Negotiating Urban Religious Space in Batumi: The Case of Catholics and Protestants*

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Abstract

This article addresses the way post-Soviet religious visibility and materiality are taking place in the Georgian port city of Batumi through the organization of sites of worship by the Christian religious minorities. In particular, it attempts to understand the strategies of Catholic and Protestant religious communities to materialize their religious identities in post-Soviet Batumi, something which predominately proceeds alongside the arrangements of the majority religious community. This article is based upon ethnographic research in Batumi where political ideologies have constantly determined the religious identity of the city. Focusing on the small Christian communities in Batumi and their strategies of post-Soviet religious revival through materializing sites of worship in the city, I investigate post-Soviet public religiosity in the multi-religious urban area, where encounters of mainstream faith and religious minorities characterize the religious identity of the city. More specifically, I argue that increasing the power and dominance of the major religious organization determines the public religious landscape of post-Soviet Batumi where organizing Catholic and Protestant places in the urban area of the city is characterized by the consequences of the public visibility and materiality of power of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Keywords: visibility, religiosity, urban space, Georgia, Catholics, Protestants

Introduction

This article addresses contemporary religious plurality in the Georgian post-Soviet urban space of the port city of Batumi. It considers the materiality and visibility of the religious identity of the Christian minorities (Catholics and Protestants) throughout post-Soviet political transformations and the increasing power of the dominant religious organization (the Georgian Orthodox Church). Recent research on urban religiosity concerns understanding the visual marks of religious groups in the city, defined as "iconic

religion" (Knot, Krech, Mayer 2016), which is a mode of legitimizing their presence in the city. In contemporary European cities increasing waves of migrants and demands for having sites for religious devotion characterize the need for rethinking religious plurality and materiality in public areas. In Georgia (in Batumi), understanding religious spatiality and diversity in the city through visibility, materiality and organizing religious identity is characterized by post-Soviet changes which led to a religious revival in public discourse. Even during the last decade of the Soviet presence in Georgia, increased national and religious feelings led religious communities to organize spaces of worships to legitimize their presence as legal "public domains": They

created a special zone where the material quality of place and immaterial relationships would intersect, which encompass a particular materially constrained interaction. Visibility constructs the demarcation of the public domain which implies attention and affections (Brighenti 2010: 123-125). Simultaneously, religious buildings were constructed or reconstructed around the areas where the Soviet ideology used to materialize its power. Legitimized by national feelings and rhetoric, the Georgian Orthodox Church rapidly revived its public religious marks in cities. Similarly, other religious communities organized "public domains" (Brighenti 2010) as well, but not as fast as the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is historically considered the "Protector of Georgian culture." Legally, the Georgian constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but the Georgian Orthodox Church is privileged due to the constitutional agreement between the Georgian state and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Signed in 2002, this agreement establishes that the Constitution of Georgia acknowledges the exclusive role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church in the history of the nation and asserts its sovereignty from the state.

Taking this religious predominance into account, this article aims to study the visibility and materiality of Christian minority religious communities (Catholic and Protestant) in Batumi. Batumi is the capital of the autonomous republic of Adjara in the westernmost part of Georgia. It has always been a multi-ethnic and multi-religious city. Due to its port and naval infrastructure on the Black Sea, Batumi has always been of interest to foreigners. Batumi was one of the strongest economic areas during Soviet times, and it experienced rapid decay after the disintegration of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. In terms of the post-Soviet political and economic transition, Batumi transformed its urban landscape to evoke its citizens' current religious feelings. In terms of Post-Soviet religious revival, the major religious groups have vividly organized old and new spaces (Orthodox Christians, Muslims) in the city by negotiating or arguing with political elites. The increasing popularity of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the 1980s needed to legitimize its dominance in Batumi (and in the Adjara region), where Muslims are the second major religious group. In 1989, the local government gave ownership of the building of a high-voltage laboratory (a former Catholic church) to the Georgian Orthodox Church as its "domain," where the patriarch of Georgia Ilia II baptized Muslim citizens.

Catholics constructed the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral in Batumi at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the communist period, Soviet officials closed the cathedral and used the building for different purposes. In the late stages of the Soviet Union, the building was given to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Symbolically, the church demonstrates to the other religious groups in Batumi which community has the power to materialize a sanctuary in the "heart" of the city. As Catholics did not have a site for public religious devotions, they established an alternative space in the city after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and established a diplomatic relationship with the Vatican.

The Protestant community materialized public visibility in the city differently from other religious groups. Currently, several protestant religious groups live in Batumi – Baptists, Charismatics, Pentecostals, the Holy Trinity Protestant Church, et cetera. Most protestant churches hold religious rituals in private houses. The Holy Trinity Protestant Church established a site of religious devotion in the centre of the city in 1995. This community used private spaces to establish the official organization in the city centre. They claim to unite all protestants of Batumi around this religious building. The ways that Catholic and Protestant religious minorities experienced "public recognition" (Brighenti 2010) in Batumi represent their reactions to the Post-Soviet discourse, which determine the involvement of political, and other religious actors, to establish a site of worship in the public spaces.

