and appoints Akhunds.²⁶

The second Shia organization, Ahl ul-Beyt, operates in Marneuli and is led by Rasim Mamedov, who received an Islamic education in Iran. The organisation owns a madrassa, which delivers courses on the Koran and the principles of Shia Islam. It receives funds from charitable organisations and individuals from Turkey and Iran, and allegedly maintains close ties with the Iranian Embassy in Georgia.²⁷

The third organization, the Supreme Spiritual Administration of Muslims, led by Mirtagi Asadov, follows an Iraqi-based Shia spiritual leader called Grand Ayatollah Sistani.²⁸ The organisation is centred around the Imam Ali mosque in Marneuli.

The last two organisations do not recognize the supremacy of the Religious Council of Shia Muslims due to its alleged close links with the Georgian state security services. Furthermore, the Supreme Spiritual Administration of Muslims has an ongoing judicial process with the official Shia directorate over the ownership of the Imam Ali mosque in Marneuli. The mosque was built by the former, but was officially claimed and registered by the latter.²⁹

Sunnis constitute approximately 35% of the region's Azerbaijani population. The Hanafi branch of Sunni Islam has been traditionally widespread in the villages of the Rustavi-Red Bridge highway (except Algeti Winery), Baidar, Kurtlar, Didi Mughanlo, Lezhbadin, Sadakhlo, Burma, Tazakend (of Sadakhlo), Khuldara, and Molaoghli (half of its population).³⁰ The Sunni Azerbaijani population of Marneuli is included within the spiritual borders of the Muftiate of Eastern Georgia.³¹ A large Sunni madrassa exists in the village of Keshalo, which, along with all other

²⁶ Interview N14. A Shia spiritual leader from Marneuli.

²⁷ C. Prasad (2012). "Georgia's Muslim Community. A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?" ECMI Working papers. Available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/140741/Working_Paper_58_En.pdf

²⁸ Interview N14. A Shia spiritual leader from Marneuli.

²⁹ EMC (2017). "EMC-m imam alis mechetis restitutsiis problemastan dakavshirebit sasamrtlo dava daitsko". [EMC Began the Court Process Concerning the Restitution Problem of Imam Ali Mosqu]. Available at: <https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/emc-ma-marneulshi-imam-alis-mechetis-restitutsiis-problemastan-dakavshirebit-sasamartlo-dava-daitsgo>

³⁰ Interview N14. A Shia spiritual leader from Marneuli.

³¹ The spiritual directorate of Georgian Sunni Muslims is split in two: western – covering Georgian-speaking Muslims (Adjarans, Chechen and Dagestanis of Georgia), and Eastern – responsible for Azerbaijani Sunni Muslims

buildings, was built by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). The curriculum of the madrassa follows the teaching of Osman Nuri Topbaş, an Istanbul-based Turkish Sufi spiritual leader.³² The students of this madrassa are mostly Sunni Azerbaijanis, and the language of education is Azerbaijani. The majority of Sunni Imams in Marneuli's rural mosques are adherents of Osman Nuri Topbaş, with the exception of Molaoghli village, where the local Sunni Imam follows another and more conservative Turkish Sufi spiritual leader, Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü, also known as Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca.³³

Along with the official Sunni Islamic bodies, informal Salafi groups are also present in Marneuli. A relatively high concentration of Salafis can be found in Keshalo village. A small group of Salafis also exists in the Didi Mughanlo, Lezhbadin, Kirech Mughanlo and Kachagan villages.

Salafis are divided into two main branches. The first group (including the community of Keshalo) are the followers of Veysel Orujov, an ethnic Azerbaijani Salafi preacher from the Kakheti region. The second group follows Gamet Suleymanov, a prominent Baku-based Azerbaijani Salafi preacher. None of Salafi communities of Marneuli possesses an exclusive mosque; in general, performing Friday prayers in their own houses. The Salafis of Keshalo, on the other hand, attend Friday prayers run by the official Sunni Imam of the local mosque. As one local Salafi explained:

"The Imam of our mosque, Anar, is an educated man. He studied in Saudi Arabia. Although we disagree with Hanafis in some minor details, both of us are Muslims. We attend the Friday prayers in the mosque".³⁴

The situation is opposite in Shia-majority villages. Salafis from a Shia family background tend to isolate themselves from their Shia neighbours and even relatives. As one woman from the Shia-majority village Algeti explained:

³² Interview N15. An activist from Khuldara

³³ Interview N15. An activist from Khuldara

³⁴ Interview N16. Salafi from Keshalo

“I had a good female friend. She was studying in Tbilisi. But one day she became a Salafi and covered herself with a hijab. She came to me and told me ‘you are Shia, and Shias are not Muslims and are our enemies. We cannot be friends until you convert to Islam’”.³⁵

Shia Akhunds also share negative views about Salafis, and perceive them as a potential threat. An Akhund of one village said, “Thank God we don’t have them, and will never allow them to appear in our villages”.³⁶

