

Georgian Avars: Seclusion against Development

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Georgian Avars are a small ethno-confessional group in Georgia that has a very complex and interesting fate. They are mainly concentrated in the three villages of Tivi, Chantliskure, and Saruso of the Kvareli district, the region of Kakheti. According to the 2014 census, there is about three thousands of them.

This people have their origins in Dagestan, Russia, and have settled in Georgia during the last two centuries. They maintain strong relations with their “ethnic homeland” through contacts with relatives, frequent trips, and economic connections. They maintain their ancestral language, though most of them also speak some Georgian and Russian. Their religion is Sunni Islam.

In the early 1990's, the Avar community came under pressure from Georgian nationalist groups that pushed them to return to their ethnic homeland, Dagestan. Many did leave, though some part (mostly older people) stayed. Those who have left frequently come back to visit their former villages in Georgia, mainly in the summer, but they do not plan on permanently returning. After this period, there has been no serious tensions between Avars and their Georgian neighbors.

In many respects, the problems of Avar villages are similar to those of their Georgian neighbors: farming does not provide sufficient income, poverty and unemployment are widespread, and those capable tend to move to cities or abroad to make their living. However, in the case of this minority group, its seclusion and alienation creates additional impediments for them to achieve success.

In 2017-18, the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy, and Development (CIPDD), with the support of the *Open Society Georgia* foundation, carried out a series of activities in Avar villages, which was aimed at spreading civic education and integration of this community into the Georgian society. This was the first effort of this type undertaken in this community. Simultaneously, CIPDD carried out a research aimed at highlighting the community's current condition and challenges. We were motivated to do this research because Georgian society has very scarce information about the Avar community, which leads to the spread of myths and misleading stereotypes. We do not claim to have created a truly comprehensive picture of this community and its problems, but hope to give an idea of how Avars live, what are their attitudes and goals.

This study is mainly based on sixteen in-depth interviews, taken by a research group led by Tamar Charkviani from inhabitants of the Avar villages and their Georgian neighbors, as well as from representatives of the local government, NGO activists, journalists, and experts. Moreover, regular contacts of the CIPDD project team with the representatives of three Avar villages, as well as neighboring Georgian villages, was crucial for us to check adequacy of our understanding of the issues of the Avar community.

Ethno-Cultural Profile

Ethnocultural links to Dagestan as well as Islam are the two main features that makes the Avar community distinct from the population of Georgian villages around them.

These people settled, or were settled, in Georgia in the middle of the 19th century in the context of Russia's Caucasian War.¹ Another tide of resettlement came in the wake of the Second World War.

There is no universal consensus as to what ethnonym should be used to refer to this community. Georgians have traditionally referred to the group as "Leki", which here generally implies anyone from Dagestan. The members of the community generally accept this ethnonym without any protest, but "Avar" a more widespread self-reference. According to Georgian experts, neither of these terms is correct. The term "Avar" originates from the Russian "avarets", while the respective Georgian term should be *khundzi*. Moreover, no term covers effective ethnic diversity *within* the community we discuss here. However, in this paper we will use the term "Avar" as it is relatively well-established and fully acceptable to members of this community.

Though they have their origin from Dagestan in common Dagestan, Georgian Avars are not ethnoculturally homogenous. Dagestan stands out within North Caucasus republics for its ethnic and linguistic diversity and this heterogeneity was apparent in the three villages we studied as well. In particular, a *dido* or *tsezi* people reside in the village of Tivi, while *khundzi* are those living in Saruso and Chantliskure. Each of these groups speak their distinct dialects and in order to make themselves understood to each other, they usually switch to Georgian or Russian. Some of them also master literary Avar. Moreover, the villagers often highlight differences of traditional ways (*adats*) and other features typical for respective groups.

¹ This is a war that Russia carried out in 1817-64 in order to subjugate the North Caucasus.

