



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი  
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# Crafting the Lions of Bolnisi: Socio-Economic Developments in the Bolnisi Municipality

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# **Crafting the Lions of Bolnisi: Socio-Economic Developments in the Bolnisi Municipality**

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*"I was crafting lions of Bolnisi  
With the soul of my ornaments,  
I was tying a sun beam on the grapevine cross  
With the hair of a Cappadocian."*

Rezo Amashukeli

Georgia's ethnic Azerbaijani community has been receiving increasing interest from the academic community, the media and the NGO sector. Ethnic Azerbaijanis are increasingly engaging in the country's social and political life. In this sense, Marneuli has become a center of such activism. Nevertheless, the media and the academic sphere alike have limited engagement with other Azerbaijani-inhabited regions of Georgia. Among these overlooked regions is the Bolnisi municipality, known for its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition. The region has undergone highly dynamic ethno-demographic changes. A lion's share of pivotal events in Georgia's history has taken place in Bolnisi and the surrounding regions, reinforcing its symbolic place in the collective Georgian memory. All of these dimensions have shaped interethnic relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In addition, the municipality has large deposits of precious metals and substantially contributes to Georgia's mining sector and economy overall.

In their research outputs, Georgian scholars have extensively covered various aspects of the historical, archaeological and cultural heritage of the Bolnisi region. However, little has been done in terms of the exploration of the region's inter-ethnic relationships. This report aims to overview the major economic, religious, political, educational and inter-ethnic trends of the municipality. The publication is intended to assist the civil sector, scholars and relevant practitioners in gaining a deeper understanding of the region's specifics. This work will be the third part of the author's engagement with Georgia's Azerbaijani community. The first report was released in 2020 and was devoted to the Gardabani municipality. It was followed by a similar work covering the neighboring Marneuli municipality. The author hopes that other multi-ethnic regions such as Dmanisi, Sagarejo, Tsalka and Lagodekhi will also be covered at some point. This work was funded and logistically supported by the Rondeli Foundation.

The work on this project included two fieldwork studies in the Bolnisi municipality. During the first phase in February 2021, the author stayed in the village of Tsurtavi and visited the settlements of the so-called "lower zone." The second phase took place in July while the author was based in the town of Bolnisi and had daily visits to Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani settlements of the so-called "upper zone." During each visit, the author recorded semi-structured interviews with the locals and also made observational notes on different aspects of local life in these areas. The respondents represented all ethnicities and comprised elderly people, Muslim clerics, local activists, teachers, youth and political activists.

## **Geography**

The Bolnisi municipality is an administrative entity in the southeast of Georgia. It shares an administrative border with the Marneuli municipality from the east, the Dmanisi municipality from the west, the Tetri

Tskaro municipality from the north and Armenia from the south. The municipality comprises two main geographic areas: the lower zone, representing an extension of the Marneuli plateau, and the highland zone, consisting of territories situated in proximity to the towns of Bolnisi and Kazreti. The Mashavera and the Khrami, along with tens of their minor inflows, represent the main rivers of Bolnisi. The southern and western part of the Bolnisi municipality is dominated by forested mountains while the eastern part differs little from the Marneuli plateau and has been mostly occupied by agricultural lands.

The total population of the Bolnisi municipality is 53,590. Azerbaijanis constitute the majority of the population (63.38%) while Georgians make up the second largest group (30.91%) followed by Armenians (5.02%). The majority of Bolnisi's Georgian population resides in towns and several villages while the Azerbaijani and Armenian populations are almost entirely rural.<sup>1</sup>

The Bolnisi municipality consists of several settlement clusters. The first is a group of several densely populated villages located along the Marneuli-Guguti road. These villages are Parizi, Nakhiduri, Tsurtavi (all Azerbaijani-populated) and Tsurtavi (a Georgian-populated town that emerged around the Soviet poultry farm near Tsurtavi). The next cluster is located on the right embankment of the Khrami River eastwards, close to the administrative border with the Marneuli municipality. These villages are Khataveti, Zemo Arkevani and Kvemo Arkevani. The third group of settlements is located along the Marneuli-Guguti road to the town of Bolnisi. These villages are Khidiskuri, Mukhrana, Balakhauri, Chapala, Mtskneti, Rachisubani, Samtredo, Vanati and Khatissopeli. With the exception of Rachisubani and Khatissopeli, all of these villages are Azerbaijani-populated. Rachisubani is settled by ethnic Georgians from Racha who were previously resettled in the Kabardino-Balkaria republic during Stalin's period but were returned upon the rehabilitation of the Balkar nation and their return to their historical homeland. However, instead of returning back to mountainous Racha, they were resettled near Bolnisi.<sup>2</sup> In a similar fashion, the village of Khatissopeli was settled in 1989 after a series of natural disasters in mountainous Adjara. Another important settlement is the town of Bolnisi itself and the village of Ratevani which is located west of the town and which represents an extension of Bolnisi's urban area.<sup>3</sup> Demographically, the town of Bolnisi and the village of Ratevani are dominated by ethnic Georgians with a slight Armenian and Greek population. Bolnisi's Georgian population can be subdivided into two categories: native Kartlian Georgians, who have their roots in Bolnisi or Dmanisi villages, and a second or third generation of settlers, mostly from the Racha, Lechkhumi, Svaneti or Imereti regions. North of the town of Bolnisi closer to the Khrami River canyon is the village of Disveli which is populated by eco-migrants from the Adjara region. Another densely populated region is the Poladauri valley, south of the town of Bolnisi, which consists of the following villages: Kvemo Bolnisi (Azerbaijani), Bolnisi (Armenian), Zemo Bolnisi (Azerbaijani) and Poladauri (Azerbaijani). There are two large isolated Azerbaijani villages located in the southern part of the municipality close to the mountain range. These are: Mamkhuti and Talaveri (with its small satellite