The vast majority of Marneuli’s population, especially the older generation, has a vague affiliation to either Shia or Sunni denominations. Intermarriages between Shias and Sunnis are very common. Both Shia and Sunni Hanafi spiritual bodies have good relations with one another. However, some Shia leaders worry about the increasing activities of Turkish-funded Sunni charitable organisations in Shia-populated areas. As one respondent noted:

“We [Shias] do not proselytize in Sunni villages, but Turks do it with Shia-born youth. They are not only trying to convert our youth to Sunni Islam, but also to change their identity. They teach our youth that they are Turks, not Azerbaijanis”.³⁷

Sunni Islam is also widespread among ethnic Georgian eco-migrants from Adjara. However, as one local from Dioknisi noted, only the older generation maintains their allegiance to Islam, while the youth tend to convert to Christianity. The same process can be seen in Mareti village, while Adjarans from Maradisi mostly remain Muslim.

The second largest confession in Marneuli municipality is the Orthodox Church. Orthodox Christianity is widespread among the majority of Georgians and the small number of Russians, Greeks and Ossetians residing in Marneuli municipality. The Georgian Orthodox Church in the region is governed by the Marneuli-Khujabi Eparchy led by Bishop Giorgi Jamdeliani. The headquarters of the eparchy is located in Marneuli. Although Orthodox Christians constitute less than 10% of the region’s population, the eparchy receives substantial financial aid from the local budget, even higher than Muslim spiritual bodies. Such a disproportionate distribution of material resources between the confessions leads to grievances between Muslim activists and

³⁵ Interview N17. A women’s rights activist from Algeti

³⁶ Interview N18. Akhund of the one of the villages closed to Debeda River

³⁷ Interview N14. A Shia spiritual leader from Marneuli.

the clergy.³⁸ It is noteworthy that the Georgian Orthodox Church does not attempt to convert Azerbaijanis to Christianity. Instead, it focuses on strengthening its presence within the Georgian villages of the region and increasing its influence on the local authorities.

The third largest confession is the Armenian Apostolic Church (Gregorian Christianity), which exists in the Armenian-majority settlements. There are three Armenian churches in Marneuli municipality, in Akhkerpi, Shaumyan, Tsiteli Sopeli. Although the churches do not have a priest, they belong to the Diocese of Armenian Apostolic Churches in Georgia.³⁹

Aside from the major religious confessions, groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and various protestant movements also exist in Marneuli, with both Georgians and Azerbaijanis among their adherents. The number of Jehovah Witnesses in Marneuli stands at 116, while the statistics of other minor confessions in the region is unavailable.⁴⁰

Education

Marneuli municipality accommodates 72 public and two private schools. The number of schools according to the main language of education is as follows: 42 Azerbaijani schools, 8 Georgian, 7 Armenian, 3 Russian, 4 Georgian-Azerbaijani, 3 Georgian-Russian, 2 Azerbaijani-Russian, and 2 Armenian-Azerbaijani. The two private schools are situated in Marneuli town. The first, 'Momavali' (Geo. 'future'), offers a Georgian-English education, while the second, the 'Davit Aghmashenebeli Liceum,' owned by the Turkish Abdullah Gülen-associated network, offers a mixed Georgian-English-Azerbaijani education.⁴¹ In recent years, Georgian sectors have been created in Azerbaijani-majority villages such as Kasumlo and Ulashlo, and Georgians schools are in high demand among Azerbaijani parents. A teacher of secondary classes in the Georgian school

³⁸ EMC (2015). "Legal Assessment of the Financial Practices of the Four Religious Denominations". Available at: <https://emc.org.ge/en/products/otkhi-religiuri-organizatsiis-dafinansebis-praktikis-samartlebrivi-shefaseba>

³⁹ Diocese of Armenian Apostolic Churches in Georgia. Available at: <https://armenianchurch.ge/en/>

⁴⁰ CSEM. Available at: <http://csem.ge/maps/gallery/csem-maps/>

⁴¹ catalog.edu.ge. Available at: http://www.catalog.edu.ge/index.php?module=school_info&page=main&search=search®ion=3

of Shulaveri told this author: “Nowadays, the majority of the pupils in the Georgian sector are Azerbaijanis”. She went on to explain this high demand for a Georgian education:

“There are two categories of parents sending their children to Georgian schools. The first are those who just want to their children to know spoken Georgian. They don’t care much about education, they perhaps need them to interpret while their parents talk to Georgian resellers. The second category wants their children to fully integrate into Georgian society and receive a decent education. Many of my Azerbaijani students are outstanding.”⁴²

However, in Georgian schools with a mixed Georgian-Azerbaijani contingent, alienation between Georgian and Azerbaijani students exists. As one teacher explained:

“We are doing our best to bring them closer to each other. We have come up with many team games and other mixed activities. But as soon as we leave them, we see the Georgian and Azerbaijani children playing separately from one other”.⁴³