Religion and Tradition

Avars are Sunni Muslims, and Islam is an important marker of their identity. Many frequently attend Mosque services and show respect to the Islamic way of life. Their Christian Georgian neighbors believe that they are better than themselves when it comes to adhering to rules and traditions of their ancestral faith. The Mullah is considered one of the most important authorities; the villagers often turn to him to resolve some of their conflicts.

However, this does not mean that every Avar is a strictly practicing Muslim. Pork and alcohol may be forbidden in large gatherings, but our conversations made it clear that many men drink alcohol, and eating pork is not off limits as well. When it comes to Ramadan, the Muslim version of fasting, individuals decide to keep or not keep it depending on their outlooks and circumstances. Some Avars admit that they cannot adhere to this practice, or that they do not deem such adherence necessary at all, though most agree that keeping the fast should be mandatory.

Women's garb is broadly considered an important indicator of the adherence to Islamic ways. In this regard, the Georgian Avar community does not follow any uniform practice, families and individuals make their own choices. Effectively nobody uses niqab, whereby the face and body of a woman are fully covered making individual identification impossible; the use of the hijab, with the hair of a woman completely covered, is rare. In fact, some young girls wear a hijab among their family members but remove it once in public, presumably due to a fear of being mocked. The use of headscarves partially covering the hair is considered a normal practice for women but not everybody does this either. Young girls wearing pants or make-up may become a points of contention: older people often disapprove, but many young women ignore this. It is generally believed that the dress codes of Avar girls are stricter than those of the neighboring Christian Georgians, but apart from headscarves, differences are not too conspicuous.

It can be said that Georgian Avars' attitudes to religion are similar to those the North Caucasus peoples used to have, especially before the second Russian-Chechen War that began in 1999. In this case, the influence of Islam is blended with traditional Caucasian practices or *adats* coming from pre-Islamic past. Villagers may not always be certain where the line separating the *adat* from the Islamic rules is.

The influence of radical political Islam is not apparent in the Avar community. This does not yet mean that it does not exist there at all: It is well known that radical Islam has a significant influence in Dagestan, an area that Georgian Avars have close contact with. However, if this trend has also infiltrated the community discussed here, this did not come up in this research.

According to some residents, since the Soviet people tend to adhere to Islamic teachings more, and it is young people who often show greater interest towards Islam. This trend is characteristic of many contemporary Muslim communities across the world. However, according to some other observations, people of the older generation are more likely to follow formal requirements of Islamic practice (such as regular prayers, fasting during Ramadan, etc.).

Close contact with Dagestan appear to encourage adherence to Islamic ways. For instance, in summer, when Avar families have many visitors from Dagestan, the women's dress code becomes conspicuously stricter.

The main holiday of Avars is Qurban (Bairam), which is celebrated on March 22nd and is preceded by fasting. The locals consider the holiday their equivalent of the Christian Easter holiday, and during this time, the doors of their homes remain open to guest and large meals are prepared. Families feel obligation to share their meals with others – this extends to Georgians as well.

Migration during the Period of the National Independence Movement

The locals (Avars as well as Georgians) are reluctant to talk about the period of the national independence movement, or the period from the end of 1980's to the beginning of the 1990's (this period is also sometimes referred to as "Zviad Gamsakhurdia times"). It was a widespread notion during this interlude that ethnic minorities posed a threat to Georgia because they were not loyal to its national project, the idea of independent Georgian state, and could become a "fifth column" manipulated by the outside power hostile to it. Moreover, there was a pervasive fear that high birthrates among Muslims and further migration might eventually change ethnocultural balance and turn Christian Georgians into a minority in their own country.

This belief did not lead to anything like systematic ethnic cleansing, but many minority representatives came under pressure and were pushed to emigrate. One such community was that of the Avars, a large portion of whom left Georgia. The formerly Avar village of Tkhillistsqaro was

completely abandoned and never repopulated, while in other villages mainly elderly remained. Blockade was the technique of choice here: nationalist activists blocked access to the village in order to prevent deliveries of goods, including groceries. In other instances, Avars were denied service in stores. In a few cases, their houses were put on fire, but it appears quite possible it was a way for the Avars who decided to leave to show their protest. This campaign continued for about a year.