Considering their historical experiences, this article discusses the way these two Christian

minority groups (Catholic and Protestant) have tried to reestablish their presence in the city by organizing sites of religious devotion. Thus, this article attempts to understand the following questions: How do Catholic and Protestant sites of devotion characterize post-Soviet religious reconfiguration in Batumi, and how do their places of worship materialize religious diversity in the city? Why do they organize their presence in Batumi in such a way, and what are the consequences in the city?

The study draws on ethnographic materials gathered from the citizens of Batumi as part of the ZOiS (Centre for East European and International Studies) research project: "Transformation of urban spaces and religious pluralization in the Caucasus." The fieldwork was carried out from May until December 2018, during which I did ethnographic observations and conducted semi-structured interviews. During my field research, I focused on studying minority Christian organizations, Catholic and Holy Trinity Protestant, that had up to 100-150 adherents in the city. Both religious groups established sites of religious devotion after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and they used to share private space for religious services during Soviet times. Recent ethnographic materials engage with theoretical approaches on visibility, materiality, public religiosity, and religious place-making (Brighenti 2010; Saint-Blacant & Cancellieri 2014; Knot, Krech & Mayer 2016; Burchardt & Giera 2020). In this article, I argue that increasing the power and dominance of the major religious organization determines the public religious landscape of post-Soviet Batumi where organizing Catholic and Protestant places in the urban area of the city is characterized by the consequences of public visibility and the materiality of power of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Theoretical Approaches to Studying Urban Religiosity

Urban religiosity represents a popular research topic among social scientists. Materiality, visibility, accessibility to public space, and the publicity

of religion in diverse urban areas are interwoven to recognize the presence of the concrete religious community in the city, which has traditionally owned or currently tries to possess the public area for organizing religious practices. Global migration as well as political and economic transformations put into question secularism as a mode of managing religiosity as a social phenomenon. As such, diversity and coexistence are debated in current plural societies. Secularization is a predominant point of interest for scholars of urban religiosity, as religious and secular organizations are actors of shaping cityscapes. In this space, the public is regarded as neutral, nevertheless the religious majority takes advantage of this neutrality. In the "politics of place-making," urban space is an area where particular religions are constructed by the boundaries between communities and diverse practices, which are constant variables (Burchardt & Becci 2013: 9, 17-18).

Current ethnographic research attempts to understand urban religiosity in post-Soviet Batumi as a space in which religious architecture is a model for potential communication between religious groups and politicians. More specifically, I focus on Christian religious minority groups and their modes of organizing their presence in the city by establishing or re-establishing their "religious domains" (Brighenti 2010). Post-Soviet multi-religious Batumi represents a space where drawing constant boundaries between the religious and secular— or the formally secular area where informal politics supported the major religious community – mark the margins between the dominant and the minority religions in the city. In Batumi, public presence alongside rituals, ceremonies, visibility and the materiality of religious architectures represent actors for communities to demonstrate their absence and presence in the concrete area of the city, — in the political, economic and socio-cultural layers. To this extent, through the visibility and materiality of the religious architecture, the concrete religious community draws its public mark to organize a public presence in the city. In social

discourse, visibility and materiality is a way to gain awareness, understanding, recognition, and control. These elements are essential in understanding the material and the immaterial as a mode for visibility revealed to territoriality, where knowledge determines an adequate definition of visible and its social background (see Brighenti 2010). Visibility is a social medium for communication of information to one which perceives the representation of that information. In terms of the visibility of religious presence or absence, this medium permits groups to organize their power in the urban spaces. As Brighenti discussed the transparent characteristic of visibility, he mentioned that the vision of something (ideas) occurs by having a vision through something (the material sign): "Vision of something through something" (2010: 13-14). Visibility as a social domain requires producing perception and knowledge, which characterize recognition or misrecognition of the social group and their actions (Brighenti 2010: 37-38). Brighenti distinguished three types of visibility: 1. Visibility of recognition – adopting Hegelian concepts, he discusses that the human being is constructed by mutual recognition where one's self-consciousness should be recognized by the others. There increases another issue of assuming the visibility and its correctness – "The adopted criteria of correctness are far from irrelevant, and in fact they constitute the stake of several political struggles for recognition. At any rate, besides the diversity of criteria of correct visibility, a fairly general effect can be observed: beneath the lower threshold, a person is socially excluded" (Brigeti 2010: 47). 2. Visibility of control – it is connected to the first model of visibility as recognition, where the power is interwoven to the visibility and more strongly to invisibility. He conceives "power as a form of external visibility (visibility of effects) associated with inner invisibility (invisibility of identification): the effects of power are visible to all, but what power is in its essence, and where it really resides, will not be revealed" (Brighenti 2010: 48). 3. Visibility of spectacle – the regime separated from every-

