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Mixed Marriages in Georgia: Trends and Implications

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Abstract

Mixed marriage is often regarded as an indicator of inter-group mixing and a group's status within society. This article will examine major intermarriage trends in Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union by focusing on some of the key factors affecting mixed marriages and inter-group relations in the country.

Background

Love and affection are often regarded as some of the major factors affecting an individual's decision to marry. Yet, ethnic differences and religious affiliations can also play an important role in people's understanding of love and marriage matters. The following article examines mixed marriage dynamics in Georgia after the demise of the Soviet Union by drawing on recent quantitative data about mixed marriages in the country. Marriage, in general, and mixed marriage, in particular, have varying meanings and are linked to socioeconomic developments, culture, politics, and geography. In the West, "mixed marriage" and "intermarriage" are frequently used to denote interracial marriage and interreligious marriage, respectively (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002:11). In the Soviet Union and following its collapse, the emphasis has been on interethnic and interfaith mixing. In this regard, mixed marriage will be defined as a legal and formal union between two heterosexual individuals from various ethnic groups, religions, or nations. The terms mixed marriage and intermarriage will be used interchangeably in this article.

Numerous sociological studies show that people tend to marry representatives of their own social and religious groups and those who are close to them in status. However, individuals can cross group boundaries through mixed marriage. The latter may decrease cultural and other differences between groups. Mixed marriage occurrences can also serve as indicators of changes in ethnic boundaries separating groups of people. In this sense, the more people intermarry, the weaker the group boundaries (Lee and Bean 2004). High intermarriage rates can also be viewed as indicators of social integration of groups of people, because these rates may indicate that members of different groups accept each other as social equals (Kalmijn 1998:396). However, negative attitudes about ethnic intermarriage are viewed as an expression of "social distance" and unvoiced intolerance.

Country Profile and Statistics

Georgia is described as the most ethnically and religiously diverse country of the South Caucasus. According to the last census conducted in Georgia in 2002, ethnic Georgians constitute the majority of the popula-

tion (83.8 percent), while Azerbaijanis (6.5 percent) and Armenians (5.7 percent) represent the two largest ethnic minority groups. Other ethnic minorities include Russians (1.6 percent), Ossetians (0.9 percent), Abkhazians (0.1 percent), Greeks (0.4 percent), Yezidis (0.4 percent), and others (0.8 percent). The major religious denominations in Georgia include Georgian Orthodox Christianity (83.8 percent), Sunni and Shia Islam (9.9 percent), Armenian Apostolic Christianity (3.9 percent), Roman Catholicism (0.8 percent), and others (1.5 percent) (2002 Census). The population of Georgia is said to be largely traditional; men are often viewed as breadwinners, while women are responsible for reproduction, domestic chores, and caring for the family. It is estimated that about half of the households in the country contain extended families (Badurashvili et al. 2009).

Figure 1 shows nine major mixed marriage types by ethnicity registered in Georgia between 1994 and 2007. These data reveal an overall decline in intermarriage in the country with 2002–2003 marking the lowest years in mixed marriage occurrences. This drop may be due to the tense political climate in Georgia and the 2003 Rose Revolution. The two most numerous mixed marriage types for the given period were Georgian–Russian and Georgian–Armenian marriages, followed by Georgian–Ossetian and Georgian–Greek marriages. In comparison, Georgian–Azerbaijani, Georgian–Jewish, Georgian–Assyrian, and Georgian–Kurdish marriages were relatively rare. Notably, these data list Kurds, whereas there were many Yezidis in Georgia as well. Thus, compared to previous years, the number of mixed marriage types in the country declined significantly.

While mixed marriages among the major ethnic groups in Georgia declined, the data presented in Figure 2 show an increase in Georgian–Georgian homogenous marriages. In this regard, the early 2000s were marked by the lowest Georgian–Georgian marriage registrations, while the number of these homogenous marriages increased by 2007. Scholars agree that endogamy, or marrying inside one's ethnic and religious group, has been a norm in Georgia. The 1994–2007 marriage data also confirm a tendency towards endogamy in the country, especially among Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Greeks, and Kurds/Yezidis. A number of ethno-

graphic studies reveal that marriage rules even among Georgians conform to strict traditional norms. In this regard, Georgian intra-group marriages between cousins six or seven times removed are generally not allowed, while endogamous marriages between partners with common ancestors and the same last name are usually avoided.

According to the Georgian National Department of Statistics, due to the removal of the “ethnicity” line from the Georgian ID cards, collecting quantitative data on ethnically mixed marriages has become impossible after 2007. Since ethnicity is no longer mentioned in official marriage records, it has become difficult to formally document the ethnic background of mixed couples. From 2009 to 2013, the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) conducted a series of surveys throughout Georgia regarding people’s attitudes about ethnically mixed marriages. As the Figure 3 shows, the overwhelming majority of people in the country approve of women of their ethnicity marrying ethnic Georgians (90–91 percent range). Marrying Russians is more acceptable than marrying representatives of other ethnic groups mentioned in the chart. In turn, marrying Jews, Azerbaijanis, and Kurds/Yezidis, all often affiliated with various religious denominations, won less support. Within the given time period, the approval rates remain the same with minor fluctuations.