The perpetrators mainly came from Tbilisi, though they were assisted by some of the locals. On the other hand, some Georgian neighbors helped during the blockade by supplying food. It was no less painful for the Avars to lose land, which was the main source of subsistence. These acts were mainly considered an expression of conflict between the Avar villagers and the state, but it is obvious that during this period, relations between villagers were also strained. In the collective memory of the locals, the campaign aimed at pushing the minority out is rather linked to the state policies of that time rather than remembered as a conflict between local communities. Nevertheless, it did contribute to the breakdown of trust between the Georgians and the Avars.

For the most part, the Avars relocated to Dagestan where they had relatives or, at least, expected a ethnoculturally friendly environment. Some of them went to other parts of Russia. In most cases, Avars did not sell their homes in Georgia and later, as conditions became more stable, began to return. Though those who have successfully established themselves in the Russian Federation, tend to stay, but usually do not sell their ancestral homes.

There were no interethnic conflicts to speak of after the mentioned period, but spirit of mistrust persists.

Migration and Links to Dagestan

Dagestan is the “ethnic homeland” of the Avars and they feel closely connected to it. This feeling further strengthened as a result of forced resettlement in the period of national independence movement. As a rule, families have relatives in Dagestan or in other parts of Russia; it is not uncommon for large families that some of their young people live in Dagestan or in other parts of Russia, while others stay in Georgia.

People continue to emigrate from the Avar villages, though this time the reason lies not in ethnic tensions but in the lack of economic prospects. If a young person decides to move from a village

to a city, the destination is usually Dagestan or other part of Russia. Dagestan's capital, Makhachkala, is more natural choice for such a youth than is Telavi or Tbilisi. Apart from a "native" ethnocultural environment, in Dagestan such person may rely on networks of kinship and friends that would help him or her to find a living and a job; this is not so in the case of Georgian cities.

Despite this, those who have left continue to visit their native villages. Sometimes it is not fully clear for themselves and their relatives whether they have made up their minds to leave for good or not. As a result in summer, the Avar villages are much fuller than in other times.

Because so many families reside in Russia, many houses in Georgian Avar villages are either closed or have only one adult living in them. However, the émigrés still do not sell their houses so that they have some place to return. Some of the Avars who have resettled to Russia plan to retire in their native villages hoping that a relatively high Russian pension will be sufficient for a decent life there. This is a strong reason to keep their homes in Georgia.

The number of pupils in schools gives one a good idea of the scope of emigration. The former principal of the Saruso school recalls that in the late Soviet times, there were about 200 students in the school; now there are only about 40. A similar trend could be observed in two other Avar villages.

Deteriorated relations between Russia and Georgia that led to the introduction of visas for the Georgian nationals traveling to Russia hampers relations between Georgian Avars and Dagestan. Complicated procedures for obtaining a visa, as well as related fee is an important impediment for the locals to travel there. This fact has negatively affected the economy of Georgian Avars as well: acting as middlemen in the bilateral trade was an important economic niche for them, while new visa regime has made such commerce much more difficult.

Despite this, the links between Avars and Dagestan have not stopped. It is not ruled out that some of the locals solve the visa problem by having both Georgian and Russian passports; but if this is so, people do not speak of this, because obtaining a passport of another country automatically entails losing Georgian citizenship.

Links to Dagestan are of utmost importance to the region's economy. Against the backdrop of widespread poverty, financial help from relatives residing in Dagestan (or other part of Russia) is a prominent component of the Georgian Avar village economy (see more on this below). Some Georgian inhabitants believe that in general, the Avars are economically better-off, also because elderly Avars receive both Russian and Georgian pensions; however, no Avar mentioned such a thing.