day life. It encompasses a set of images that are detached from everyday life but serve as an ideological form of unity (Brighenti 2010: 46-49). Visibility and territoriality are essential for visual attention as a mode of social recognition that encloses visual communication and implementation of power, which is a predominately political process for diversity configuration in the public area determined by the influences of the majority (Brighenti 2010: 57-58). Visuality as a model for social recognition could favour social group to gain symbolic legitimization and socio-economic status. Saint-Blacant & Cancelleri (2014) argue that for religious communities, real estate is a way of demonstrating a "spatial power" where accessibility, temporary appropriation and visibility are involved in spatializing religion. The public as a mode of visibility embodies territoriality which is characterized by a complex social discourse that encompasses material and mental dimensions of the social organization. "The public appears when a certain urban site is turned into a venue of a 'public address', as an attempt to reach a dispersed public of personally unknown yet significant recipients. Every form of address to a public thus entails imagining a public to be addressed" (Brighenti 2010:126). Organizing social behaviour and constructing symbolic areas could be essential for minority groups. In terms of activities organizing religious presence in the city throughout religious architectures, public performances, et cetera, small religious communities could struggle finding ways for visual survival – to establish a visual, public presence in the urban space; Burchardt and Giera argue that (2020) "doing religious space" includes spatiality (for localizing the absence and presence of actors), materiality (for showing how religious actors materialize the space), rituality (to understand how religion is demonstrated in public symbolically) and governmentality (legal regulations and their administrations that determine expressing the religiosity in public). To this extent, religious spatiality embodied in territoriality is understood as a mode for the community to present itself in the concrete territory

characterized by the competition with the other religious organizations to attract and maintain believers. The competition for spatial presence converts pluralism from the religious into an ideological concept, which characterizes the competition or symbolic control of space (see Harvieu-Lager 2002: 101). In this sense, urban religious place-making is a political instrument that could shape the religious imagination of the city where dominant and other religious groups compete or coexist together. The religious imagination of the city, diversity and marked secularism constantly transform into symbolic and religious materializations which manifest themselves in buildings, dress, sounds, rituals, and performances; this urban spatial context of religiosity is called iconic religion (Knot et al. 2016). Considering the approaches of Knot, Krech and Mayer (2016) the attention of the researchers towards religiosity and their materiality in the urban area has been characterized by the constant flows of migrants in Europe. In terms of searching for the place of residences, migrants strain to organize the new religious spaces in the old and new religious architectures. By organizing their presence in cities through religious architectures and public religious celebrations they symbolically legitimize and mark the "our space" in urban area. In the post-Soviet space, there is a need to organize new and old religious buildings, thus visibility and materiality have been characterized by the re-emergence of religious activities in the public area where dominant and minority religious communities tensely organize their sacred identities in the public landscapes of the cities.

The religious landscape in Batumi

The port city of Batumi is a religiously diverse area where Orthodox Christianity (Georgian, Greek and Russian), Islam, Armenian Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, et cetera determine the visual identity of the city. The current city-centre represents the meeting place of different religious architectures, principally constructed at the end of the nineteenth and the

beginning of the twentieth centuries. Batumi, as a central area of the region of Adjara, was a centre that demonstrated political power with its history of Ottoman, British, Russian Tsarists, and Soviet occupations. During their presence in the region, the governors through history used the religion and architectural presence in Batumi to demonstrate their power in the city, the region and the state.

Since the sixteenth century, when the Ottomans were leading Adjara and Batumi, Islam predominantly occupied the everyday public and private arenas in the majority of the city. The very first mosque in the city was constructed in the 1830s. Called Akhmed-Phasha's (named after the vice-governor of the region Akhmed Khimshiashvili) Jamie, it was burned down in the 1890s. The locals constructed a new mosque called Orta Jamie (the Jamie which is traced between the other two mosques) in the 1890s. The third mosque in Batumi was Assisie's Jamie (as Sultan Assis 1871-1876 claimed to have a new mosque in Batumi), which was a military mosque for the Turkish soldiers. The fourth mosque was constructed in the city in 1870 by Mufti and was destroyed in 1973 (Kvachadze 2011).

In 1878 the Russian Tsarism reunited Adjara to Georgia. In 1878 Batumi declared the status of Porto Franco as England required: The city and port fostered foreign-economic relationships by maintaining duty-free customs and goods. This status was annulled in 1886. In 1888 Emperor Alexander III visited Batumi and established a new Russian architectural cathedral called "Soboro" (named after saint Alexander Nevsky) which was symbolic evidence to demonstrate the Russian presence in the city and region. The emperor used religious architecture in the city to demonstrate the power that occupied a central role in the history of Batumi, where religious minorities were permitted to construct sites for religious devotions as well. The Ottomans permitted Orthodox Christians to have a Greek-Georgian site for religious devotion, which was constructed in 1865-1878. Greeks arrived in Batumi in the 1860s. The Russian Empire allowed Arme-

nians, Jews, and Catholics to construct places for religious services. The Jewish synagogue was constructed in 1904 and the Armenian church was constructed in the 1890s. In the second half of the nineteenth century, France was interested in the territory of Batumi; French businessmen were communicating with the local Catholic Armenians, which composed the majority of the Christians in the city. They supported the Armenians to construct an Armenian-Catholic church in Batumi (Jibashvili, Diasamidze 2013: 85-89).