Discussion

In general, some of the factors affecting mixed marriage dynamics include religiosity, strong ethnic consciousness, group size, migrations, settlement type, language use, media coverage, and stereotypes. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnicity and religion have played an important role in Georgia. The Soviet political system was instrumental in constructing and solidifying ethnic identities by institutionalizing ethnicity, partly through Soviet passports. In the late 1980s through the early 1990s, ethnicity became extremely politicized, igniting nationalistic rhetoric that resulted in ethnic conflicts across the former Soviet bloc, including Georgia. To this day, ethnic affiliation and last names, in particular, remain important attributes of an individual’s identity in Georgia.

In the late 1990s–early 2000s, the Georgian leadership decided to remove the “ethnicity” line from Georgian passports and ID cards as a way to promote civic integration. However, this move has been strongly opposed by both the ethnic majority and ethnic minority groups. For some, the recording of their ethnicity in the ID cards meant preserving their ethnic heritage. Yet, others maintained that ethnic heritage cannot be lost and exists regardless of its legal status. This

debate continues to this day, reflecting citizens’ concerns about preserving their ethnic identity and fears of assimilation.

Unbalanced and negative portrayals of ethnic minorities in the Georgian media and one-sided Georgian history teaching in schools and universities, especially in the 1990s and 2000s, also fed into inter-ethnic tensions in the country. In this regard, derogatory terms that have been used in the media to refer to ethnic and religious minority representatives include “traitors,” “separatists,” “aggressors,” “potential criminals,” etc. This situation, in turn, further contributes to social alienation and promotes stereotypical thinking. Also, the Georgian history textbooks published between the early 1990s and late 2000s, applied an ethnocentric rather than citizen-based approach. These textbooks were characterized as one-sided, emphasized the Georgian ethnicity, and excluded non-Georgian ethnic minorities from the curriculum (CIMERA 2007). A number of recent reports have documented cases of religious and ethnic discrimination in schools to this day (EMC 2014).

Religion as a salient identity marker has also re-emerged with new meaning after the demise of the USSR; the Georgian Orthodox Church has become a cornerstone for the “genuine” Georgian identity (Khaindrava 2004:55). In the last ten years, religiosity has also increased throughout the country, especially among the younger generation. Based on the 2008 World Values Survey (WVS), 78 percent of people in Georgia noted that churches in the country provided answers to the problems of family life. According to the 2013 Caucasus Barometer conducted by CRRC, 95 percent of people in Georgia said that religion was important in their daily lives. Also, religious denominations in the country tend to discourage inter-faith marriages, unless the other partner converts.

The declining intermarriage dynamics in Georgia are also partly due to the fact that ethnic Georgians constitute the majority of the population, while non-Georgian ethnic groups comprise about 16 percent of society (2002 Census). Furthermore, based on the 1989 and 2002 census data, about 25 percent of the Georgian citizens left the country permanently, as a result of ethnic and civil wars as well as due to difficult socioeconomic conditions. A significant number of these emigrants were Russians, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Kurds/Yezidis, and others. Nevertheless, mixed marriages have been more common in urban centers, including Tbilisi, than in rural areas. In this regard, despite its rich ethnic and religious mosaic, Georgia’s Kvemo Kartli region has been also characterized by relatively low intermarriage rates and clear group boundaries. Melikishvili (2011) documents cases of disowning or ostracizing family mem-

bers for marrying outside of their ethnic and religious groups in this region.

Conclusion

In sum, between 1994 and 2007, the number of mixed marriages in Georgia declined almost twofold. Among the major “traditional” ethnic groups in Georgia, the Georgian–Russian and the Georgian–Armenian mixed marriages were the most common. In contrast, the Georgian–Georgian homogenous marriages increased by 2007. The 2009–2013 CRRC annual surveys also reveal a continued tendency toward endogamy. Some

of the major factors affecting the marriage dynamics in Georgia include higher religiosity, strong ethnic consciousness, religious restrictions, unbalanced media coverage and ethnic tensions, as well as a significant outflow of the country’s minority population. All of these factors in one way or another have affected the mixed marriage trends in Georgia. The decline in intermarriage may also indicate that boundaries separating ethnic groups in Georgia may have become more rigid since the demise of the Soviet Union. Such developments may negatively impact the social and civic integration of the country’s minority population.