Another factor contributing to this alienation is the attitude of some ethnic Georgian parents. As an ethnic Azerbaijani resident of Qizilajlo, who sends his children to the Georgian sector of Marneuli’s N6 public school said, Georgian parents demand separate Georgian and Azerbaijani classes in primary schools.⁴⁴ According to him, Georgian parents are dissatisfied with the quality of education when the majority of the pupils in primary classes are Azerbaijanis with rudimentary Georgian skills, which means teachers and headmasters are concentrating on teaching spoken Georgian to the Azerbaijani pupils, rather than teaching the relevant subjects to their Georgian peers. The abovementioned resident of Qizilajlo noted:

“When I was a child, I studied in Russian school. We didn’t care about nationality. Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Russians, Armenians, Greeks all studied together. Now, my children have only Azerbaijani classmates. Georgian parents think that in Azerbaijani-majority classes, the quality of education is low. This attitude must be changed. I want my children to have more Georgian friends”.⁴⁵

Parents sending their children to Georgian schools face another problem. The older generation, with its limited knowledge of Georgian, is incapable of helping their children with homework,

⁴² Interview N19. A school teacher from Mareti.

⁴³ Interview N19. A school teacher from Mareti.

⁴⁴ Interview N5. A resident of Qizilajlo

⁴⁵ Interview N5. A resident of Qizilajlo

especially in scientific subjects such as maths, biology, physics or geography. As such, many Azerbaijani pupils lag behind their Georgian peers in the basic subjects. Furthermore, the teachers of Georgian schools were unprepared for the influx of Azerbaijani students, and, lacking training in the phonetics and morphology of the Azerbaijani language, cannot indicate or correct the grammar or pronunciation mistakes typical to Azerbaijani native speakers.

Azerbaijani parents also send their children to schools in other Georgian villages. The local municipality assists parents with transportation of children via minibuses.⁴⁶ Affluent parents from the villages near the Red Bridge highway, due to proximity, send their children to Georgian schools in Rustavi.⁴⁷

The proficiency level of the Georgian language is low among Azerbaijanis. In urban parts of Marneuli, the majority of the middle-aged and younger generations have satisfactory communication skills in Georgian, while in rural areas, only a handful of locals can communicate in Georgian. An exception is the village of Alvari, where the majority of the Azerbaijani population is bilingual due to their intensive contacts with neighboring Georgian villages. A large number of Azerbaijani youth have learned Georgian in Tbilisi universities, within the framework of the programme “1+4”. Azerbaijanis serving in the Georgian Armed Forces are also able to communicate in Georgian.

Concerning Armenians, the vast majority speaks Armenian and Russian. Russian is used as the lingua-franca among the older generation of Azerbaijanis, Armenians and Georgians, although today, Russian has lost its position among the young generation, especially among ethnic Georgians and Azerbaijanis.

Informal education is widespread in Marneuli municipality. Numerous NGOs run courses in Marneuli town, with curriculums mostly covering women’s rights, the integration of minorities, and raising awareness of the EU and NATO. However, the most remarkable endeavors are so-called “Garage Education Centres”, opened by young activists in various villages in their private assets (basements, garages, warehouses). “Garage Centres” function in the villages of Khuldara

⁴⁶ Interview N12. A resident of Damia-Georarkh

⁴⁷ Interview N19. Imam from Keshalo

(founded by Kamran Afandiyev), Molaoghli (founded by Ariz Dashdemirov), Aghmamedlo (Zakir Ayvazov), Kvemo Sarali (Sakina Rustamova), Algeti (Ayshan Gisbasova) and Kasumlo (Arzu Bayramova). The centres offer courses that vary from Georgian language to IT classes. Additionally, the centre in Molaoghly has created a “mothers’ school”, focused on educating adult women who did not continue their education following early marriage. The interesting detail is that the majority of the attendees of these centres are girls. As one owner of the centre explained:

“The majority are girls. They are very motivated. The same cannot be said about boys, who prefer either to hang around in the “birzha”⁴⁸, or attend Koran courses in the mosque.”⁴⁹

Politics

Compared to other Azerbaijani-populated Municipalities of Georgia, the political process in Marneuli is extremely vibrant and active. Almost every electoral campaign in the region of late has been accompanied by tension and the increasing attention of national media. Like other minority-inhabited regions, prior to 2012, every election in Marneuli was a guaranteed victory for the ruling party.

The situation has changed since 2012, seeing opposition parties increasing their influence and offering more potent competitors for positions in the local government (see figure 3). A focal point was the local elections in 2014, when the ethnic Azerbaijani candidate Ahmed Imamgulyev, representing the United National Movement (UNM), came very close to victory against his rival Merab Topchishvili from the ruling party Georgian Dream (GD).⁵⁰ The second remarkable event was the 2016 General elections in Marneuli’s majoritarian constituency, between Ahmet Imamguliev and the GD candidate, Tamaz Naveriani. The election was accompanied by

⁴⁸ Birzha – In Georgian slang “an outdoor gathering of idle youth”

⁴⁹ Interview N20. An activist from Kvemo Sarali

⁵⁰ Data on the 2014 local elections is available on the official website of Election Administration of Georgia: <https://cesko.ge/>

unprecedented violence near the polling station in Qizilajlo, resulting in stones being thrown at law enforcement officials, and the mobilization of the riot police. Eventually, Naveriani managed to achieve victory in the second round.⁵¹

Imamguliev's candidacy challenged the unwritten ethnic protocol in Marneuli's local administration. According to informal rule, the mayor/governor of Marneuli municipality should be ethnic Georgian. Imamguliev was able to successfully mobilize ethnic Azerbaijani votes against Georgian candidates from the ruling party. Consequently, the GD party also began to nominate Azerbaijani candidates as mayors: Temur Abazov and Zaur Dargali respectively.