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<sup>1</sup> Data on the 2014 census is available on <https://www.geostat.ge/ka>

<sup>2</sup> Respondent N17. A school teacher from Rachisubani.

<sup>3</sup> T. Trier and M. Turashvili. (2007) "Resettlement of Ecologically Displaced Persons, Solution of a Problem or Creation of a New One? Eco-Migration in Georgia 1981-2006." p. 41. Available at: [http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2008/792/pdf/monograph\\_6\\_en.pdf](http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2008/792/pdf/monograph_6_en.pdf)

village of Patara Darbazi<sup>4</sup>). Another large cluster of mostly Azerbaijani villages is located westwards from the town of Bolnisi. These are: Zvareti, Akaurta (with some small Georgian and Armenian population), Dzedzvnariani, Potskhveriani, Itsria, Dzveli Kveshi, Geta, Bertakari, Senebi, Darbazi, Tsipori, Khakhalajvari, Chreshi and Tandzia. Tandzia is mainly populated by descendants of eco-migrants from the Svaneti region. And finally, the Azerbaijani villages of Javshaniani, Mushevani and Sabereti, the Georgian villages of Kveshi and Balichi, the Armenian village Kianeti and the town of Kazreti, with a Georgian majority population,<sup>5</sup> are located in the far western part of the municipality.

It is noteworthy that until the Second World War, the town of Bolnisi was populated by ethnic Germans, originally from the Swabia region. The first German colonies in the Caucasus region emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the Russian Empire. The modern-day town of Bolnisi was initially a German settlement named Ekaterinfeld, renamed Luxemburg during the Soviet period. During the Second World War, almost all of the German settlers were deported to Central Asia and were replaced by Georgians from other regions and Azerbaijanis from neighboring villages.<sup>6</sup> The town was eventually renamed Bolnisi. Upon the dissolution of the Soviet state, the vast majority of Germans were repatriated to Germany. Some of the descendants of the German colonists from Bolnisi still maintain cultural relationships with the local Georgians.

Table 1

Settlement	Old Name	Major Ethnic Group	Religion	Population (2014)
Bolnisi	Ekaterinfeld, Luxemburg	Georgians, Armenians	Orthodox Christian, Armenian Christian	8,967
Kazreti		Georgians, Azerbaijanis	Orthodox Christian, Shia Muslim	4,340
Balichi		Georgian	Orthodox Christian	783
Tamarisi		Georgians, Azerbaijanis	Orthodox Christian, Shia Muslim	510
Tsurtavi	Kolagiri	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslim	2,116
Parizi	Patara Mughanlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	774

<sup>4</sup> Previously, Patara Darbazi was populated by Armenians but they later moved to Armenia during the Soviet period and their houses were purchased by their Azerbaijani neighbours from Talaveri.

<sup>5</sup> Kazreti grew as a town during the Soviet period after the discovery of deposits of copper, gold and silver. The population of the town consists of local Georgians, settlers from other regions of Georgia as well as Azerbaijanis, mostly from Darbazi and its surrounding villages.

<sup>6</sup> S. Voell and E. Kamm. (2018). "Prologue to a Restoration Foretold: Negotiating Heritage in a Former German Village in Georgia," *Caucasus Survey*, 6(2), pp. 113-129.

Nakhiduri	Arukho	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	3,686
Khidiskuri	Hasanhojalo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	710
Mukhrana	Tashtikulari	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslim	679
Balakhauri	Siskala	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	455
Chapala	Kochulo	Azerbaijanis	Approximately 70% Shia, 30% Sunni	1,121
Mtskneti	Asmalari	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	203
Talaveri	Pakhralo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims (small minority)	5,038
Savaneti	Imirasani	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	1,412
Mamkhuti	Sarachlo	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslim	2,359
Zemo Arkevani	Zemo Koshakilisi	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	467
Kvemo Arkevani	Kvemo Koshakilisi	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	769
Khataveti	Molaakhmedlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	145
Rachisubani		Georgians	Orthodox Christian	597
Samtredo	Japarlo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	430
Vanati	Migirlo	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	510
Khatissopeli	Tsitelsopeli	Georgians	Sunni Muslims, Orthodox Christians	387
Ratevani		Georgians	Orthodox Christians	1,370
Zvareti	Saralar	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	351
Kvemo Bolnisi	Kapanakchi	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	4,162
Bolnisi (village)	Bolnis-Khachini	Armenians	Armenian Christians	1,534
Zemo Bolnisi	Injaoghlu	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	365
Samtsevrisi		Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	299
Poladauri		Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	235
Akaurta	Ayurta	Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Armenians, Ukrainians	Sunni Muslims	762
Dzedzvnariani	Arakeli	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	411
Potskhveriani	Musopriani	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	391
Itsria	Qaradashi	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	104
Dzveli Kveshi		Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	1,199