Protestant churches established themselves in the city in the 1880s. The first protestant community was Evangelical-Lutheran. The adherents, consisting of about twenty-five people, were Germans working in Batumi who rented a private place for religious devotions. The anti-German rhetoric during and after the First World War led the German protestants to leave the city. The first Baptists arrived in Batumi from Russia in the 1890s, so they were ethnically Russians. In 1909 the community had twenty-five to thirty adherents. The Evangelical-Baptist community registered in Batumi in 1947. The adherents were Russians, Ukrainians, few Georgians and Jews. All Baptists prayed in a privately rented room. The first Pentecostals arrived in Batumi from Kazakhstan in 1959. In 1971 the adherents were up to 140-150, and were ethnically Russians and Ukrainians (Kopaleishvili 2013: 99-105).

Under Ottoman and Russian leadership, the presence of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the city had been diminished. The Russian Orthodox church deprived the Georgian Orthodox Church of having autocephalous status in 1811 (gained in 486 AD). To demonstrate its power, the Russian Orthodox Church constructed Russian architectural buildings called "Soboro" in all the big cities of Georgia. The Russian "Soboro" in Batumi was a symbol of the power of the Russian Orthodox Church in Batumi shortly after it rejoined Georgia. During Russian Tsarism, Batumi was under the interests of foreign Catholic businessmen. Together with Georgian Catholics that migrated from southern Georgia, and with the support of Georgian Businessmen, the Zubalashvili family,

Catholics constructed the Latin-Catholic Church in Batumi.

After the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (1917), Georgia regained independence (1918) and the Georgian Orthodox Church regained independence in 1917[1]. When the Soviet system was established in Georgia and militant secularism (Pelkmans 2009) was declared the official religious discourse, all religious groups in Batumi experienced oppression and the domestication of their religious activities in public areas. The term domestication of religious practice from public areas concerns the idea of shifting the religious arena from the exterior/public to the interior/private space (see Dragadze 1993:144). The Armenian Apostolic Church constructed in the 1890s was closed and restored as a planetarium, which was replaced in 1989 by a video salon/store. In the 1930s, Assisie's mosque and the Russian Soboro were destroyed and were replaced by a new park and hotel. The big synagogue was closed, as well. Jews conducted their religious observations in apartments. Protestants prayed in private places, as well. In the 1930s, the Orta Jamie Mosque was closed (and re-opened in the 1940s). Religious devotion in the Catholic church was replaced by an electric power plant, which led Catholics to pray in a private house.

As Soviet politics diminished, Batumi transformed and, since the 1980s, became a place for religious tensions concerning the ownership of religious places in public areas of the city. Pelkmans (2009: 2) argues that religious life after socialism can be characterized as a revival of repressed religious traditions. The religious revival after the Soviet collapse in Batumi has vividly determined the identity of the city. The population in Batumi was Christian until the seventeenth century, and the majority of them adopted Islam under Ottoman leadership. Since

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[1] The Russian Orthodox Church recognized the autocephalous status of the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1927 and 1943, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate granted autocephalous status to the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1990.

the end of the 1980s, the Georgian Orthodox Church regained power. Membership of the Georgian Orthodox Church became popular among Georgian society, as Orthodox Georgian Christianity was associated as a national attribution. Thus, since the second half of the 1980s, Georgian Muslims of Adjara have massively converted to Orthodox Christianity (see Pelkmans 2009: 2). The urban religious transformation in Batumi started in the very late years of the Soviet Union, when the local government assigned the former Catholic cathedral to the Georgian Orthodox Church. During Soviet times, the Saint Nicolas Church was the cathedral of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Currently, the Georgian Orthodox Church owns the Saint Barbare church as well, which was constructed in 1888 in the old part of Batumi, which was used as a hospital during Soviet times. In 1996 the government of the city assigned the building to the Georgian Orthodox Church.