Language, Education, Information, and Sport

For large ethnic minorities in Georgia, such as Armenians and Azeris, the lack of knowledge of the Georgian language constitute a clear disadvantage when it comes to attaining higher education, dealing with state agencies, finding jobs, getting information about events in the country, etc. However, in the case of the Avar community, Georgian language proficiency is not much of an issue. They master their native languages, but large majority also speaks Georgian and Russian to varying levels of fluency. As the inhabitants of Tivi on the one hand and Chantliskure and Saruso on the other each speak different dialects, they often use Georgian for mutual communication.

The Avar youth speak grammatically correct Georgian, sometimes using it among each other as well. This is to be explained by the fact that in each of the three villages, there is a Georgian school giving primary and secondary education (9 grades). During the Soviet period, it was believed that Avars had to receive education in Russian. In the school of Tivi village (that has mixed population) there were Georgian and Russian-language sectors, with Georgian pupils usually studying in the Georgian-language sector, while Avars – in the Russian-language one. In Chantliskure and Saruso, there existed only Russian-language schools. This contributed to segregation between communities and prevented Avars for mastering Georgian fluently. As a result, the older generation, as a rule, has had a Russian-language education, but large majority has command of at least basic Georgian as well.

Today, with Georgian as a principal language of education, students also learn Russian, literary Avar (which is different from native dialects of the villagers), and English. This creates some difficulties as all language that they learn are new to them. However, parents welcome the opportunity for their children to learn multiple languages.

The locals are also motivated to study Russian because they may want to travel to Dagestan, eventually settle there, or interact with their relatives from Russia. Avars living in Dagestan often speak their native language poorly, which makes Russian a more advantageous language of communication. The abolishing of the Russian-based curriculum from Georgian schools was somewhat resisted by the locals, but not too strongly. Today, many respondents welcome switching to the Georgian-language education because they recognize the necessity to master the official language of the country.

Because it was difficult for the Avar first-graders to study in Georgian, in the recent years a new program of pre-school education was introduced for them. This proved rather productive: the children are now much better prepared to start school and have less language-related problems there.

Due to economic hardships, insufficient level of integration with the Georgian community, or insufficient motivation, few of the local youth continue their education past the secondary school. This extends to both ethnic Georgians and Avars, but the latter are even less likely to go on with their studies. The high school (10th – 12th grades) is only in the neighboring Georgian village of Akhalsopeli. Alternatively, one can opt for the technical college in the same Akhalsopeli where they can study for a dental technician, nurse, etc. The distance to Akhalsopeli, which varies for different villages, is a contributing (though not the only) factor for students who chose not to continue their education beyond the secondary school.

University level education is even rarer, especially in case of girls. If asked about their priorities in this area, the locals would rather have access to vocational education, preferably in their own village. Even when young people aspire to university education, their families may not encourage them. If, however, a youth still makes a decision to pursue higher education, Dagestan or other parts of Russia rather than Georgia becomes a destination of choice.

There are no kindergartens in the Avar villages. It is responsibility of the municipality to create and maintain such institutions, but having limited means, it cannot do so in each village. The municipality offered transportation to transfer Avar children to kindergartens in neighboring villages, but parents declined the offer because they did not want their children to travel to another village on a daily basis.

Sports, particularly wrestling, is very popular among boys. However, there is no appropriate infrastructure to support them. It was quite an event when Chantliskure opened a sports facility. It is mostly used by boys.

Cultural activities, such as creating folklore groups or anything else, is not developed in the Avar villages.

Popular Georgian TV companies such as *Imedi* and *Rustavi-2* are the main sources of information for the Avars. One cannot rule it out, though, that some of the locals gives preference to the Russian channels to get their information.

Interethnic Relations

Out of the three villages, Chantliskure and Saruso are monoethnic, while Tivi has an Avar majority and a Georgian minority. Most of the Georgian inhabitants of Tivi are so-called “ecological migrants” from Adjara (a historically Muslim but ethnically Georgian region on the Black Sea) who were resettled during the Soviet Union following natural disasters in their own villages. After this, some other (non-Adjaran) Georgian families have also settled in Tivi. It is worth noting that after Georgia gained independence and religious life was revived, Adjarans living in Tivi (similarly to Adjarans in Adjara) became split between Islam and Christianity. The number of Christian and Muslim Adjarans living in Tivi is estimated as being about the same.