Geta	Kvemo Gulaveri	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	342
Bertakari	Bektakari	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	120
Senebi		Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	154
Darbazi		Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	1,604
Tsipori	Zemo Gulaveri	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	182
Khakhalajvari	Demurlo	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	213
Chreshi	Kipirjiki	Azerbaijanis	Sunni Muslims	60
Tandzia		Georgians	Orthodox Christian	518
Javshaniani	Abdalo	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	476
Kianeti		Armenians	Armenian Christians	301
Mushevani		Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	905
Sabereti	Qaratikani	Azerbaijanis	Shia Muslims	53
Disveli		Georgians	Sunni Muslims, Orthodox Christians	397

## Economy

The economy of the Bolnisi municipality relies on two major sectors: mining and agriculture. The municipality has rich deposits of precious metals such as gold, silver and copper. The mines are run by the Russian company Rich Metal Groups (RMG) which has numerous contractor companies operating in Bolnisi. The company extracts ores containing copper and gold from two open pit mines located in the vicinity of the town of Kazreti and an underground mine near the village of Bertakari. The ore is processed at the Madneuli Copper Concentrator in Kazreti.<sup>7</sup> In addition, several other RMG-owned mines are located in the neighboring Dmanisi and Tetri Tskaro municipalities.

RMG is the largest employer in the Bolnisi municipality, employing approximately 3,000 people, 90% of whom are inhabitants of Bolnisi's upper zone.<sup>8</sup> As one local explained: "Almost everyone who can drive lorries and is willing to work is employed by RMG."<sup>9</sup> The minimum monthly income of RMG employees is over GEL 1,200 which significantly exceeds the average national salary in Georgia. RMG is one of the largest taxpayers in Georgia. Furthermore, RMG and its contractor companies make a significant contribution to Bolnisi's municipal budget which exceeds GEL 20 million. Nevertheless, there has been

<sup>7</sup> IM-Mining (2019). "RMG Copper Working with Outotec Benefits of Mineralogy-led Advances Simulation." Available at: <https://im-mining.com/2019/08/20/rmg-copper-working-outotec-sees-benefits-mineralogy-led-advanced-simulation/>

<sup>8</sup> Bolnisi (n/d). *Mskhvili Satsarmoebi* [Large Factories]. Available at: <https://im-mining.com/2019/08/20/rmg-copper-working-outotec-sees-benefits-mineralogy-led-advanced-simulation/>

<sup>9</sup> Respondent N16. A pensioner from the village of Kveshi.

controversy over RMG's activities. The first main concern is ecology. According to the environmental watchdogs, the company was dumping industrial wastewaters into the Mashavera River, causing significant damage to the local ecosystem. Although the company has installed filters and decreased the amount of dumped waste material, the problem of water pollution still exists.<sup>10</sup> The locals also complain about the dust and toxic particles in the air in and around Kazreti. They believe that it contributes to multiple chronic diseases, including various forms of tumors. The second concern is the treatment of historical monuments. One of RMG's most controversial actions was the destruction of the prehistoric archaeological Sakdrisi site as a part of its exploration for new mineral deposits. After the case of Sakdrisi, RMG is trying to win the hearts and minds of the local population by funding a variety of projects for preserving cultural heritage. For instance, the Abulmughi sulfur bath has been relocated in order to mitigate damage during exploration.<sup>11</sup> The company has also funded the building of Bolnisi's new museum.<sup>12</sup> And finally, residents of some villages worry that they might be resettled as the result of the company's further exploration. The main candidates for the resettlement program are dwellers of the village of Bertakari. The locals mentioned that the company is offering local families alternative households in the town of Kazreti and are purchasing their property. Residents of the village of Balichi have the same fears as they believe that their settlement is "sitting on large silver and gold deposits."<sup>13</sup>

The second important sector of the economy is agriculture. The villages of the lower zone have been mostly engaged in growing potatoes, carrots, onions or garlic while the size of the land in the upper zone is insufficient for sustainable and profitable agro-business. In Georgian villages near Bolnisi, there are several large vineyards while the vast flat lands around the village of Disveli are sown with wheat crops. Animal husbandry is not well-developed and the families keep cattle in order to supply their households with dairy products. The municipality accommodates a large poultry farm in the village of Savaneti. Ukrainian investors have built a large swine farm in the village of Akaurta. A potato crisps factory located between the villages of Talaveri and Savaneti was built by Polish investors. The general problem of agriculture in Bolnisi is the unsustainable irrigation system, the unequal distribution of farmland and the so-called "arendators"<sup>14</sup> (especially in Azerbaijani villages) as well as the lack of modern technologies.

Aside from agriculture and mining, several hydropower plants have been functioning in Bolnisi. The Nakhiduri HPP is currently under construction. Despite big potential, the tourism sector in the region is in its infancy stage. The government has started the renovation of historical German houses in the town of Bolnisi; however, the rehabilitation process is slow and the inflow of tourists is also low.