During the post-Soviet transformation and the religious revival that ensued, the spatial visibility of monumental architecture and its massive appearance in public areas demonstrated the power in the city that was permitted by the political authorities of Batumi. Since the last decade of communism, the legally claimed secularism affected the urban landscape of Batumi – public areas became formally neutral, which strongly resonates to demonstrate the power of the religious majorities. In contemporary Batumi, several religious groups live together. According to the information of the State Agency for Religious Issue of Georgia, 152,839 citizens live in Batumi. Considering the total number of citizens, 105,004 are Orthodox Christians, 38,762 are Muslims, 916 are members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, 102 are Catholics, 111 are Jehovah witnesses, 24 are Yezidis, 55 are Hebrews, and 7,866 pertain to other religions. Officially, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholic Christians, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Jews, Jehovah Witnesses, the Church of the Gospel Faith, and the Holy Trinity Protestant Church have registered religious sites of devotion (**https://religion.gov.ge**).

Since the 1990s, the Georgian Orthodox Church has renovated old religious buildings as well as built new ones. Besides the churches, crosses and shrines can be seen on Batumi's streets. These signs symbolise the religious identity of the neighbourhoods.

In the old part of Batumi, Muslim Ortha Jamie is considered one of the central meeting places for Muslims. Around the mosque there are Turkish restaurants and markets for Islamic religious items. During Soviet times, people lived on the second floor of the mosque. In 1991, the government paid money to the residents to leave the building. At present, Muslims desire to construct a new mosque in the city, as well. In 2014, the office of Mufti was officially registered as a public entity that officially advocates communication between Muslims and the state.

Jews in Batumi have reconstructed an old synagogue in the city which is incorporated in the international Jewish tourist route to Israel. The small synagogue used for devotions during Soviet times was gradually destroyed, but the ruins remained.

In 1992 the building of the Armenian Apostolic Church transformed into the Armenian eparchy.

As Catholics did not have a building for worship in the public area of the city, they established a new one in 1999. Among protestant communities, the Holy Trinity Protestant Church is one of the well-known protestant religious buildings in the city; they have a Facebook page, have registered the site of religious devotions, et cetera, which makes this church a meeting space for the locals and visitors. The following section will focus on the contemporary situation of the materiality and visibility of the Catholic and Holy Trinity Protestant sites of religious devotions.

Post-Communist Religious Re-configuration of Catholic and Protestant Religious Organizations in Batumi

Since the end of the 1980s, religious buildings and signs have occupied the public landscape of Batumi. Through visibility and materiality in concrete territories, religious groups demonstrated

that their religious building in the public area of the city determines urban religious diversity and the multi-religious status of Batumi. The process was not a negotiation between religious groups and officials. Rather, it was a competition for public recognition of their identities. In this process, the major religious organizations influenced the shape of urban religious infrastructures through a negotiation with city officials. Nevertheless, religious minorities have found niches to materialize their presence in the city. In several circumstances, processes of co-organizing multiple religious identities in post-communist cities fostered tensions between different religious groups mostly at the official level. The tense spaces in the central parts of the city were historical, where religious public visibility has traditionally been materialized. To this extent, the small religious communities of Catholics and Protestants in Batumi needed to organize their religious "domains" (Brighenti 2010). Material architecture for small communities in post-atheist discourse was a mode of recognizing their visibility by the local officials and other religious communities. As the former Catholic church was given to the Georgian Orthodox Church, and the small community did not have an official representative from the Vatican in the state, Catholics in Batumi could not negotiate to reclaim the historical religious building. As soon as the Vatican established eparchy in the region, the negotiation with the local government and Catholic religious leaders succeeded and a decision was made to build a religious site of worship in the public space. The act of establishing a new site for worship was an act of place-making by keeping the mental connections with the former site of devotions which used to better materialize their visibility in the city, even during Soviet times when everyone recognized the building as the Catholic Cathedral. Through establishing the Holy Trinity church in the public space of the city Batumi, which marks their religious domain, the Protestants of Batumi demonstrate the legitimacy of the presence of Protestants to the officials and to the other religious communities (Protestants mostly). As

Protestants in Batumi are challenged to be unified due to urban shrinkage, the adherents of the Holy Trinity Church claim to be a place for all Protestants. By organizing religious sites of worship, all religious groups demonstrate their presence in the city which characterize the urban religious identity of Batumi as a multi-religious place. In what follows, I more closely analyse these two minority groups.

The Presence of Catholics in Batumi

The Catholics of Batumi migrated from Samtskhe and Javakheti (Southern Georgia) mostly during the nineteenth century. Besides Georgians, Armenian Catholics lived in Batumi and constructed the first Catholic church in the city. Soviet religious politics reshaped the Catholic community in Batumi. This determined the Post-Soviet public religious reconfiguration. Traditionally, the Catholics of Batumi had two places of worship. The first was a Catholic church which was constructed in the 1880s and was an Armenian-Catholic sanctuary. During Soviet times, the building was used as a sports gym. The second Catholic site of worship was the gothic building of the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral, constructed at the end of the nineteenth century by the Zubalashvil family. The Cathedral was a place for Latin-Catholic[2] devotion. In Soviet times, the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral was used for different purposes, but not as a space for religious activities. The Catholics of Batumi did not have a religious site in the public space of the city. Since the 1980s, due to a religious revival and the emerging nationalistic rhetoric in Georgia, the freedom of religion —understood as rights for major religious organizations to reconfigure their public identity in the cities— was established. The local government gave both Catholic buildings to the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Georgian Orthodox Church has owned the Batumi Armenian-Catholic church since 2000.