Among neighboring Georgian villages, Avars have the closest contacts with Akhalsopeli. In addition to Georgian villages typical for the Kakheti region, Avars also live in relative proximity to villages inhabited by ethnic Ossetians, Udin, and Georgians resettled from Imereti (western Georgia). However, when asked about their inter-ethnic relations for this research, Avar respondents usually implied interactions with the Georgians of Tivi and Akhalsopeli. Due to Tivi’s heterogeneous make-up, Avars living interact with Georgians more than residents of Chantliskure or Saruso.

The locals (both Avars and Georgians) usually describe relations between communities in positive terms. Everybody agrees that tensions typical for the period of national independence movement became thing of the past. To illustrate this point, villagers refer to the habit of inviting each other to holidays such as the Avars’ Qurban-Bairam, or ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, etc. During such events, it is the Avar custom not to send out individual invitations but make a general announcement to the village that such and such family has a wedding on a certain day, which implies that all, including Georgians, are invited.

Communities have economic relations as well; Georgians frequently buy meat and dairy products from the Avars, while the latter may be found working in stores owned by Georgians. People from both communities cooperate during agricultural works; Georgians recruit Avars to help during the harvest while Avars rent tractors from Georgians in order to till the fields. A marketplace (stalls where everyone sells their produce) is another space where Georgian and Avars often interact with each other.

Generally, each community recognizes and respects the traditions and customs of the other, and believe that neither one has the right to dictate how one group should or should not live. Georgians

are aware that Avars do not eat pork or drink wine and respect this custom. Avars in Tivi sometimes complain about their Georgian co-villagers keeping pigs, but this in itself has not become a source of conflict.

At the same time, there exist barriers and a sense of alienation between the two communities. Marriages between representatives of each community are rare and both communities, especially Avars, tend to disapprove of them. With regards to this, the religious difference is considered more important than ethnic one. Marrying within their own communities is a priority for the Avars in any case; but marrying other Muslims (such as Kistsji, the Georgian Chechens, or Adjarans) are considered much more admissible as compared to marrying Christian Georgians.

Marriages to Christians do occur, but are exceptionally rare. If a Christian woman is entering a Muslim household, she is expected to conform to Muslim ways (which may include circumcision). An Avar villager approvingly recalled an instance when a Christian Georgian woman married into an Avar family and later became more of a devout Muslim than the Avars themselves. If a non-Muslim woman gets married to an Avar and does not wish to convert, the couple has no other option but to move out: the local community will not accept such a marriage. A daughter marrying into a Georgian family is the worst-case scenario for an Avar household: the latter usually break all relations with her, though after she gives a birth to a child, her Avar family elders may reconcile to it. An older Avar respondent remembered a case when a whole family was forced to move from a village because of their daughter having married a Christian Georgian.

It is notable what are terms of abuse during occasional quarrels between Georgians and Avars do occur (for instance, between children): in such cases, Georgians use “heathens” or “Qizilbash”, while Avars refer to Georgians as „pigs”.

The elimination of the Russian-language sector in schools was probably an especially important factor for integrating both communities because it was only after that that Georgian and Avar children started to study next to each other. In the first ears of schooling, certain distance may still persist, because at this stage the Avar children do not speak Georgian fluently, if at all. Moreover, children may bring negative stereotypes of “the other” from their families. But as time passes, friendships develop.

The case of Tivi village

When Georgians migrants were settled in the monoethnic village of Tivi, they did so on the outskirts of the village in a circular pattern with a free space in the middle of the circle. This configuration highlighted separateness and distinctiveness of the Georgian part of the village. Current Georgian inhabitants want this part of Tivi to be given a status of a separate village under the name of “Mtisubani”, but the municipality of Kvareli does not support such a project. Avars disapprove of the idea as well. They like to mention that before the resettlement of the Georgians, this land constituted pastures attached to Tivi. On several occasions Georgian inhabitants posted a sign stating “Mtisubani” in their part of the village that Avars promptly took down.

