The Peculiar Case of the Megrelians -
Representation and Identity Negotiation in Post-Soviet Georgia
ABSTRACT

In the post-Soviet country of Georgia is a strong sense of nationalism prevalent in the current process of nation building. The Megrelians, traditionally understood as a sub-ethnic Georgian group, form a majority in western Georgia. Many Megrelians are however displaced due to a civil war in 1992 and live outside their traditional territories. Much research has been done covering the situation of the displaced Megrelians. This study however, examines processes of Megrelian identity negotiations in relation to Megrelian representations, thus contributing to a wider understanding of Megrelians’ self-understanding. A field study was undertaken for two months in Georgia in order to gather information for this topic. From an ethnographic research approach, methods of interviews and observations were used to gather data. The findings from the analysis are discussed in relation to theories of representation, nationalism and identity. The study suggests that Megrelian identity interrelates with representations of politics, regional and national associations, surnames, language and assumed characteristics.

Keywords: Georgia, Megrelians, Identity Negotiation, Representations, Field Study, Nationalism, Ethnography, Interviews, Observations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of my research participants for letting me into their lives. I am also grateful for the aid and valuable information Karina Vamling at Malmö University has shared with me. Special thanks are directed to my supervisor Dimosthenis Chatzoglakis. Likewise, I wish to thank Sokhumi State University for helping me with my project. I am also very grateful for the help I gained from Tamara Gzirishvili at Ilia State University in Tbilisi helping me getting in contact with several informants. I likewise wish to thank Shota-Meskhia University in Zugdidi for greeting and helping me. I am also grateful to the International Organization for Migration in Tbilisi that helped me establish contact with Megrelian IDPs. I am also sincerely thankful for the excellent greeting in Tbilisi by the Chanturia family who made me feel like home. Thank you all in Tbilisi and Zugdidi who have shared your contacts and helped me with my research. Last but not least, thanks to my girlfriend for the support you have shown throughout my research.
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1. INTRODUCTION
Georgia currently deals with its self-understanding and corroboration as a nation. First annexed by Imperial Russia and later a Soviet republic, Georgia faces obstacles due to Imperial Russian and Soviet political minority policies in confirming the country as a unitary nation. With a history of various feudal states, Safavid and Ottoman dominion and influences; Russian imperial governance and later as a Soviet republic Georgia has little experience as a sovereign nation. Several ethnic groups live in Georgia and a plethora of languages are widely used theoretically posing as threats to the unity of the Georgian nation.

Megrelians (in some sources referred to as Mingrelians) as a group form a majority in western Georgia and are estimated to be around 400,000 in number. Megrelians have inhabited western Georgia (Samegrelo, parts of Abkhazia, particularly the Gali district as well as the shores of the Black Sea coast), since antiquity (Vamling and Tchantouria 2005:81). Their early history, based on classical Greek sources, finds its roots in the ancient Kingdom of Colchis1. According to some sources, Megrelians were a part of a distinct Megrelo-Chan (Zvans) tribe in eighth century BCE later dissolving into Lazi people and Megrelians (Suny 1994:4).

Over time various Megrelian kingdoms with different allegiances and land claims have existed. Noted is that throughout history Megrelians inhabited western Caucasus and only briefly formed united entities with eastern Georgian kingdoms, and under those circumstances were they more or less self-governing (Broers 2001:4ff). By tradition are many of them farmers and live a rural or semi-rural life.

Megrelian language2, Megruli3 in Georgian, is widely used in western Georgia, but no certain numbers of speakers exist since Megrelians have not been treated as a separate group in official censuses since the 1920s (Broers 2001:6; Vamling and Tchantouria 2005:81).

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1 The territory of Western Georgia has been named differently over time. In chronological order from antiquity onwards: Colchis (Egrisi in Georgian), Lazica, Abasgia (Abkhazeti in Georgian) and now Samegrelo (Megrelia or Mingrelia in western sources). Eastern Georgia is referred to as Iberia in classical sources and Kartli in Georgian (Suny 1994:3). See Appendix 1 for maps showing samples of the historic-territorial changes in Georgian history.