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[2] While opening the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral, the Latin-Catholics and Armenian-Catholics used to share the same Armenian-catholic church (Natsvlishvili 2019: 132).

The roof of the building is collapsed. The leader of the Armenian-Apostolic Church in Batumi, father Ararat[3], stated that if the Georgian Orthodox Church gave the Armenian-Catholic church to the Armenian diaspora of Batumi, they would renovate the building. The building is unused, and it is difficult to identify where it is located and what its function is/was. For the Catholics in Batumi, this building is not as important as the building of the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral, which had special significance for Georgian Orthodox Christians, as well. The first reason which characterised the importance of the cathedral for all the Christians in the city is its history; since the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire occupied the city. Batumi was occupied by the Ottomans until 1878, so the construction of the Batumi Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral was associated with the "triumph" of Christianity in the region. Zakaria Chichinadze (1903: 13) wrote that the construction of the Catholic church in Batumi had symbolic meaning for the city, which was occupied by the Muslim Ottoman Empire and was finally returned to Christianity. He assumed the new Christian building would remind the Muslims of their Christian past, even though it was not a traditional Georgian Orthodox Christian church.

The second reason which characterized the importance of the cathedral for all Christians of the city is the film "Monanieba"[4] (Repentance), which was recorded at the Batumi Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral during Soviet times. In the last decade of the Soviet Union, when nationalistic feelings were emerging in Georgia, the Cathedral adopted special significance for everyone due to the film. This movie is about political and ideological changes; hence the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral has symbolic meanings of moving away from the Soviet system and in direction of democratization. This was the principal motive for citizens of Batumi in the second half of the 1980s to start a movement for

renovating the damaged construction. As Catholics did not have many adherents in Batumi, the Georgian Orthodox Church got involved in the process of maintaining the building, something which generated tensions between Catholics and Orthodox Christians. When the construction was damaged in the 1980s, the Orthodox and Catholic Christians asked the government to take the electric-power plant away from the building. The Soviet officials took the plant away and repaired the building, but then decided to open an orchestra hall. The Catholics of Batumi collected the signatures for reopening the Catholic Cathedral in the building. Nonetheless, the Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Socialist Republic of Adjara ceremonially gave possession of the building to the Georgian Orthodox Church. One of my informants indicated that:

> "As the nationalistic ideology was associated with Orthodox Christianity, no one complained about the event, which the government and the Georgian Orthodox Church committed in the case of the Cathedral. Catholics were protesting the negotiation of the government and the Georgian Orthodox Church, but the protest would not reverse the arrangement. Nowadays, if they consent that the building belongs to the Catholic community, I am sure it will be a reason for religious conflict in Batumi because radicals would be against that".

The Catholics did not have strong relationships with the Vatican and they did not have a public religious place so, in post-Soviet times, the Catholics of the city actively demanded possession of the historical building of the Catholic Church in Batumi. The reconfiguration of the religious identity of Catholics in Batumi was accomplished after declaring the independence of Georgia. It was a time when an official relationship was established between Georgia and the Vatican. Since that period, the involvement of religious buildings of Catholics in the urban landscape of Batumi have been discussed between the Autonomous Republic of Adjara and the Bishop of the Vatican. As Catholics could not take the historic building back, the process for organizing public religious visibility in the city turned into the need to organize a new place for demonstrating pub-

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[3] Priest of the Armenian-Apostolic Church.
[4] The director of the film is Tengiz Abuladze. It was released in 1984.

lic presence in the city. Political discourse and actions led to the Georgian Orthodox Church to become the owner of the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral during the very late period of Soviet times, which forced Catholics to make new places, which would establish their current presence in the city. Nevertheless, the old icons and the oral memories of the adherents have allowed Catholics to maintain a connection with the historic site of worship.

When the bishop (Giuseppe Pasotto) of the Catholic Administration of the Caucasus was appointed in 1995, Catholics in Batumi were actively negotiating with the government to acquire an official site of worship. In addition to these discussions, Bishop Giuseppe attempted to negotiate with the Georgian Orthodox Church, as well. In an attempt to recognize the religious visibility of Catholics in Batumi, he asked the Georgian Orthodox Church to give back the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral as long as they needed it, and promised to return the building to the Catholics in the future. Since the Georgian Orthodox Church did not accept, the religious figures from the Georgian Orthodox Church argued that the old cathedral which was built by the Georgian businessmen, the Zublalashvilis brothers, was constructed when the power of the Georgian Orthodox Church had been diminished. As Catholics could not negotiate for the traditional sanctuary, they discussed establishing a new site of worship with the local government. Since 1995, Catholics led by Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto and the newly appointed Priest of Batumi, Gabriele Bragantini (who arrived in Georgia from Italy with Bishop Pasotto), discussed having a new site of religious devotion with the head of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara – Aslan Abashidze (1991-2004). They negotiated the construction of a new sanctuary downtown, one of the central entrances to the city; the construction started in 1999 and was completed in 2000.

