

## **Ethnocentrism and the Problem of Ethnic Identity in the Multiethnic Region (Kvemo Kartli)**

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**ABSTRACT.** Representatives of academic circles, business sector and religious organizations of neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan strive to partake in the consolidation and ethnic identity maintenance processes of Azerbaijani and Armenian groups compactly residing in Kvemo Kartli, the south-eastern region of Georgia; they consider that the mobilization of their compatriots around the national idea is in their state interests. They actively propagate the cultural superiority of their people and glorify their past to this end. The article deals with the Armenian “Theory of Great Armenia” and the Azerbaijani “Albanian Theory”, which are in reality ethnocentric narratives and potential conflict provoking factors. © 2019 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

**Key words:** ethnocentrism, ethnicity, ethnic minorities

The glorification of one's own past and the demonstration of cultural advantage are quite common in certain ethnic groups, as well as in academic circles. The ethnocentric conceptual paradigm has become an effective means of achieving imperial goals of the great states on the one hand, and of national mobilization and concentration of national minorities, on the other. Sometimes it is found extensively in doctrines that at a glance express democracy and cosmopolitanism, but because of national problem solving and community mobilization, do not shy away from preaching the cultural superiority of this or that nation and exalting and glorifying their past.

Appealing to group priority or intra-ethnic favoritism, based largely on historical (often pseudo-historical) factors, is of particular

importance in a multiethnic environment where the comprehension of preference of one's own ethnic group is an important precondition for preserving/maintaining identity and avoiding assimilation. I. Cohn believes that understanding and evaluating life events through a prism from which the traditions and values inherent in a particular ethnic group play the role of a certain standard and optimum, are characteristic of a person [1: 812]. The group's own culture is the norm, its history is the richest, its values are the most acceptable, natural and correct, generating a sense of pride and superiority. The culture, values and norms of the other group are contemplated in relation to their own culture and, as a rule, are considered as lower level, which impedes intergroup relations and integration processes, but

strengthens intra-group mobilization and ethnic boundaries.

The need to preserve identity and justify one's own particularity is more acute in multiethnic regions where contact with groups of different cultures is more intense. Kvemo Kartli is a multiethnic province of Georgia, where besides Georgians, Armenians and Azeris live in compact settlements (there are also Greeks, Russians, Ossetians, etc. in Kvemo Kartli). Each of these communities has its own path of socio-cultural development and is characterized by a certain isolation, which is caused by different historical backgrounds, ethnic origin, religion (confession) and language. Their traditions, norms of behavior, ethnic values, mentality, stereotypes are different. Each group has its own social attitude to the existing reality. The situation is complicated by the harsh living, social and economic conditions, the devastation of the region, stagnation, alienation, destruction of agricultural and industrial infrastructure, language barrier, information vacuum, education, low living standards and inconsistent state policies [2: 11].

Ethnic minorities in Kvemo Kartli also receive some provocative impulses from neighboring countries. Representatives of Armenian and Azerbaijani academic circles, business sector and religious organizations participate in the consolidation of the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities and the strengthening of their identity, since they believe that strengthening of the ethnic identity of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the border region is in the interest of their states. Russia and Turkey also influence ethnocentric processes here. A very difficult situation has arisen in this respect since the 1990's. After the declaration of independence, secessionist and irredentist aspirations have been observed in the densely populated ethnic minorities on the Georgian border. By manipulating the ethnic problem, Russia managed to occupy 20% of Georgia's territory [3: 111-112]. The strategic goal of the Georgian

state is to integrate ethnic groups into a single socio-political space in such a way as not to undermine the fundamental rights of minorities, which is a very difficult task in the described circumstances.

Below we will discuss the influence of trends in the academic circles of neighboring countries on the groups of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Kvemo Kartli. These tendencies are partly supported by a statement established in the Russian ideological centre that in the Soviet period Stalin, as ethnic Georgian, annexed the territories of neighbouring states to Georgia, and therefore the one who claims that these lands belong to Georgia, is a Stalinist and the defender of Stalin's decision [4]. The absurdity of this provision was easily substantiated by Georgian academicians [5: 10-15; 6: 168-175], though this was considered favourable in the neighboring Azerbaijani and Armenian scientific circles. The Russian empire, and especially the Stalinist regime are associated with evil in the modern world, and obviously their decisions are also evil. Hence in case of Georgia's defeat and disintegration, the prospect of making territorial claims can be justified in the eyes of the international community [7].