Marneuli can be characterized by the competition between several ethno-political clans. The respondents listed the most influential interest groups. The first is the so-called "Svan clan", allegedly led by Tamaz Naveriani, a former MP from the GD. Naveriani himself, apart from being an MP, owns Marneuli bazaar, several other business objects, and the local martial arts club. Several of his associates hold key positions in the city hall and local council. The local bishop, Giorgi Jamdeliani, is also believed to be Naveriani's close associate.⁵²

The second interest group is known as the "Imeretian clan", represented by the residents of Saimerlo and Tsereteli. The dwellers of these villages have had a strong presence in the local administration and especially law enforcement structures since their resettlement from the upper Imereti region.⁵³ The head of the local council, Amiran Giorgadze, is believed to be among the leading figures of this clan.

The third large interest group is made up of heterogeneous Azerbaijani clans, representing various villages and influential families, and having ties to political circles in Baku. In addition, the non-indigenous cadres appointed from Tbilisi and the local State Security Service (SUS) also have substantial influence in the region. The relationships between these interest

⁵¹ Data on the 2016 general elections is available on the official website of Election Administration of Georgia: <https://cesko.ge/>

⁵² A. Yusubova & M. Ghoghoberidze "mdumare deputatis gavlenebi marneulshi" [The Influence of a Silent MP in Marneuli]. Available at: https://spark.adobe.com/page/L9feDelzBTvhE/?fbclid=IwAR1OGaMJFqEhHDIDvuOwVrXDJ9panK_Cja_EKk-I3qecc9ZWsva6Gp0Az8g

⁵³ Interview N2. A retired police officer from Marneuli city/Saimerlo.

groups can be described as a complex hierarchy of temporary and event-based coalitions between the competing clans. For instance, the “Svan clan”, formerly loyal to the ruling party, was disengaged from the GD after the party leadership refused to nominate Tamaz Naveriani in the proportional list nor as the majoritarian candidate for the 2020 general elections. Instead, the respective clan supported a minor nationalist party, ‘Georgian Idea’ and its candidate Oleg Devadze, who got 999 votes (1.65%).⁵⁴

Despite the competitive electoral process in recent decades, none of the opposition parties has managed to achieve a victory in Marneuli. Several factors can explain the strong position of the ruling party. First is the low political awareness of the majority of the ethnic Azerbaijani population in the region. As one local explained: “The older generation in particular believes that no matter how bad the ruling party is, you should vote for it”⁵⁵.

Secondly, the members of opposition parties accuse the government of using administration resources during the electoral campaign. They point to the use of teachers as one such resource. As one respondent said: “Behind every teacher is a whole extended family. So, imagine how many votes can be collected by the whole school personnel!”

Further, some business and political circles in Azerbaijan are still capable of influencing the elections in the region. The diasporic network with close ties to Azerbaijan’s local elites maintain influence on their relatives and co-villagers in Marneuli. The local opposition activists mentioned the involvement of SOCAR in the elections:

“Before every election, the leaders of SOCAR visit Marneuli and agitate in favour of the government, no matter who the candidate is. They even supported Svan Naveriani against Azerbaijani Imamguliyev. The government makes a deal, and SOCAR supports them”.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Data on the 2016 general elections is available on the official website of Election Administration of Georgia: <https://cesko.ge/>

⁵⁵ Interview N13. A political activist from the UNM in Marneuli.

⁵⁶ Interview N21. A political activist from the UNM in Beylar.

And finally, several locals mentioned the involvement of the mafia (“thieves-in-law”) in supporting the government during the elections. As they told this author, many associates of Georgia-born ethnic Azerbaijani mafia kingpin Guli⁵⁷ were active in the 2017 local elections.⁵⁸

Interethnic relations

Georgian-Azerbaijani relations

The residents of the majority of Azerbaijani villages have limited daily interaction with ethnic Georgians. Even in Marneuli town and those villages which have neighbouring Georgian settlements, the Georgian and Azerbaijani population lives separately from one another. During the Soviet period, some Georgian and Azerbaijani villages had common sovkhos (collective farms), and the population was employed in ethnically mixed working brigades, but following the privatization of the state-owned lands, this type of interaction came to an end.