2 Megrelian (and other Georgian (Kartvelian) languages such as Laz and Svan) enjoying the status of a language is disputed among philologists specializing in Georgian languages. Some argue that these languages are only dialects of the literary Georgian standard or that Lazi and Megrelian are dialects of the ancient Zan language. However, I will stick to the term language, since Megrelian is referred to as language in many linguistic standard works (Broers 2001:4; Vamling and Tchantouria 2005:81; Suny 1994:4). See Appendix 2 for a map of current day language distribution in Georgia.

3Henceforth I will use the Georgian word Megruli when I address the language and Megrelian in any other circumstance. Likewise will I use the Georgian word Kartuli for literary Georgian, Lazuri for the Lazi language and Svanuri denoting Svan language.
Megruli is a spoken language with no written standard. It is related to but not mutually intelligible with Kartuli. They share common features in structure and grammatical aspects. For writing, Megrelians mainly use Kartuli. Some Abkhazian Megrelians also tend to use Russian extensively for writing, since many finished Russian Schools. Their knowledge of Kartuli is sometimes only passive and limited to understanding. Russian language has also “infiltrated” Megruli in word use and many Megrelians from Abkhazia switch between Megruli and Russian in everyday speech (Broers 2001:4).

A great number of Megrelians was driven out of Abkhazia due to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict that erupted in 1992. Thousands hold IDP-status residing in various settlements in Samegrelo and Tbilisi (Coene 2010:148). Some Megrelians however still live in Abkhazia. Tbilisi being the educational and financial hub in Georgia also attracts students and unemployed Megrelians in search for a better life.

Megrelians are considered Georgians but significantly different from the rest. Many (mainly negative) characteristics are associated and comprehended as something specifically Megrelian. They are seen as cunning liars, untrustworthy, wayward, uneducated, backward striving and rebellious and with latent separatist intentions but also street-smart, witty, humorous, hardworking and famous for their hospitality, beautiful gardens and cuisine.

This study focuses on Megrelian identity negotiations and how their self-understanding interplays with the idea of the Georgian nation and Georgian national identity. The Megrelians play (both actively and passively) an important role in how they are perceived and represented and their difference from other Georgians is constantly officially and unofficially confirmed. The production and re-production of Megrelian representations and which role they play in Georgian society has gained little attention and I wish to contribute to the understanding of Megrelians and their role in Georgia.

With an ethnographic research approach my intention has been to access information regarding the current situation of the Megrelians. Qualitative analysis of semi-structured and narrative interviews with Megrelians has provided me with the means to extract their own position and how they understand themselves and their situation.

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4 IDP: Internally Displaced Person i.e. forced migrant or refugee but who remains within their country of origin (Castles and Miller 2003:5).
1.1 AIM
The aim of this study is to examine how Megrelian identity processes interplay with Megrelian representations. This is done by focusing on how Megrelians consider themselves as specific and how they experience to be represented in Georgian society. My intent is to show the relationship of a social group’s self-understanding with its surrounding environment, using the Megrelians as an example.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS
- How is Megrelian identity maintained in Georgia today?
- How are Megrelian representations produced, perceived, and projected by Megrelians and also by non-Megrelians?
- How does a Megrelian identity correlate with the idea of a Georgian national identity?

1.3 OUTLINE
Further in chapter 1, I will present the theoretical framework and instruments used for analyzing the empirical findings. Chapter 2 presents the procedure of how I gathered the empiri. In chapter 3, is a contextual background presented in order to fully understand the historical and socio-political setting from where this study departs. The analysis is in Chapter 4, where I put the gathered data within the theoretical frame and apply the analytical tools to elaborate on and study the empirical findings. Finally in chapter 5 is a conclusion and a summary of my answers to my research questions presented.

1.4 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE STUDY
The initial thought for this study was merely to cover social aspects of Megrelian identity negotiation. Yet, as it became clear to me during my field work, and also when I studied literature on post-Soviet Georgian development, Georgia deals now with its own comprehension and confirmation as a nation state. Therefore it is necessary to clarify the concepts of nation, nationalism since they are an integral part of the context or “setting” where Megrelian identity negotiations take place.

Important theories deriving from Anthony D. Smith and Benedict Anderson will provide us with significant perspectives of concepts and theories of nation and nationalism. Furthermore, we will see how these concepts interplays with identity negotiations and how this is part of the production and reproduction of, in this case, Megrelian representations.
The meaning and comprehension of the concept of representation in this study will be explained relying on the theories and concepts presented by Stuart Hall and Christopher Prendergast.