On another occasion, Georgian inhabitants erected a cross in the center of their part of the village. This caused an especially negative reaction from the Avars. They expressed their protest by slaughtering pigs of Georgian villagers. The conflict did not lead to any serious altercations, but the villagers do not consider it fully exhausted either. The Avars think that erection of a cross in the public square which is a meeting space for all the inhabitants implies Christian identity of the whole village despite the fact that large majority of its inhabitants are Muslim.

Another controversial issue facing the villagers of Tivi is the claim of the Muslim population to build a new mosque. There is already a mosque in the village, but it is on the outskirts of the settlement (near the cemetery), which local Muslims consider inconvenient. Avars would like to build a mosque in the center of the village across a school. They have bought a plot of land for the mosque construction but have yet to receive a permit from the local government. Local Christian Georgians, however, say that with one mosque already being there, it is no longer appropriate to build another one, especially near the village school.

Georgian inhabitants have an issue with the call to prayer from the mosque being too loud. This disturbs them – the call can be heard in neighboring Akhalsopeli and it keeps villagers awake at night. They perceive such behavior as demonstrative.

These issues have not led to open and severe conflicts, but the study has showed they constitute a ground for mutual discontent. In such situations, the local government tends to be passive and allow local communities to figure out the issues among themselves.

Attitude towards the State and the Law Enforcement

The Avar community is fully loyal to the Georgian state. There exist no alternative historical narratives questioning legitimacy of Georgian jurisdiction over the territory occupied by the Avar villages.

At the same time, the Avars remain loyal to their customs and traditions. This means, among other things, that they do their best to avoid state involvement in regulating their internal conflicts. Unless absolutely necessary, Avars never contact law enforcement bodies: this is considered an unbecoming behavior. When explaining, why they would not turn to police and courts they do not allege that these bodies are unjust, corrupt, ineffective, etc., but say that it is embarrassing for the community to involve aliens in their internal business. If anybody cooperates with the law enforcement, this person is considered “a spy”. As an Avar respondent stated, “there are one or two people like this, but we do not consider them fully human”.

In order to settle disputes (like fights, kidnappings of women, etc.) members of the community address people who carry informal authority – there are such people in every village and whatever they decide has considerable sway.

Avars are poorly represented in the government bodies. In the *Sakrebulo* (municipal council) of Kvareli, there was one Avar member who recently decided to resign. The Avars themselves do not show any wish to get involved in political processes, something that may be considered another expression of their tendency to seclusion. They participate in elections and as a rule, vote for the government candidate, which may be their way to demonstrate their loyalty to the state.

The main expectations and complaint that Avars have with regards to the government are focused on the state of infrastructure (roads, lighting in the streets, etc.). Ethnic Georgians, on the other hand, expect the government to create more jobs.

Economy

Avars are poor, but this does not set them apart from Georgia’s rural, especially mountainous rural population. Some Georgian neighbors believe that the Avars’ economic condition is actually better than theirs because the Avars have connections with Russia, get remittances from their relatives or – if they are seniors – Russian pensions that are considerably higher than Georgian ones. One has to keep in

mind, though, that within Russia, Dagestan is considered one of the poorest regions. On the other hand, for religious or other traditional factors Avars do not pursue wine production, which is the dominant agricultural activity for the Georgian population in Kakheti. This may be a source of economic disadvantage for them.

Traditionally, animal husbandry is the main occupation of the Avars. They mostly raise sheep, though they have cows as well. The sale of meat, dairy products, and wool is the main source of cash income (apart from remittances from relatives abroad). They also grow fruits and vegetables, the main crops being corn and beans. Aside from this, the Avars sell their labor for agricultural and construction works (average daily wage being 25-30 GEL). Both men and women do this. Avars can also have jobs as teachers, have their own shops, act as used car dealers, etc.