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<sup>10</sup> OC-Media (2017). "Government Idle as Mining Companies Wreck the Environment in Georgia's Sustainable Development." Available at: <https://oc-media.org/opinions/government-idle-as-mining-jompanies-wrejk-the-environment-in-georgias-sustainable-development/>

<sup>11</sup> Agenda.ge (2021). "17th Century Abulmugi Persian Bath Relocated from Historical Site to a New Safe Location." Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2761>

<sup>12</sup> Agenda.ge (2015). "New Museum to House Ancient Sakdrisi Artefacts." Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2015/709>

<sup>13</sup> Respondent N14. A political activist from the town of Bolnisi.

<sup>14</sup> Arendators - landlord owning large agricultural lands who obtained them after the collapse of the USSR.



## Religion

The Bolnisi municipality has a multi-confessional population. Islam represents the largest confession of the municipality and it is widespread among Azerbaijanis as well as the eco-migrants from Adjara. The exact breakdown of Shia and Sunni denominations has not been mentioned in the census but field work has enabled us to identify historically Sunni and historically Shia settlements (see Table 1). The settlements with prevailing Shia Muslims are following: Parizi, Tsurtavi, Kolagiri, Dzveli Kveshi, Mushevani, Dzedzvnariani, Talaveri (with a Sunni minority), Savaneti, Mtskneti, Khataveti, Senebi and Bertakari. Sunni Muslims constitute the majority in: Darbazi, Nakhiduri, Khakhalajvari, Geta, Kvemo Bolnisi, Vanati, Poladauri, Mamkhuti, Khidiskuri, Mukhrana, Samtredo, Chapala and others. The estimated percentage of both denomination among Azerbaijanis is following: 45% of Shia and 55% of Sunni Muslims. Certain proportions of the populations of the villages of Disveli and Khatissopeli are also Sunni Muslims. Compared to the Marneuli and Gardabani municipalities, the population is less religious and the activities of Islamic organizations are minimal. Functional mosques exist only in a handful of Azerbaijani villages. The locals explain the absence of a mosque by a combination of bureaucratic barriers from the authorities and religious indifference from the locals. Sunni mosques in Bolnisi's Azerbaijani villages belong to the Muftiate of Eastern Georgia whereas the Sunni mosque of the village of Disveli, populated with people from Adjara, belongs to the Muftiate of Western Georgia.<sup>15</sup> Both of these Sunni communities adhere to the Hanafi School of Sunni Islam. Furthermore, due to the absence of a mosque in the village of Mamkhuti, the local Azerbaijanis often visit the neighboring village of Khikhani in the Marneuli municipality, populated by people from Adjara, and attend Friday prayer at the Khikhani mosque.<sup>16</sup> The Muftiate's representative, who is in charge of the mosques in the Bolnisi municipality, resides in the village of Talaveri.

In terms of Shia Muslims, the existing mosques are controlled by the Office of the Sheikh of All Georgia. Informal groups following the doctrine of Ayatollah Khamenei or Ayatollah Sistani are not present in Bolnisi. The leader of the Shia Muslims of Bolnisi, appointed by the Sheikh of All Georgia, is a resident of the village of Dzveli Kveshi. Sectarian tensions between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Bolnisi is almost non-existent. However, there is a remarkable case in the village of Talaveri. Although the majority of the population of this large village is comprised of Shia Muslims, the local mosque is run by a Sunni Imam. There is an informal agreement between both denominations for equally sharing the mosque's infrastructure. Nevertheless, due to the absence of the local religiously educated Shia Akhund in Talaveri, the Sunni Imam has managed to gain more followers. In order to strengthen the Shia presence in Talaveri, Shia religious activists from Marneuli frequently hold various religious events in the village of Talaveri.<sup>17</sup> The presence of Salafis in Bolnisi is minimal. The leader of a large Salafi community in Georgia, Veysel

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<sup>15</sup> Respondent N10. Imam of the mosque a village populated with people from Adjara.

<sup>16</sup> Respondent N9. A resident of the village of Khikhani.

<sup>17</sup> YouTube (2019). "Imam Huseyn Karvani Bolnisi Fahrli Kendi" [Imam Huseyn's Celebration in Bolnisi Fahrli Village]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wMCHGJOAKg&t=271s>

Orujov, visited the village of Kvemo Bolnisi to meet his followers but I failed to find a functional Salafi jamaat in Bolnisi's Azerbaijani villages.<sup>18</sup>

The Georgian Orthodox Church is represented in the region by the Diocese of Bolnisi led by Bishop Efrem. There is a large number of functional Orthodox Churches and monasteries in the region. The Georgian population of the region is relatively religious. The Georgian Orthodox Church has succeeded in the conversion of a group of eco-migrants from Adjara in the villages of Disveli and Khatissopeli. It's the presence of the Armenian Church in the Armenian settlements is minimal. In addition, a small group of Jehovah's Witnesses exists in the town of Kazreti with followers from both the Georgian and the Azerbaijani communities.