Theories regarding identity will be highlighted by perspectives offered by Richard Jenkins as well as the theoretical concerns of Pierre Bourdieu will offer additional depth and comprehension of the complexity of how identity processes are perceived and interrelate with national discourse. My intention is to make an attempt to relate theories of political science (in this case theories of nationalism) with perspectives adhering to cultural sociology, namely Jenkins’s theories of social identity and Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*.

By combining and using these theories as analytical instruments I wish to shine light on, as well as offer new information on how Megrelians perceive, produce and react to representations to which they can relate to as “Megrelian”. Moreover by using these theories I aim to analyze how a Megrelian identity coincides with the idea of a Georgian national identity.

I extensively make use of the word *discourse* throughout the text. My intention is however, not to perform a discourse analysis. The wide definition of discourse, in this study, is that it is a collection of statements that gives us a vocabulary and language to talk about and represent the knowledge about “something”. Knowledge is hence produced through language discursively; leading way for social practices that contains meanings described by language thus shaping this “something” and our relationship to it (Hall 2003:44)

How I came to judge these theories as important correlates with the ethnographic research procedure, where theories are something that develops as a result from performing research (Goldbart & Hustler 2005:18).

### 1.4.1 The Concept of Representation

Representation as concept is varied while it expands over several academic disciplines (Prendergast 2000:2).

However two elementary interpretations of representation exist. Firstly, Christopher Prendegast (2000:4f) explains *re-present* as bringing something back to the present both spatially and temporally. From this point of view is people represented by spoken, textual or pictorial references. That is, referring to someone in this sense immediately makes them “appear” in the present context, represented through language, symbols, pictures, art or texts.
Hall (2003:17, 19) further explains that language provides with the possibility to describe and associate to symbols, art, picture etc. within a system of representations. Systems of representations are described as mental concepts and understandings that correlate with specific meanings of vocabulary and signs. Language allows thus something (representations) to exist (Hall 2003:17).

The second meaning of representation can be explained by the word substitution. Here someone “stands in for,” thus represents someone else. The substitute can represent politically or officially speak on behalf of a group of people with a specific interest (Prendergast 2000:5; Hall 2003:16).

With the above definitions in mind, the aim of studying representations is to provide with understandings and meanings of the representations’ effects. This is especially relevant due to the fact that people’s main points of reference, regarding “reality” are different representations of reality.

1.4.2 The Genealogy of Nations
Smith (1999:3) argues that modern nations rely upon an understanding of the nation as a successor to an ethnic community with a certain culture and geographical ties. Subjective factors, which make up everyday life of those whom include themselves in the nation, confirm the existence of the current nation and connect it to the predecessor ethnic community. The nation links itself to the past legitimizing its present existence by incorporating memories, myths and traditions as a legacy to an “original” ethnic community (Smith 2009:44). A genealogy of the nation and its people is established. Smith summarizes a nation as:

5 In a wide and general sense: a post-feudal nation state produced by modernity as a social form, often included in the historical events of industrialism, capitalism (Giddens 1991:15).
6 A nation does not always have to rely upon an understanding of being a successor to a single ethnic group.
   Several nations have been formed through a coexistence of ethnic groups and attempted merges of them into a single national community. Examples of this principle are Australia and the U.S.A (Smith 1991:40).
   However, in the specific case of Georgia is the comprehension of an original Georgian ethnic past an undisputable statement.
7 Culture is a contested concept with several different meanings. In this case “culture” is rather defined as a set of mechanisms that govern, control and define “proper” behavior and not only as compositions of behavioral patterns. Customs, traditions and habits are examples of how these mechanisms are expressed (Geertz 1977:44). Moreover, “culture” is under constant construction, negotiation and renegotiation. These processes define a “we” and “others” (with different expressions of the governing mechanism). The definitions are also constantly negotiated leading to imaginary boundaries between “us” and the “others” that becomes part in distinguishing members of the own and other cultural group (Benhabib (2002:8). Cultures are thus formed through binary relationships (Benhabib 2002:7).
“[…] a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths, and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all its members” (Smith 1991:14).