Many Azerbaijanis share negative memories concerning the first years of the resettlement of eco migrants from Svaneti in Marneuli, which was accompanied by intercommunity clashes between Svans and Azerbaijanis in Marneuli.⁵⁹ In the 1990s, organised crime groups consisting of Svan settlers frequently targeted Azerbaijani families.⁶⁰ Such a negative attitude did not exist towards the earlier settlers from Imereti. However, the old generation of Baidar and Kurtlar villages recalls the events of the 1950s: “These were our agricultural lands. Hundreds of hectares of agricultural lands. Now, they are the Georgian villages of Tsereteli and Orjonikidze [Saimerlo].”⁶¹

Several Azerbaijani respondents mentioned the ethnic imbalance in the public sector of Marneuli. Despite the fact that Azerbaijanis constitute more than 80% of Marneuli municipality,

⁵⁷ Guli (Nadir Salifov) – A thief-in-law, born in Mamishlo village of the Dmanisi municipality. He was among the most influential leaders of Russian-speaking organised crime groups. Assassinated in 2020 in Turkey.

⁵⁸ Interview N13. A political activist from the UNM in Marneuli.

⁵⁹ S. Zviadadze & D. Jishkariani (2018). “Identity Issues among Azerbaijani Population of Kvemo Kartli and its Political and Social Dimensions”. EMC

⁶⁰ Interview N2. A retired police officer from Marneuli city/Saimerlo.

⁶¹ Interview N23. An elderly man from Baidar.

the majority of the key positions in the local police, security services, city hall and council are held by ethnic Georgians either from local villages or from Tbilisi. Another contested issue between Georgians and Azerbaijanis is the symbolic politics of the Georgian Orthodox Church. More precisely, crosses were erected on several hilltops near all-Azerbaijani villages. One location was at the historical Gagi (Akchakala) Fortress in Kushchu village. As the local Akhund said: “If it was the national flag of Georgia, it wouldn’t be a problem. But why do they put up a cross? It’s not a church and has nothing to do with religion”.⁶² The tension between the Georgian and Azerbaijani population increased when the head of the Orthodox Church in Marneuli demanded the monument of prominent Azerbaijani writer and Soviet official, Nariman Narimanov, in Marneuli town, be demolished. Jamdeliani claimed that Narimanov was a communist practitioner who had participated in the Soviet annexation of Georgia in 1921. The Azerbaijani population perceived Jamdeliani’s indicative as an attempt to erase Azerbaijani culture in Georgia.⁶³

The eco-migrants from Adjara and the most recent IDPs from Tskhinvali region remain separate from the ethno-political dynamics of Marneuli. No major clashes have been reported between the respective settlers and the local host communities.

Azerbaijani-Armenian relations

In three villages, namely Tsopi, Norgiughi and Khojorni, a mixed Azerbaijani and Armenian population lives together. Overall, both ethnic groups coexist peacefully, and both Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the mixed villages are bilingual and fluent in each other’s languages. However, mixed marriages are almost nonexistent between the two ethnicities. They also have their separate gathering places (so-called “birzha”). The older generation of Azerbaijanis residing in proximity to the Armenian border (Burma, Tazakend, Kalinino) had close relationships with the neighboring villages of Armenia (Bagratashen, Debedavan), and many elderly people in these areas still speak Armenian.

⁶² Interview N24. Akhund from Aghmamedlo

⁶³ Civil.ge (2020). “Soviet-era Monument Steals the Show in Georgia’s Covid-hit Marneuli”. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/354407>

Aside from several small incidents, no major clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis have been observed in Marneuli. However, both ethnicities fully support their kin states in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijanis recently held several demonstrations in Marneuli and waved national flags,⁶⁴ and Armenians did not support the UNM party in the last general election due to its leader Mikheil Saakashvili's pro-Azerbaijani statement.⁶⁵

The existing transit routes in Marneuli also make contacts between the local Azerbaijanis and Armenians from Armenia inevitable. As one local said, Armenian lorry drivers often purchase goods from the multiple Azerbaijani stores spread along the highway.

Georgian-Armenian relations

The interaction between these two ethnicities is not as intense as the cases mentioned above. Armenians and Georgians have contacts in the following regions: Norgiuli (Mirzoevka) and Tsereteli/Saimerlo settlements; Shaumyan, Khikhani (including the IDPs from Tskhinvali region) and Tserakvi with mountainous villages such as Tsopi, Akhkerpi and others. Relations are mostly peaceful. In the mountainous areas, intermarriages between Armenians and Georgians from Tserakvi or Sioni are frequent.⁶⁶ However, the residents of Shaumyan remember that hundreds of hectares of their agricultural lands were transferred to Adjaran settlers in Khikhani village in the late 1980s by the Soviet State. The proficiency in the Georgian language among Armenians is low. Georgians and Armenians mostly use Russian as their lingua franca.

Media and the Civil Sector

Civic activities in Marneuli municipality date back to the late 1980s and early 1990s. Simultaneous to a rise of nationalism in Georgia, a group of local Azerbaijanis demanded the establishment of an autonomous region in Kvemo-Kartli, with the titular status of ethnic Azerbaijani population.