## Education

The educational system in the Bolnisi municipality consists of 32 public schools (see Table 2) of which 11 are Georgian, two are Armenian, ten are Azerbaijani and nine are mixed Georgian-Azerbaijani. Remarkably, the Georgian sector has been opened in nine Azerbaijani villages during the last decade. Georgian teachers in these schools are mostly Georgians from the town of Bolnisi or from Georgian villages. In several Azerbaijani majority village schools, the principals are also ethnic Georgians. Fully Azerbaijani schools exist either in relatively remote Azerbaijani villages (Darbazi, Geta, Mamkhuti) or in those larger villages which have two schools. As the result of reorganization, several small primary schools merged with the larger schools of the neighboring village: the Zemo Bolnisi and Zvareti primary schools merged with the Kvemo Bolnisi school, the Kianeti school merged with the Bolnisi village school, the Bertakari school joined the Akaurta school, the Tsipora and Potskhveriani schools merged with the Geta school, the Khakhalajvari school joined the Darbazi school, the Zemo Arkevani school merged with the Kvemo Arkevani school, Bolnisi's N4 school joined Bolnisi's N2 school and the Balichi school joined the Kazreti N1 school.<sup>19</sup> In recent years, Azerbaijani families are tending to send their children to the Georgian sectors or Georgian schools located in the Georgian settlements. The number of Azerbaijani pupils is especially high in the Rachisubani, Tamarisi and Bolnisi town schools. Due to the popularity of the Georgian sectors, the Azerbaijani sector might disappear in some Azerbaijani villages.<sup>20</sup> However, many

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<sup>18</sup> YouTube (2015). "Veysel Qardash Nesihat" [Advice from Brother Veysel]. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s4oAqrZsic&t=22s>

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (2007). Order N191. Available at:

[https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=193&module=legislation&page=detals&leg\\_id=241&doc\\_type=orig](https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=193&module=legislation&page=detals&leg_id=241&doc_type=orig)

<sup>20</sup> On.ge (2018). "Azerbaijanulenovani Skola 4 Tselshi Sopol Parizhits Daikhurebe" [Azerbaijani School in Parizi might be Closed in 4 Years]. Available at: <https://on.ge/story/20542->

<https://on.ge/story/20542-%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%A3%E1%83%9A%E1%83%94%E1%83%9C%E1%83%9D%E1%83%95%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C%E1%83%98-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%99%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9A%E1%83%90-4-%E1%83%AC%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%A8%E1%83%98-%E1%83%91%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9C%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A4%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A-%E1%83%A4%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%96%E1%83%A8%E1%83%98%E1%83%AA-%E1%83%93%E1%83%90%E1%83%98%E1%83%AE%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%90>

Azerbaijanis complain about the quality of education in some of the village schools and prefer to send their children to Bolnisi. The Bolnisi municipality lacks informal education. Currently, several young activists are trying to launch a community center in their village. One of those activists is a resident of Savaneti, Elada Rizayeva, but her endeavor is still in its early stages.

**Table 2**

<b>School</b>	<b>Main Language of Education</b>
Bolnisi N2	Armenian
Bolnisi N3	Georgian
Bolnisi N5	Georgian
Kvemo Arkevani	Georgian, Azerbaijani
Kvemo Bolnisi N1	Georgian, Azerbaijani
Kvemo Bolnisi N2	Azerbaijani
Kveshi	Georgian
Ratevani	Georgian
Rachisubani	Georgian
Bolnisi village	Armenian
Savaneti	Azerbaijani
Talaveri N1	Georgian, Azerbaijani
Talaveri N2	Azerbaijani
Tandzia	Georgian
Chapala	Georgian, Azerbaijani
Khatissopeli	Georgian, Azerbaijani
Khidiskuri	Azerbaijani
Dzveli Kveshi	Azerbaijani
Akaurta	Georgian, Azerbaijani
Tsurtavi	Azerbaijani
Kazreti N1	Georgian
Kazreti N2	Georgian
Tamarisi	Georgian
Darbazi	Azerbaijani
Disveli	Georgian
Parizi	Azerbaijani, Georgian
Geta	Azerbaijani
Javshaniani	Azerbaijani
Mamkhuti	Azerbaijani
Mukhrana	Georgian, Azerbaijani
Nakhiduri	Georgian, Azerbaijani
Bolnisi N1	Georgian

## Inter-ethnic Relationships

**Georgian-Azerbaijani relationships.** The relationships between these two ethnic groups in Bolnisi can be characterized by a high degree of mutual distrust. Unlike the neighboring Marneuli and Gardabani municipalities, the events in the 1990s made a deep imprint on local collective memory. Azerbaijanis harbor a deep resentment of the Georgian population of the region. Firstly, they blame the Georgian authorities of the early 1990s for cleansing the town of Bolnisi of ethnic Azerbaijanis. As the result of ethnic tensions between 1989 and 1990, 980 Azerbaijani families fled the town of Bolnisi while their households were purchased by the government and allocated to settlers from the Svaneti, Lechkhumi and Adjara regions.<sup>21</sup> In addition, several respondents mentioned the informal ban on selling property to ethnic Azerbaijanis in the town of Bolnisi. Secondly, Azerbaijanis perceive the renaming of villages in the 1990s as a traumatic event. In accordance with the executive order N101, issued on 26 June 1992 by the municipal authorities of the Bolnisi region, the names of almost all Azerbaijani-populated settlements were given alternative names of Georgian origin.<sup>22</sup> The Azerbaijanis claim that the renaming process lacked transparency and took place overnight, without any prior consultation with the locals. Some older residents of certain villages still do not know the official names of their villages.<sup>23</sup> For Georgian authorities, the main rationale for renaming the villages was the restoration of historical toponyms. Even following the coup d'état and the abrupt end of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia's administration, none of his successors attempted to challenge the existing status-quo. While being interviewed by the Azerbaijani media, the former Governor of Kvemo Kartli, David Kirkitadze, expressed his view on this topic:

If we start solving the problems with the changed names of villages, other problems might arise. For instance, there is a Tbilisi-based association concerned with the examination of toponyms. The members of this association sent me a letter demanding the renaming of some villages in [Marneuli of] the Kvemo Kartli region according to the toponyms that existed during David IV the Builder in the XII century. If this happens, another problem will emerge as long as many Azerbaijani villages did not exist in XII century. That's why I think that it's better to avoid these issues... Changing the names in the 1990s was a mistake but renaming them back will do more harm than good.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> T. Trier and M. Turashvili. (2007) *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> M.D. Gordon. (2017) "Nomen Est Omen? Naming and Renaming of Places in Minority Inhabited Areas in Georgia." Available at: [https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/56067392/Working\\_Paper\\_103\\_-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?Expires=1645211000&Signature=GxxpCNdInkH7o-NkOwd9EfA5a~O4elbmCe-XgiJ8hJ~HRT3OlbLnU9wJt0aHj1DxHekI6GDUN-fTK2rUT37qXFtLs5DjzJANEhwmZTd0DWIFbLn1KeJLc-kYN2bgXRCmMMTfrUq0sOGOswHs8JNTMfhW~-cTMJJ6aFoKcLLbqsiq0Lf5jFJZvq9ZYXFyUp63IC---c2nEWZHo6NwtrOLSsN5RK7NjI5cy3QDk3IPQNWbNu6WB1GvgQHyZLJA6Z4CICKVuVxUGsCyCt4ZMs8TYL4ix5AngMWm3TuSIUzIUr5rR542mjPjglz1X09aDb979Tmb5xIcIrQJfTwlP6cdg\\_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/56067392/Working_Paper_103_-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?Expires=1645211000&Signature=GxxpCNdInkH7o-NkOwd9EfA5a~O4elbmCe-XgiJ8hJ~HRT3OlbLnU9wJt0aHj1DxHekI6GDUN-fTK2rUT37qXFtLs5DjzJANEhwmZTd0DWIFbLn1KeJLc-kYN2bgXRCmMMTfrUq0sOGOswHs8JNTMfhW~-cTMJJ6aFoKcLLbqsiq0Lf5jFJZvq9ZYXFyUp63IC---c2nEWZHo6NwtrOLSsN5RK7NjI5cy3QDk3IPQNWbNu6WB1GvgQHyZLJA6Z4CICKVuVxUGsCyCt4ZMs8TYL4ix5AngMWm3TuSIUzIUr5rR542mjPjglz1X09aDb979Tmb5xIcIrQJfTwlP6cdg_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA)

<sup>23</sup> The inter-town public transport (buses or minibuses) circulating between Marneuli and the Azerbaijani villages of Bolnisi always uses Azerbaijani village names on the inscription rather than the official.

<sup>24</sup> Day.az (2009). "David Kirkitadze: Ot stabilnosti v azerbaijan zavisit stabilnost na vsem kavkaze" [David Kirkitadze: Stability in Azerbaijan Means Stability in Whole Caucasus ] <https://news.day.az/politics/152162.html>

Thirdly, many Azerbaijani respondents mentioned clashes between Georgians and Azerbaijanis in the 1990s. According to several interviewees, informal Georgian armed groups were constructing checkpoints on the highways and entrances to Azerbaijani villages and were restricting the movement of locals while the dwellers of Azerbaijani villages were creating self-defense units patrolling inside the village.<sup>25</sup> And finally, some residents mentioned the lack of representation of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the local government. Despite constituting the majority of the population, the representation of Azerbaijanis in the local administration is minimal.

On the other hand, the Georgian population of the town of Bolnisi and the upper zone believe that the violent events in the 1990s and the departure of Azerbaijanis from Bolnisi was a response to the attempt of the ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Bolnisi and separatist aspirations. According to one respondent:

They had lists of who would settle in Georgian houses. It was well-planned. They were holding separatist rallies in Bolnisi. They were gathering in Darbazi and Kvemo Bolnisi to make pogroms in Bolnisi. But we were prepared to defend our town. Our men got weapons from the local hunters and the explosives from Kazreti mines. They blocked the entrances to the city with lorries. The attempt failed and they did not manage to expel us. After all of that, Azerbaijanis had no moral right to live in the town of Bolnisi. They betrayed us. They received financial compensation and went to Azerbaijan. Sometimes they come from Azerbaijan and visit the town.<sup>26</sup>

Both Georgian and Azerbaijani narratives are controversial and there is a shortage of available documentary evidence on these events. The police archives of the early 1990 are classified and unavailable for academic enquiry. Only in-depth fieldwork in combination with an archival and media document analysis could unearth the truths of the past events.