In the recent past, trade was considered an important economic niche for the Avars: in particular, they took merchandise from Russia and sold it in Georgia. However, after Russian authorities introduced visa regime to Georgia's citizens and customs control became stricter, it became much more difficult to pursue such activities.

As it is the case in Georgia in general, the Avars consider unemployment as one of the most severe problems. This stimulates labor emigration, especially among men.

Family, Gender Relations, and the Status of Women

Both Dido and Khundzi people do their best to marry within their own ethnic groups, which naturally limits their choices. It is acceptable for the Khundzi living in Saruso and Chantliskure to marry their close relatives, including first cousins. Villagers of Tivi rule out marriages to close relatives, but distant relatives are considered eligible for marriage. The overall trend is, however, that marrying relatives becomes a rarer practice. This induces the Georgian Avars to search for spouses in Dagestan.

The Avars are a traditional rural community and it is only natural to expect that the social roles of women and men are regulated by both ancient *adats* and the requirements of Islam. However, this community's practices do not fit into common stereotypes of "a traditional Muslim community". In particular, Avar women are much more independent and influential than such stereotypes might suggest.

It was the practice of female circumcision among the Avars that has largely influenced the perception of this community by a part of the Georgian society. At the end of 2016, an online publication of the *Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)* released a piece describing the practice of female circumcision among Georgian Avars. This was followed by frequent visits of Georgian journalists and NGO activists to these villages who tried to get more details about the problem. The local community was extremely concerned by all this: from their perspective, this constituted a totally unwelcome intrusion of the “aliens” in their internal affairs that aimed at spreading negative stereotypes about them. This was the way for the Georgians portray them as a “backward” people. They believed this made Avars a laughingstock for the Georgians; the Avar women felt embarrassed to appear in public places. The result was that the Avar communities closed up even more and avoided any contacts with the “aliens” – especially journalists and NGOs activists.

This background left its mark on the process of this study as well. For the CIPDD team, it turned out rather difficult to gain confidence of the community. The locals often agreed to talk with CIPDD representatives upon a condition that female circumcision would not be mentioned at all. Still, the topic would occasionally come up in the conversation. The available information allows us to conclude that the practice of female circumcision is indeed characteristic for the Avar community, but it is not universal. Families take their own decisions on this. However, it is difficult to find out exactly how widespread the practice actually is: some respondents said it has become rare, others contended many people still use it.

As in many other societies, the opinions of the Avars regarding gender roles are not uniform and varies between families and individuals. There also exists a difference between generations: the youth often do not follow the beliefs of the elders and make different choices. Although the older generation may mandate it necessary for the youth to follow certain traditional ways, the younger generation frequently rebels; the elders disapprove and try to impose their norms on the young – but may or may not succeed.

Every Avar respondent shared the view that the relations between boys and girls are less restricted today than they used to be in the past. Traditionally, it were families who arranged marriages for their young people; now, it has become typical for the young people to meet each other on their own and decide to marry – after which they seek approval of their parents. Internet became an important space for the young people to meet.

Still, relations between the sexes remain rather restrained. Friendly kisses on the cheek between boys and girls as a greeting is not considered acceptable – while for Georgians this is a normal behavior. Premarital sex is totally ruled out. Arranged marriages continue to exist as well, though young girls have an option to decline.

The practice of kidnapping brides remains an extant practice, but it often happens with actual consent of the girl. In the latter case, it is rather elopement masqueraded as kidnapping: the real point is to marry without parents consent. Usually, as some time passes after the elopement, the parents reconcile to the decision of their young people and a formal wedding takes place.

It is believed that the best age for a girl to get married is 18-19. Although the search for a future bridegroom starts immediately after the graduation from the secondary school and the couples often get engaged, they wait until their majority to marry. Sometimes, young people marry at 16, but marriage at even earlier age is extremely rare. Apparently, the fact that legal age for marriage has increased in Georgia to 18 years has its influence. For young men, around 25 is considered the best time to marry. It has to be taken into account that man has to prepare for his marriage financially as well: he has an obligation to buy gold jewelry to his bride, and for this he may need to work for several years.