⁶⁴ Marneuli FM (2020). "tsitel khidze azerbaijanis mkhardamcheri aktsia gaimarta" [Demonstration in Support of Azerbaijan Held at the Red Bridge]. Available at: <https://www.marneulifm.ge/ka/marneuli/article/32447>

⁶⁵ Data on the 2020 general elections is available on the official website of Election Administration of Georgia: <https://cesko.ge/>

⁶⁶ Respondent N10. A resident of Tserakvi

The clashes and tension between settlers from Svaneti strengthened these aspirations. The strongest Azerbaijani ethnic organisation at that time was Geyrat. Geyrat organised numerous protest demonstrations, blocking the highways and claiming a higher representation of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the local government.⁶⁷ However, following the coup d'état in 1992 and coming to power of Shevardnadze's administration, the newly appointed governor of Kvemo Kartli, Levan Mamaladze, managed to make a deal with Azerbaijani activists and incorporated the leaders of Geyrat in the local government. Geyrat has significantly weakened since the Rose Revolution in 2003,⁶⁸ and nowadays exists, but no longer has influence over the population of the region.

Numerous Tbilisi-based organisations have conducted various projects in Marneuli. In most cases, these organisations are focused on informal education, combating early and arranged marriages, and raising local awareness of nationwide affairs and NATO-EU integration. Among the NGOs present in Marneuli municipality is the platform 'Salam'. The organisation consists of ethnic Azerbaijanis from almost all regions of Georgia, including Marneuli, who are focused on the popularization of the culture of Georgian Azerbaijanis, raising awareness among rural Azerbaijanis about various issues, and protecting human rights in the region. For instance, Salam launched the campaign "Give Me Back my Surname", which means changing the official last names of Georgian Azerbaijanis by removing the Russian suffix –ov/ -yev.⁶⁹ Additionally,

⁶⁷ Kavkazskiy Uzel (2003). Azerbaijantsy zhivushiye v gruzii perekрили zheleznuyu dorogu [Georgian Azerbaijanis Blocked the Railway]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/36889/>

⁶⁸ Wheatley J, (2009). "The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Provinces of Georgia." ECMI Working paper 44. p. 33. Available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/106670/working_paper_44_en.pdf

⁶⁹ Mchedlidze D. (2020). "sakartvelos azerbaijanelebma sotsialur kselshi sakutari gvarebis rusuli daboloebis shetsvla daitskes" [Georgian Azerbaijanis Began to Change the Russian Suffixes of their Family Names]. Radio Tavisupleba. Available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%A5%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%97%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%90%E1%83%96%E1%83%94%E1%83%A0%E1%83%91%E1%83%90%E1%83%98%E1%83%AF%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%9B%E1%83%90-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%9D%E1%83%AA%E1%83%98%E1%83%90%E1%83%9A%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0-%E1%83%A5%E1%83%A1%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%A8%E1%83%98-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%99%E1%83%A3%E1%83%97%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98-%E1%83%92%E1%83%95%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A0%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A3%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98-%E1%83%93%E1%83%90%E1%83%91%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A8%E1%83%94%E1%83%AA%E1%83%95%E1%83%9A%E1%83%90-%E1%83%93%E1%83%90%E1%83%98%E1%83%AC%E1%83%A7%E1%83%94%E1%83%A1/30366700.html>

Salam distributed masks and sanitisers during the lockdown in Marneuli, and also provided free legal consultation to the local population.⁷⁰

Media has an important role in Marneuli. The majority of the Azerbaijani population watches Azerbaijani TV programmes for news and Turkish programmes for entertainment. However, several local media resources exist. First, the state-owned Marneuli Television broadcasts in Georgian, Russian and Azerbaijani. The channel has a news programme in all three languages, and offers translated documentaries. TV24 is a private TV station in the Azerbaijani language with news programmes as well as documentaries about the rural life of Marneuli. The bilingual Georgian-Azerbaijani Marneuli FM radio is growing in popularity in Marneuli. Mostly funded by donors, the radio station offers news programmes and debates on regional and global issues.

Additionally, a significant annual event taking place in the Marneuli municipality is the ‘One Caucasus’ festival. The annual festival of alternative music takes place every summer in Tserakvi village. In 2020 the geography of the festival was expanded, and events were also held in Sadakhlo and Shaumyan. The organizers of this festival aim to “create an inspirational and safe space to foster the meetings and collaboration between young people from the entire Caucasus region.”⁷¹

Recommendations

Central Government

- Continuation of building new kindergartens in the rural areas;
- Improving the quality of Georgian language teaching in the schools;
- Improving transport communication between Marneuli and Tbilisi by bus and train;

⁷⁰ Marneuli FM (2020). “platforma salami korona virusis shesakheb sainformatsio kampanias itskebs” [Platform “Salam” Starts an Information Campaign Against Covid19]. Available at: <https://www.marneulifm.ge/ka/marneuli/article/28609>

⁷¹ Official website of the “One Caucasus” annual festival: <http://www.onecaucasus.org/>