The church opened on January 24th, 2000, and was called the Batumi Holy Spirit Catholic Basilica (Kutateladze 2019: 602). The Holy Spirit Basilica was one of the first buildings with a contemporary architectural style constructed in post-Soviet Batumi. The interior is plain and austere with frescoes. In the space behind the altar, there are private working offices and conference rooms. The church has three floors. On the ground floor there is a conference room which currently is a shared site of worship of one of the Protestant groups of Batumi. The space is open to visitors. The owner of the building works in the Catholic Administration of the Caucasus. The adherents of Batumi Holy Spirit Basilica are citizens of Batumi or neighbouring villagers. The number of adherents is approximately one hundred people, the majority of whom are ethnically Georgians, but there are Armenians as well. Due to the economic decay in Georgia in the 1990s, a lot of Catholics emigrated abroad. Father Gabriele Bragantini serves the Catholics of Batumi, Kutaisi and Ozurgeti. Since he leads several Catholic churches in the different cities in west Georgia, the religious devotions and holiday celebrations are shifting.

Batumi reshaped the urban landscape after the "Rose Revolution" (2004). The third President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013), aimed to transform Batumi into one of the most attractive touristic areas in the state. His renovation projects changed the image of the city. Since the Batumi Holy Spirit Basilica has postmodern architecture, he wanted the religious building to become a tourist destination. He wished to establish a Catholic Cultural Centre in the Batumi Holy Spirit Basilica to demonstrate to the locals and the visitors that Georgia and Batumi inherited their European past, as demonstrated by the presence of Catholics and the traditional communication with the Vatican. Saakashvili's idea was never realized, as he lost both elections in 2012 and 2013.

The Batumi Holy Spirit Catholic Basilica has a tight connection with the former Catholic Church of Batumi not only due to the memories of its adherents, but for its material and symbolic connections, as well. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Father Anselmo Mgebrishvili

bought small statues for the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral. Those were polychromic plaster statues of angels, the Holy Mother, Jesus Christ, the Christmas stall, and scenes of the Passion of Christ. Those statues used to hang up on the walls of the former Catholic cathedral until Soviet times. The Soviet officials of Batumi gave those statues to the local museum. The museum gave them back to the Catholic community in 2005 and they are now kept at the Batumi Holy Spirit Catholic Basilica (Kutateladze 2019: 604; Natsvlishvili 2019: 147). The old icons currently hang at the entrance of Holy Spirit Basilica, in the office of the priest, and at the conference halls. Catholics had fourteen old icons that depicted Christ's fourteen Stages of the Cross. Catholics have maintained ten statues; four of them were lost during Soviet times. The Catholics of Batumi made miniature copies of those statues which are installed on the walls of the Basilica, to remember and remind the others that their presence in the city has historical roots, and the tradition continues at the newly established Holy Spirit Catholic Basilica.

The Presence of Protestants in Batumi
Through the history of the Protestant groups in Batumi, which dates back to the nineteenth century, they did not have a site of worship in the public space of the city. The Lutherans attempted to have a building in Batumi and negotiated with the government of the city from 1899-1902. Finally, their request was rejected, as an appropriate space for the construction of the building could not be found in the city (Kopaleishvili 2013: 100). Opposite to the other protestant groups in Batumi, who were renting a place for religious devotions, Pentecostals who migrated from Kazakhstan bought a private place in the 1970s, which still remains open (Kopaleishvili 2013: 104). Currently, the church of Pentecostals of Batumi represents a brunch of Evangelical Faith Church of Georgia centred in Tbilisi. The other Protestant groups have never had a place of worship during the pre-Soviet and Soviet times. In the 1990s, the number of adherents of the Protestant churches

increased. During Soviet times, the majority of parishes consisted of congregants that were ethnically Russian or Ukrainian; in post-Soviet times, Georgians were actively involved in Protestant religious activities, as well. After the 1990s, the number of parishes decreased due to economic decay and emigration from the city. The stable adherents of Protestant communities are mostly people from ethnically mixed families. One of the famous Protestant group in Batumi is the Holy Trinity Protestant community, which was established in 1995. The church inherited Pentecostal traditions and used to share the private site of worship with the Catholics of Batumi. Due to decreasing number of Protestant adherents and the desire to have an independent church in the city, they did not unify with the Evangelical Faith Church of Georgia and claimed to be the church not only for that particular community but for all Protestants of Batumi.