The so-called theory of "Great Armenia", is relatively old; it asserts that concrete regions of Georgia (Kvemo Kartli and Javakheti) was part of the Armenian state at a certain period of its history, therefore, it could still join the Armenian ethnopolitical space in the future. The academic circles of Georgia opposed the proclamation of Georgian territories as historical territories of Armenia. Some of this material was published in a special collection [8]. The Azerbaijani analogue of the "Theory of Great Armenia" is the "Albanian Theory" that recently appeared in Baku intellectual circles, according to which Albanians, Iberia's / Georgia's historical neighbours, are the ancestors of the Azerbaijani people; the Shaki Khanate and the Emirate of Tbilisi are considered Albanian / Azerbaijani political units, after the fall of which all

cultural and historical monuments were destroyed [9].

Both of these theories are multicomponent and include elements such as: the issue of political history, ethno-demographic situation in the historical and modern context, the issue of belonging (mainly religious) of the monuments of material culture, etc. For example, from the Armenian point of view, Kvemo Kartli was historically part of the Armenian political unification, the majority of its population was always Armenian (at least the part inhabited by chalcedonyites), the Armenians made up the majority for more than two millennia and never ceased their cultural and religious activities, therefore most Christian temples are remnants of their national creativity [10: 3-8]. Some Azerbaijani scholars, for their part, consider that this Georgian region was historically under the influence of Turkish-Azerbaijani unions and its population has been ethnic Azerbaijanis from ancient times, respectively, cultural monuments are considered Azerbaijani / Albanian [9; 11: 160-170; 12: 88].

It is noteworthy that the identity of the Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in the region was mainly formed in the Georgian political system and the ancestors of most of them had not lived in the Armenian and Azerbaijani states that emerged in the early 20th century. However, they link their ethnic identity exactly with Armenia and Azerbaijan [13]. The above theories, of course, also have some influence on the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities of Kvemo Kartli, since they primarily consider autochthonism as the main argument for their existence in this region.

10 years ago during our field research in Kvemo Kartli, we noticed that part of the intellectual community of Azerbaijanis, though considered themselves Azerbaijanians, associated themselves with a new ethnonym – "We are Azerbaijanis but Albanians by origin." The expedition in 2019 showed the growing popularity of this new identity

in almost every Azerbaijani village in Kvemo Kartli. They regard the Georgian monuments (including churches and monasteries) and zoomorphic tombstones here as Albanian, explaining that they have learned all this from the individuals, who as they say "walk here around like you (meaning ethnologists, authors)". Azeris living in Kvemo Kartli cannot part with the Turkish ethnocultural world either. They try to celebrate or establish holidays, which testify to their unity with the Turks, protect cult monuments proving their Turkish origin. Due to its ethnic name this group is in an obscure situation, because it has several names (ethnonyms) with both negative and positive connotation – Azerbaijani, Azerbaijani Tatar, Tatar, Borchalo, Turk. Some of these terms (for example, Tatar, Azerbaijani Tatar) are categorically unacceptable to them, but quite understandable and widespread among other members (Armenians, Georgians). It is noteworthy that the emergence of a new ethnonym, "Albanian," will further complicate the already obscure issue of their ethnic self-identification.

Ethnic belonging is constantly reminded/maintained through general public gatherings that exacerbate the feeling of group unity with Armenians or Azerbaijanis. Along with the old religious holidays, new rituals appeared. Since 2009, Azerbaijanis, at the initiative of the Baku organization "Borchalo" were celebrating "Elati" (Shepherd's Day) at the Lake of Pantiani (Dmanisi district); it was formally called an event of friendship, but was mainly aimed at stirring up the Turkish-Azerbaijani spirit (at the initiative of the city administration of Dmanisi this celebration was replaced by Dmanisoba). Genocide Remembrance Day is held annually by Armenians on April 24. In maintaining constant unity with the homeland, great importance is given to the so-called memorials bearing national spirit (a Bas-relief of the genocide or a bust of the participant of the Karabakh war, a monument of a historical figure, etc.).