- Attracting new investment in the agricultural and industrial sector;
- Creating a new industrial zone in the proximity of Marneuli town;
- Creating new economic opportunities near the upcoming highway connecting Georgia and Armenia;
- Reeducation of farmers and the technical modernization of existing greenhouses;
- Renovation of the historical town of Shaumyan, as done in Signaghi and Mtskheta, and creating tourist infrastructure;
- Creating new tourist routes of German heritage in Tamarisi, archaeological sites in Imiri, the tombs of the Seids in Araplo, Kushchu (Gagi) Fortress, and the Opreti and Khorakert monasteries in Akhkerpi and Tserakvi;
- Building a new asphalted road connecting Tsopi and Akhkerpi;
- Organising special training for Georgian teachers working with Azerbaijani-majority classes;
- Organising special intensive courses of Georgian language for Shia Akhunds and Sunni Imams.

Local Government

- Completing the registration of land and households;
- Facilitating interethnic contacts in ethnically mixed settlements through cultural and sports events;
- Incorporating the alumnus of 1+4 programmes in the public sector of Marneuli municipality;
- Solving waste management issues in the villages of Marneuli municipality;
- Solving irrigation problems;
- Creating an urbanization plan for Marneuli town;
- Creating new alternative entertainment places in Marneuli town;
- Empowerment of the local women;
- Improving infrastructure in the villages.

Media and NGO

- Broader coverage of the events in Marneuli at a nationwide level;
- Supporting informal education in urban and rural areas;
- Facilitating confessional dialogue in the region;
- Continuation of the festival “One Caucasus” and expansion of its geography.

Appendix

Figure N1. Marneuli's Settlements, Ethnic and Religious Groups

Settlement	Ethnicity	Religion	Census 2002	Census 2014
Marneuli	Azerbaijanis 84%, Georgians 10.5%, Armenians 3.7%	Shia Islam, Orthodox Christianity	20 065	20 211
Qizilajlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	7124	7291
Sadakhlo	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	9486	7337
Molaoghli	Azerbaijanis	Shia approximately 50%, Sunni Islam 50%	1180	1091
Tzakend (of Sadakhlo)	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	433	478
Khuldara	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	n/a	915
Algeti	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	5017	4253
Sabirkend	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	3713	3403
Tzakend (of Algeti)	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	2230	2076
Azickend	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	2170	1536
Hajisakend	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	750	522
Ambarovka / Algeti Vineyards	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1249	578
Ilmazlo	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	1033	998
Kesalo I	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	1622	1267
Kesalo II	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	1587	1353

Kapanakhchi	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	1383	1081
Damia-Georarkh	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1815	1939
Akhlo-Lalalo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	805	650
Kirovka (Mamey)	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	706	663
Damia	Armenians		334	326
Baydar	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	1236	882
Kurtlar	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	1711	1413
Didi Mughanlo	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	1815	1286
Lezhbadin	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Islam	1538	962
Khutor Lezhbadin	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	177	273
Tsereteli	Georgians (from Imereti)	Orthodox Christianity	2206	2191
Saimerlo	Georgians (from Imereti)	Orthodox Christianity	1470	1237
Didi Beglar	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	200	356
Patara Beglar	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	395	320
Norgiughi	Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Georgians	Mixed	567	436
Araplo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1118	854
Akhlo Mamudlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	758	554
Yenikend	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	492	488
Seidkhozalo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	527	501
Zemo Sarali	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1135	883
Kvemo Sarali	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1745	1370
Imiri	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1445	1235

Shulaveri	Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Armenians	Mixed	1787	1551
Imirchala	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	n/a	208
Shaumyan	Armenians, Georgians from Tskhinvali region	Gregorian Christianity, Orthodox Christianity	3630	3107
Akhkula	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	150	86
Khikhani	Georgians from Adjara	Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity	304	504
Kudro	Armenians	Gregorian Christianity	43	26
Tamarisi	Georgians from Imereti and Svaneti	Orthodox Christianity	1690	1399
Alvari	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	288	200
Dioknisi	Georgians from Adjara	Orthodox Christianity, Sunni Islam	296	309
Kasumlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	2921	2299
Aghmamedlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	2867	2289
Ulashlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	859	692
Kushchu	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	452	404
Beitarapchi	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	483	462
Baiatlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	400	259
Kirkhilo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1262	1114
Zemo Kullar	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1704	1141

Kvemo Kullar	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	628	565
Maradisi	Georgians from Adjara	Sunni Islam	n/a	239
Metsamula (former Budyonovka)	Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Georgians	Mixed	163	134
Dashtapa	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1462	1092
Kirmizikend	Armenians	Gregorian Christianity	1072	695
Kachagan	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	3974	2487
Tekalo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1682	1536
Khanji-Ghazlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	436	380
Kirech-Mughanlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Islam	1155	1105
Khojorni	Azerbaijanis, Armenians	Islam ⁷² , Gregorian Christianity	842	635
Gulbaghi	Armenians	Gregorian Christianity	273	245
Burdadzor	Armenians	Gregorian Christianity	58	38
Tsopi	Azerbaijanis, Armenians	Islam ⁷³ , Gregorian Christianity	746	596
Akhkerpi	Armenians	Gregorian Christianity	742	610