The post-Soviet religious revival of Protestant communities in Batumi is the unambiguous process of public religious place-making where the strategy of the Holy Trinity Protestant Church for claiming their presence is represented by the establishment of an independent Protestant Church for all Protestants in the city; this is something unique for Batumi. Even for the media and local officials, communication with Protestants takes place in the church of the Holy Trinity. Contrary to the strategy of Catholics and their long process of negotiation with the city government, the Protestants' process of materializing their public presence in the city via the visibility of the place of worship was different. They decided to organize the religious site in the city in a private house. In the 1990s, the number of adherents was around thirty to thirty-five people. Currently, the community consists of 150 members. The Protestant church does not have a hierarchy, nor a bishop. The leader of the community is Varlm Ramishvili, who established the Holy Trinity Protestant Church of Batumi in 1995.

The territorial visibility of the community in the public space of Batumi started on private property. The adherents bought the house where

they have officially established the Holy Trinity Protestant Cathedral, which was the original community in the city. The community renovated the building at their own expense. The building is located in downtown Batumi and is marked on tourist maps. The church has a courtyard isolated from the street. The exterior of the building looks like a private house rather than a church. The interior is refurbished with religious items. The reception, kitchen and several rooms are on the first floor of the building and the second floor has several restrooms where guests travelling to the church from other cities and states may stay. The building is not only a place for devotion; it is also an educational and meeting centre for the members of the Holy Trinity Protestant Church. The space for religious devotion, however, is in the biggest room on the first floor, which is isolated from the other rooms. The members of the community are ethnically Georgians as well as Armenians, and Russians. The devotions are bilingual: They are done both in Georgian and Russian. The strategy to organize the presence of Protestants in the city and request their recognition differs from that of the other religious groups in the city. By declaring its uniqueness in Batumi and transforming the private property into the site of religious devotion, the newly established Protestant group became dominant in relation to the other protestant groups of the city.

Conclusion

The analysis of the organization of sites of worship in Batumi shows that there are different ways post-Soviet religious plurality relate to the public urban space. Two religious organizations and their involvement in the urban space of Batumi show the different ways religious communities have chosen to insert themselves in the urban landscape. These approaches resonate with the activities that the dominant religious community applies to demonstrate their presence in the city through religious architecture and ownership of historical buildings. The way these two minority groups demonstrate their public religious identity is a spontaneous representation of the multi-religious identity of Batumi. Those small Christian religious communities (Catholic and Protestant) must navigate how to be recognized and contest the powers of Orthodox Christians and Muslims in the city. Ownership of a religious organization in the city is a potential contact area with the other religious groups.

The visibility of the different religious groups in the city is legitimized by the recognition of the power of the discourse-maker major religious community (the Georgian Orthodox Church). The Georgian Orthodox Church becomes a powerful urban actor in Batumi and maintains a special position in urban public spaces. It is a result of the Ottoman, Russian Tsarist, and Soviet religious oppressions which diminished the status of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the other religious communities in Batumi. In post-Soviet times, the Georgian Orthodox Church has revived its power by increasing in popularity among the Georgian society and gaining political support. The organization of Power of the Georgian Orthodox Church shapes the strategies minority religious organizations adopt to mark sites of worship in the public area, since the latter is formally neutral but strongly resonates with the "requirements" of the religious majority. For this reason, the strategy of organizing religious sites of devotion for small religious groups (Catholic and Protestant) is a component of the politics of recognition which symbolically determine "The fight for survival by organizing the religious domain" (Burchardt and Griera 2020). Through visibility and materiality in concrete territories, Christian minorities demonstrate to the citizens of the city that their public presence constitutes the urban religious diversity and the multi-religious status of post-Soviet Batumi.

In their negotiations with the government to organize their presence in the city, the Christian religious minorities (Catholic and Protestant) adopted different strategies: Catholics organized their religious sites in post-Soviet Batumi by negotiating with the politicians of the city when the official relationships were established between Georgia and the Holy See. In the case of the Prot-

estants, they used private resources to establish a new organization in Batumi which began in a private house and became a religious site; locals currently agree and accept this place as the mark of the Protestants of Batumi. Considering the concepts of Brighenti (2010) and the work of the above-mentioned authors about visibility, territoriality, religious place-making – which draw public marks of the religious organizations and make ideas and concepts understandable for everyone (Brighenti 2010, 13) – we can argue that the visibility and materiality of the religious groups, by means of its religious architecture, resemble the religious identity of the city where power, public organization, legitimation, and unification circulate the power of the major discourse makers. To this extent, religious architecture favors groups to gain recognition of their presence in the city (see Saint-Blacant & Cancelleri 2014). The cases of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and the Catholic and Protestant organizations of Batumi demonstrate that place-making in the urban area is a political instrument that shapes the imagination of the city, by which symbolic demonstrations of power publicly resonate with the strategies (constructing a new church by involvement of the religious and city officials in case of Catholics, and transforming private place into public mark of religious devotions in Protestants case) of the religious communities in Batumi.

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