On the contrary, Georgian-Azerbaijani relationships in the lower zone of Bolnisi are less polarized. For instance, Georgians from the town of Tamarisi have managed to establish friendly relationships with their Azerbaijani neighbors from the village of Tsurtavi. As one local said: "When we arrived from Samegrelo for the first time, our relationship with the Azerbaijanis was a bit cold. But now, we go to each other's weddings and I have many friends from there. I even speak Azerbaijani."<sup>27</sup> During my visit in Tamarisi, I came across bilingual Georgian children fluent in the Georgian and the Azerbaijani languages. Azerbaijanis and Georgians also have good relationships in the town of Kazreti. Azerbaijanis from this settlement are fluent in Georgian and unlike the town of Bolnisi, both ethnic groups found ways for coexistence and the Azerbaijanis did not abandon Kazreti. Azerbaijanis from the village of Mamkhuti have also established friendly relationships with Georgians from the village of Khikhani in the Marneuli municipality. Settlers from Adjara in Disveli have limited contacts with Azerbaijanis because of geographic barriers.

**Azerbaijani-Armenian relationships.** There are several settlements where these two ethnicities have contact with each other. For example, there are the villages of Kvemo Bolnisi and Bolnisi. Armenians from Bolnisi, originally from Karabakh, can speak the Azerbaijani language. As one local explained: "The

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<sup>25</sup> Respondent N5. A resident of the village of Tsurtavi.

<sup>26</sup> Respondent N7. A resident of the town of Bolnisi.

<sup>27</sup> Respondent N4. A resident of the town of Tamarisi.

Armenian village is poorer compared to Kapanakhchi. But Armenians are good builders and maintenance workers. If we need renovation in our house or some maintenance work, we call the Armenians. No one can do it better than them.”<sup>28</sup> Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis from that area avoid discussing the politics of the Karabakh conflict. The second area of Armenian-Azerbaijani contact is the mixed village of Akaurta. Although Armenians and Georgians constitute a minority in this village, the locals often proudly say: “Here in Ayurta, Georgians, Azerbaijanis and Armenians live together in peace.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the majority of Bolnisi Azerbaijanis share the official state narrative of Azerbaijan on Armenia. It is noteworthy that Azerbaijanis often refer to anti-Armenian conspiracy theories while trying to explain Georgian-Azerbaijani ethnic tensions in the 1990s. As one local noted: “It was a hard time for us. But you know, a real Georgian would have never ever done it. All of those people, who were involved in those events against Azerbaijanis, in fact, were Armenians who had changed their last names to Georgian ones.”<sup>30</sup>

**Georgian-Armenian relationships.** Armenians in the Bolnisi municipality, except from the residents of Bolnisi village, are highly integrated in Georgian society. Many Armenians have been assimilated and even changed their surnames to Georgian ones. Armenians from Bolnisi remain less integrated in Georgian society. The contacts with Georgian settlements are minimal. The Georgian language is not widely spoken in Bolnisi.

## Politics

Similar to other municipalities of the Kvemo Kartli region, the political power in Bolnisi has been distributed between several clans. According to our respondent, the power in the region has been equally shared by the State Security Service (SUS) and the RMG company. The State Security Service is responsible for the control of the local government as well as the local eparchy of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Given the high religiousness of the ethnic Georgian population, the Georgian Orthodox Church is an important stakeholder of the region. It receives generous funds from both the central and the local budgets as well as donations from the private sector. Despite its declared non-involvement in domestic politics, the Church has been covertly assisting the ruling party, especially during the elections. Another strong political interest group is led by the majoritarian MP of Bolnisi and surrounding municipalities, Gogi Meshveliani. The second political interest group is led by the mayor of the Bolnisi municipality, Giorgi Sherazadishvili, who had previously served as the director of the poultry farm in the village of Savaneti. As local political activists have noted, the local government has an inflated number of public servants, some of whom receive a monthly salary from the budget without doing any actual job. Concerning RMG, the company is the largest employer of the region. The State Security Service and the local administration does not interfere in the company's interior affairs. In exchange, the RMG supports the ruling party during the elections. Ethnic Azerbaijanis have only nominal representation in the local government, mostly either as the mayoral deputies, members of the local assembly and mayoral envoys in their villages. Almost all

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<sup>28</sup> Respondent N9. A resident of the village of Kvemo Bolnisi.