⁷² The Azerbaijani population of Khojorni is unaware about their affiliation either to Sunni or Shia Islam

⁷³ The Azerbaijani population of Tsopi is unaware about their affiliation either to Sunni or Shia Islam

Verkhviani (former Ulyanovka)	Georgians	Orthodox Christianity	0 ⁷⁴	4
Chanakhchi	Armenians	Gregorian Christianity	235	248
Opreti	Greeks	Orthodox Christianity	158	80
Khokhmeli	Armenians	Gregorian Christianity	81	59
Tserakvi	Georgians	Orthodox Christianity	248	180
Sioni	Georgians	Orthodox Christianity	351	192
Jankhoshi	Georgians ⁷⁵	Orthodox Christianity	20	2

Figure N2. Schools in Marneuli municipality

School	The main language of education
Alvari	Azerbaijani
Algeti N1	Azerbaijani
Algeti N2	Azerbaijani
Algeti N3	Azerbaijani / Russian
Araplo	Azerbaijani
Aghmamedlo	Azerbaijani
Dioknisi	Georgian
Akhkerpi	Armenian

⁷⁴ The village was populated by Armenians prior to its depopulation

⁷⁵ The village was populated by Armenians prior to its depopulation

Akhlolalo	Azerbaijani
Akhkula	Azerbaijani
Azizkend	Azerbaijani
Baydar	Azerbaijani
Bayatlo	Azerbaijani
Beytarapchi	Azerbaijani
Damia	Armenian
Damia-Georarkh	Azerbaijani
Dashtapa	Azerbaijani
Beglari	Azerbaijani
Mughanlo	Azerbaijani
Chanakhchi	Armenian
Gulbaghi	Armenian
Ilmazlo	Azerbaijani
Imiri	Azerbaijani
Jandara	Azerbaijani
Kachagan N1	Azerbaijani
Kachagan N1	Azerbaijani
Kasumlo	Azerbaijani / Georgian
Kirech-Mughanlo	Azerbaijani
Kirikhlo	Azerbaijani
Kirovka	Azerbaijani
Lezhbadin	Azerbaijani
Maradisi	Georgian
Molaoghli	Azerbaijani
Opreti	Russian
Saimerlo	Georgian
Kesalo	Azerbaijani

Marneuli N1	Azerbaijani
Marneuli N2	Georgian / Russian
Marneuli N3	Azerbaijani
Marneuli N4	Russian
Marneuli N5	Georgian
Marneuli N6	Georgian / Russian
Marneuli N7	Azerbaijani
Marneuli N8	Azerbaijani
Kapanakhchi	Azerbaijani
Keshalo	Azerbaijani
Kurtlar	Azerbaijani
Kvemo Sarali	Azerbaijani
Kullar	Azerbaijani / Russian
Sabirkend N1	Azerbaijani
Sadakhlo N1	Azerbaijani
Sadakhlo N2	Azerbaijani
Shaumyan N1	Armenian
Shaumyan N2	Georgian / Russian
Shaumyan N3	Armenian
Sioni	Georgian
Shulaveri N1	Georgian
Shulaveri N2	Russian
Tekalo	Azerbaijani
Tazakend (of Algeti)	Azerbaijani / Georgian
Tazakend (of Sadakhlo)	Azerbaijani
Ulashlo	Azerbaijani / Georgian
Tserakvi	Georgian
Tsereteli	Georgian / Armenian

Kirmizikend (Tsiteli Sopeli)	Armenian
Tsopi	Armenian / Azerbaijani
Khanjighazlo	Azerbaijani
Khikhani	Georgian
Khojorni	Armenian / Azerbaijani
Khuldara	Azerbaijani
Qizilajlo N1	Azerbaijani
Qizilajlo N2	Azerbaijani
Zemo Sarali	Azerbaijani
Davit Aghmashenebeli School-Lyceum (private), in Marneuli	Georgian / Azerbaijani
Momavali (private), in Marneuli	Georgian

Figure N3. Election results in Marneuli

Elections	2012 General	2013 Presidential	2014 Local	2016 General (36 th electoral district) ⁷⁶	2016 General (35 th electoral district) ⁷⁷	2016 General (second round) (36 th electoral district)
GD	17.42%	63.95%	51.08%	43.41%	56.31%	72.24%
UNM	78.91%	25.92%	32.24%	47.91%	36.58%	27.35%
EG						

⁷⁶ 36th electoral district included Marneuli town and the western settlements of the region

⁷⁷ 35th electoral district included eastern and southern settlements of the region

Elections	2017 Local	2018 Presidential	2018 Local by- elections	2020 General
GD	69.34%	47.57%	78.44%	51.43%
UNM	8.34%	39.22%	11.49%	38.89%
EG	19.04%	10.52%	7.73%	3.67%