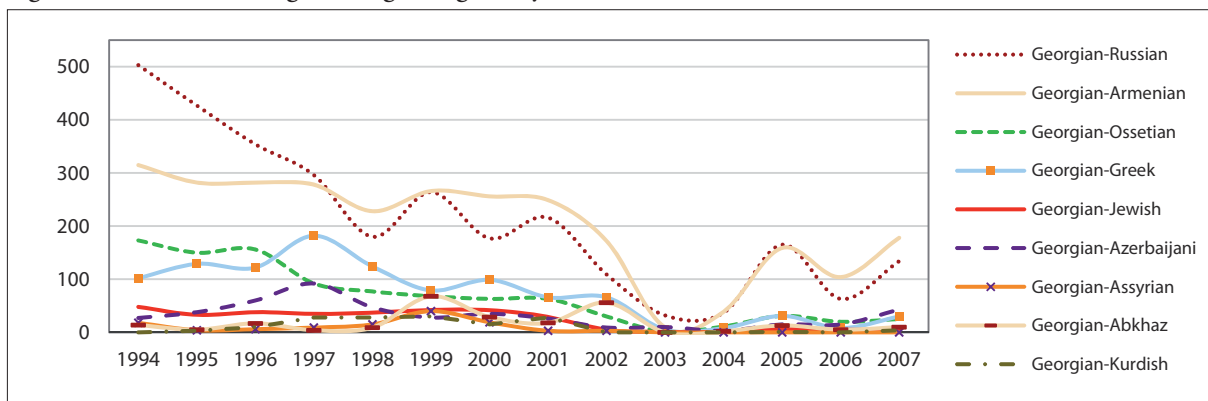
About the Author:

Milena Oganessian is a Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Montana-Missoula, MT, USA. Milena is currently conducting fieldwork in Georgia. Her research focuses on ethnically and religiously mixed couples in Georgia.

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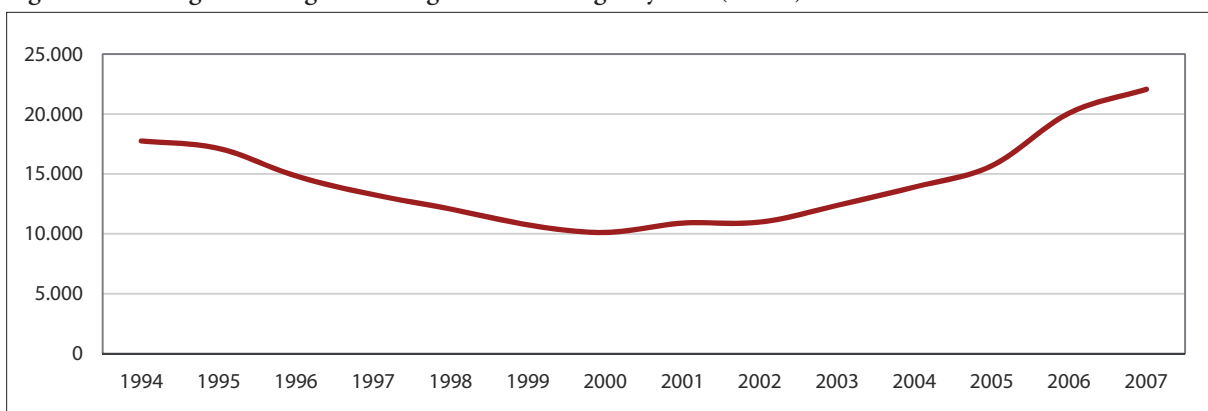
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Figure 1: Mixed Marriage Among Georgians by Year (Count)



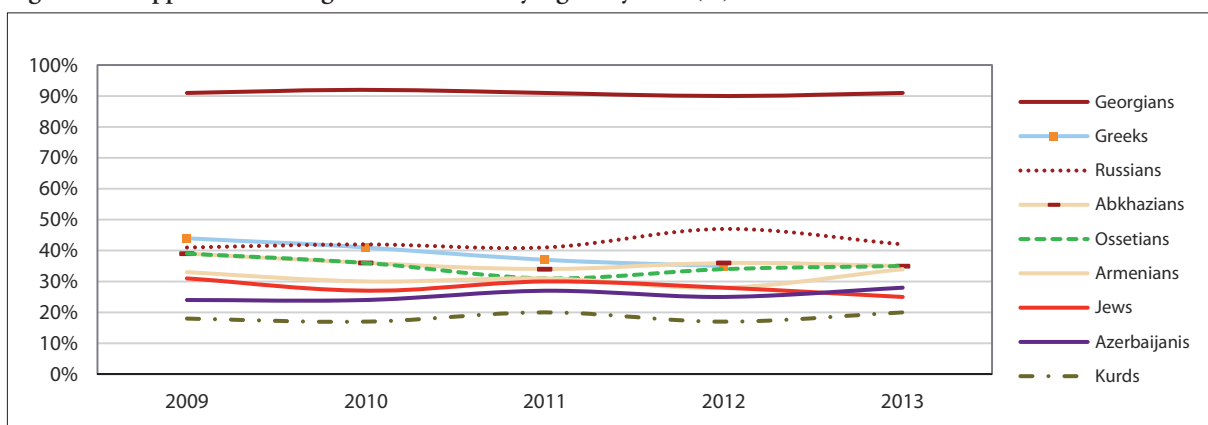
Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia

Figure 2: Georgian-Georgian Homogeneous Marriages by Year (Count)



Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia

Figure 3: Approval of Georgian Women Marrying ... by Year (%)



Source: 2009–2013 Caucasus Barometer, CRRC