The Avars do not practice polygamy; at least, the respondents deny that such things happen. There was no mention of domestic violence against women as well.

Divorce is a widespread practice and frequently it is the wife who initiates it. Husband's drinking habit or his inability to provide for the family are considered fully legitimate reasons for a woman to seek divorce. The fact that Avar men frequently travel to Russia for work and leave their wives back at home may become a reason for the latter to seek divorce. The community does not disapprove of a woman because of that. It is also fully acceptable for the Avars that a woman may remarry, often more than once. For instance, it is not a rare occasion in this community that a woman has three children by three husbands; what matters is that the marriages have to be official. For the Georgian respondents, such practices are rather different from those of their own community: they noted that divorce is a much more widespread practice among the Avars than among the Georgians.

It is generally expected among the Avars that men serve as unofficial authority figures within the community, though sometimes a woman can play this role as well. During this research, we met several women who have an important role on the life of their communities outside their families. The Avar

community does not at all confirm the stereotype that the role of the woman is limited by her household.

It is worth noting in this regard that in many cases women also play leading roles in the local economy. Typically, Avar men provide to their families by going to work in Russia and sending back money or gifts. But when it comes to the economy of their villages, women often take up functions that have traditionally belonged to men, such as herding sheep. Moreover, they can also work outside their families as schoolteachers, shop assistants, daily wage workers, etc. – even though this does not fit into a traditional female roles. Avar men are less active in the village economy.

Access to education is one of the biggest challenges faced by women. It is extremely difficult to find a local woman who, having graduated from a secondary school, continued her education in either the high school or college of Akhalsopeli, not to speak of an university. The distance needed to travel to neighboring villages to receive education cannot be considered the main factor for this (though its role cannot be completely ruled out): It is the traditional mindset that 9-years education is fully sufficient for young girls who should start thinking about creating a family after that.

State Policies towards the Avar Community

Georgian state policies towards ethnic minorities comprise different directions: those of education, culture, information, etc. The National Council of Minorities that functions with support of Human Rights Defender of Georgia is conspicuous for actively debating different aspects of these policies and making relevant recommendations. The Council includes organizations representing both large minorities like Armenians and Azeris, as well as smaller ones. Avars also participate; Council members and staff have had a number of meetings in the Avar villages in order to identify their problems.

With regards to the Avar community, the Council judged that education in the native tongue should be considered a priority. The issue was solved several years ago, when, for the first time, learning Avar language was included into the curriculum of local schools. Moreover, keeping in mind that residents of different villages speak different dialects, teachers of the Avar are encouraged to conduct certain lessons in the local dialect.

There are other specific issues that the Council tried to address. For instance, it supplied Chantliskure village school with reading materials and textbooks for its new pre-school classes.

Generally, the Avar community is considered less problematic in this regard and gets less attention as compared to much more numerous minorities like Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Most of the latter do not master Georgian, which is a factor of their even greater estrangement from the public life.

Conclusions and Prospects

It may be concluded that seclusion and isolation may be the main challenge faced by the Georgian Avars. This limits their chances to develop and achieve success in the Georgian society. Low motivation in the area of education is the most salient indicator for this: most young people do not show ambition to continue education after the secondary school; those who have this ambition, chose to go Dagestan or other parts of Russia. The motivation to go beyond the 9th grade is especially low for girls and women for whom education is considered unnecessary as their traditional roles are within the household. Young girls have an especially low motivation to continue their education, since the traditional community restricts women's role to family functions.

However, as it became obvious through this study as well as through interactions with members of the community in the framework of CIPDD project activities, the Avar youth genuinely wish to have closer interactions with their Georgian counterparts, and play a more active role both on the regional and national levels. In general, the Avar community views the prospect of their life in Georgia very positively, though it worries that due to economic deprivation and resulting labor migration this prospect may come under question. If the state, civic organizations and the Avars themselves become more active in activities aiming at integration, it is fully realistic that the Georgian Avars become much better integrated and successful members of the Georgian society.