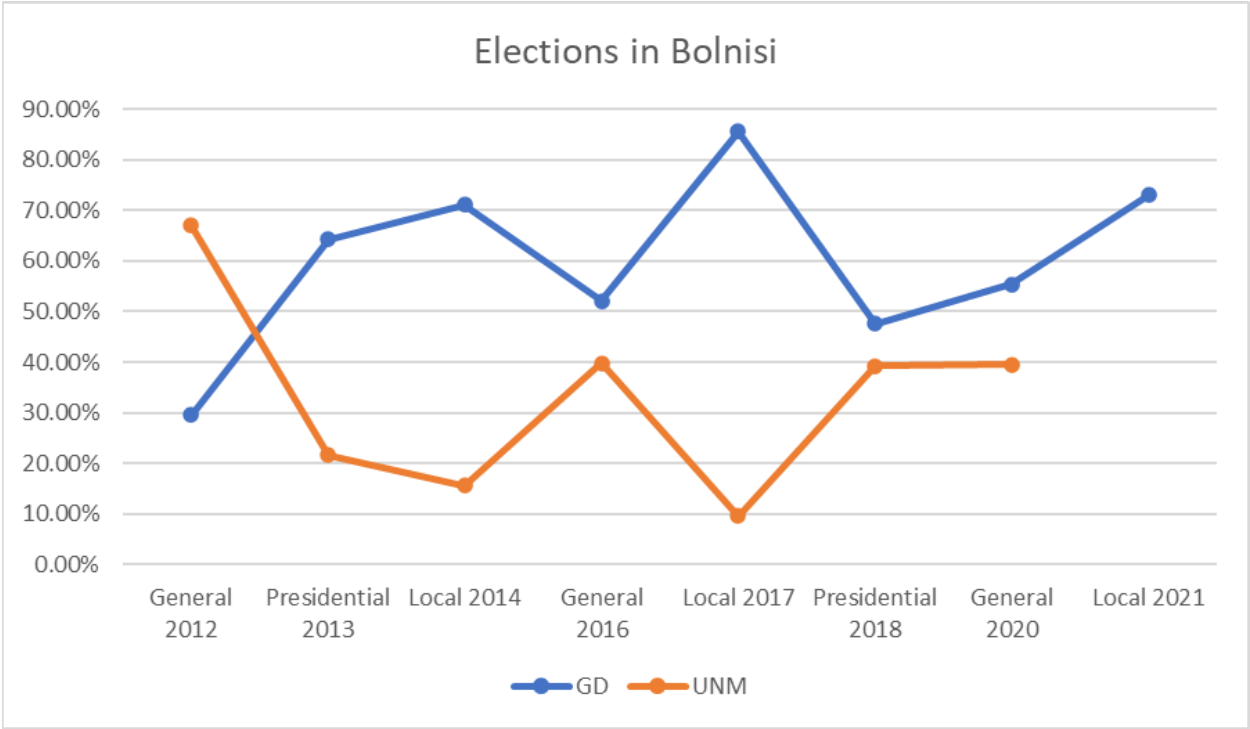
<sup>29</sup> Respondent N8. A taxi driver from the village of Dzveli Kveshi.

<sup>30</sup> Respondent N5. A resident of the village of Tsurtavi.

of the members of the municipal assembly are inactive and only vote according to the general position of their political party.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, the Bolnisi municipality has witnessed several highly polarized electoral campaigns. The first was the general elections in 2016. Due to the alteration of the borders of electoral constituencies, several large Georgian-majority settlements, including Kazreti, were allocated to the Tsalka-Dmanisi electoral constituency meaning that more than 80 percent of voters in Bolnisi within the new boundaries were ethnic Azerbaijanis. The candidate from the opposition party UNM was a young ethnic Azerbaijani woman, Samira Ismailova, while the candidate of the ruling party was Gogi Meshveliani. Despite the fierce competition, Gogi Meshveliani managed to win and gained 52.12%. The second remarkable election took place in 2020 when the Bolnisi municipality was unified with the Tetri Tskaro, Dmanisi, and Tsalka municipalities as a single constituency. Although Gogi Meshveliani managed to win the elections, the process was accompanied by tension and violence. For instance, there was shooting and assault on the opposition activists in the village of Nakhiduri. Some of the respondents mentioned the active involvement of the “thieves world” in the electoral process when the supporters of organized crime groups were intimidating opposition activists.

Table 3



**Conclusions**

The Bolnisi municipality is one of the most overlooked regions of Georgia populated by the ethnic minorities. Despite containing large mineral deposits and having substantial agricultural production, the

<sup>31</sup> Respondent N14. A political activist from the town of Bolnisi.

nationwide media and the NGO sector often avoid this region. The recent clashes between Azerbaijanis and Georgians in the neighboring Dmanisi municipality have shown that a small event can trigger ethnic tensions in such regions. Regions like Bolnisi require increasing attention from the central government and non-governmental bodies. We hope that this report will facilitate new projects related to the integration of minorities and the socio-economic development of the Kvemo Kartli region.

## **Recommendations**

### Central government

- Renovation of German cultural heritage in the town of Bolnisi and the creation of a new nationwide tourist destination
- Building kindergartens, especially in Azerbaijani-populated villages
- Improving the ecology of places affected by mining activities
- Solving the problems with drinking and irrigation water supply vis-à-vis the Bolnisi municipality
- Improving quality of teaching the Georgian language in schools
- Active measures to protect the cultural heritage of the region

### Local government

- Decreasing the number of public servants and increasing funds for social programs
- Incorporating young Georgian-speaking ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians in the local government
- Proactive measures for decreasing inter-community tensions by facilitating inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue
- Improving public transport, especially in the upper zone

### NGO and media

- Creating bilingual Georgian-Azerbaijani media resources focusing on the Bolnisi (and Dmanisi) municipalities
- Supporting the local grassroots organizations
- Creating platforms for inter-ethnic and inter-confessional dialogue
- Strengthening informal education