Objectivity requires to mention, that awareness of one's cultural advantage is based on a certain basis, since each group is truly unique in this regard. Ethnocentrism cannot be represented only in a negative sense, since it is a tendency to evaluate the world through the filter of one's own culture, which is characteristic of everyone, and therefore, all people are ethnocentric, because they have their own perception and interpretation, certain models of behavior that are defined by culture [14: 104]. The situation in Kvemo Kartli is not quite clear in this regard; here negative trends of ethnocentrism can be noticed. On the one hand, the "Armenian" or "Azerbaijani" group is closely connected with the

Armenian and Azerbaijani states, perceiving them as historical homelands, and their current place of residence – as part of this homeland from a cultural and historical point of view, due to ethnocentric narratives. Such a situation is a potential factor for ethnic marginalization and conflict provocation, as evidenced by the recent developments at the David Gareji Monastery complex, which is linked to the border issue between the two states.

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### *ეთნოლოგია*

## ეთნოცენტრიზმი და ეთნიკური იდენტობის პრობლემა პოლიეთნიკურ რეგიონში (ქვემო ქართლი)

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საკუთარი წარსულის განდიდება და კულტურული განსაკუთრებულობის აფიშირება საკმაოდ ხშირია როგორც ცალკეული ხალხის ყოფაში, ისე სამეცნიერო წრეებშიც. ეთნოცენტრისტული კონცეპტუალური პარადიგმა, ერთი მხრივ, დიდი სახელმწიფოების იმპერიული მიზნების დაკმაყოფილების, მეორე მხრივ კი, „მცირე“ ხალხების ეროვნული მობილიზაციისა და კონცენტრაციის ეფექტურ საშუალებად იქცა. ნაციონალური პრობლემების გადაწყვეტის და საზოგადოების მობილიზაციისათვის ზოგჯერ ამა თუ იმ ხალხის კულტურული უპირატესობის ქადაგებას და წარსულის გაიდება-განდიდებას არ ერიდებიან. იდენტობის შენარჩუნებისა და საკუთარი განსაკუთრებულობის დასაბუთების მოთხოვნილება უფრო მძაფრია პოლიეთნიკურ რეგიონებში, სადაც განსხვავებული კულტურის მქონე ჯგუფთა კონტაქტები მეტად ინტენსიურია. საქართველოში სწორედ ასეთი მხარეა ქვემო ქართლი, სადაც, ქართველებთან ერთად კომპაქტურად ცხოვრობენ სომხები და აზერბაიჯანელები. ქვემო ქართლის ე. წ. „ეთნიკური უმცირესობები“ მეზობელი ქვეყნებიდან გარკვეულ მაპროვოცირებელ იმპულსებსაც

იღებენ. აზერბაიჯანული და სომხური თემის კონსოლიდაციის და იდენტობის განმტკიცების საქმეში მონაწილეობენ სომხეთის და აზერბაიჯანის აკადემიური წრეების, ბიზნეს სექტორის და რელიგიური ორგანიზაციების წარმომადგენლები. მიაჩნიათ, რომ სასაზღვრო რეგიონში მცხოვრები ჯგუფების ავტოქთონობის აღიარება და მათი „სომხური“ და „აზერბაიჯანული“ იდენტობის განმტკიცება ტერიტორიული პრეტენზიის პერსპექტივას ზრდის. უძველესი დროიდან სომხების აქ მკვიდრობის დასაბუთებას ემსახურება „დიდი სომხეთის თეორია“, მის საპირწონედ კი ბაქოს ინტელექტუალურ წრეებში ბოლო ხანებში შეიქმნა ე. წ. „ალბანური თეორია“, რომლის თანახმადაც იბერიის/საქართველოს ისტორიული მეზობლის ალბანეთის მოსახლეობა თურქი/აზერბაიჯანელი ხალხის წინაპარია. ეთნოცენტრისტული ნარატივების გავლენით ჩამოყალიბდა არცთუ ისე სახარბიელო ვითარება. საქართველოს მოქალაქე სომხებსა და აზერბაიჯანელებს მჭიდრო კავშირი აქვთ და ისტორიულ სამშობლოდ აღიქვამენ სომხეთსა და აზერბაიჯანს, ქვემო ქართლს კი კულტურულ-ისტორიული თვალსაზრისით ამ ქვეყნების ნაწილად მიიჩნევენ, რაც ეთნიკური იდენტობის მარგინალიზაციისა და კონფლიქტის მაპროვოცირებელ პოტენციურ ფაქტორად გვევლინება.

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