The nation as we know it is thus closely linked to and demands memories of ethnic and territorial pasts. Nationalism and national identity is thus a modern phenomenon and owes its existence to the awareness and resurrection of memories of pre-modern ethnic groups (Smith 1999:18). Moreover, the genealogy of the ethnic group creates boundaries through which the ethnic community and its place in the world today are understood as a nation (Smith 2009:37). A “set” of cultural codes, holidays, customs, language and more subtle activities such as every day rituals confirms the continuity of the ethnic community (Smith 2009:37f).

Nation and state are closely related since modern states are required to be recognized as national (Smith 1991:15). The state is the set of public institutions exercising a monopoly of constraints and extractions in the territory of the nation (Smith 1991:14). State institutions function as integrated in the nation due to a political and cultural bond, uniting a political community with shared history, myths, territory etc. A nation state is understood to exist when an ethnic group is politicized i.e. politically represented (Smith 1999:156f).

Most nation states are polyethnic but with a dominant ethnic group that incorporated others in the nation state apparatus. Often, this process includes erasing the minor ethnic group’s awareness of themselves as distinct from the majority group. Instead are they merged into the history and myths of the dominant group (Smith 1991:39). This merge is not always done smoothly and minor ethnic groups submitting to this process without resistance happens only rarely (Smith 1991:114). When the merge fails to incorporate all ethnic groups in the myths and memories of the nation is a political solidarity, with political representations not favoring any single group, vital for the nation state’s existence (Smith 1991:115). A political frame is however no insurance for the recognition of minority groups. The dominant group tends to determine the nation’s history and how and to what extent other groups are represented as part of it.

Official political representations of the nation rarely reflect the versatility among its population. Smith (2009:81) states that several variations of ethnic/national identity among the population are simultaneously present and to represent every ethnic/cultural unit is almost impossible. Especially since these units within themselves are dynamic and diverse. They might dissolve or change direction as well as new ones can emerge.
In order to keep the nation intact an official language plays an essential part. The language is promoted by educational (schooling systems, universities etc.) as well as by bureaucratic political institutions spreading the language, creating a language community that transcends differentiative ethno-cultural traits (Smith 2009:82). An official language is essential for maintaining (some sort of) solidarity among the people due to the dependency of the use of it. This dependency and legitimization of the language as national is often promoted by the intellectuals emphasizing on a national unity based on language (Smith 1991:108f).

The language provides thus with the possibility to describe and associate to images, symbols and references within what Hall describes as a system of representations. In this case with a system of representations connected to nation, nationalism and national identity.

1.4.3 The Imagined Nation
As important as ethnic genealogy, traditions, territorial alignment and other references for the nation and its people may seem, the aspects function as components in the creation of a communal awareness. May it be labeled ethnic, national or political the components exist to serve as unifying elements. As real as the community that relies on these components may seem Benedict Anderson (2006:6) proposes that the community itself is imagined. This is especially noted in a national community since social interaction among its members is limited only to a close circle of people. Other members exist in people´s minds as part of a cohesive national community.

An imagination of a brotherly understanding of the people that dismisses all internal diversities lays the basis for the nation as community. The nation is imagined as limited in a sense since it borders other nations/communities. The imagination of the nation´s sovereignty exists because of the concept of the modern nation state is a reaction of the Enlightenment, disqualifying any divinely-ordained legitimacy of a dynastic class (Anderson 2006:7).

An official language is important contributing to the awareness of the community´s particularity. A written literary standard is vital since through the spread of written media (newspapers but also books) is the community confirmed and members can relate to other members via the fixated literary standard (Anderson 2006:24). The standardized language serves as a uniting factor making people aware of other members of the community (Anderson 2006:44). Many dialects assimilate into the written standard and gradually disappear as a spoken version of the official literary language (Anderson 2006:45). The official language claims a specific position since through its authority is history, culture,
myths, religious practices etc. represented, disarming other minority languages of this capability. In order to understand yourself, your community, history etc. is it vital to know how to read and write the literary standard of the nation. Hall (2003:18) describes is as the shared conceptual map is accessed via language.

Anderson (2006:134) claims that the purpose of a literary standard is not exclusion but rather inclusion into a specific national community. The printed language invents and confirms nationalism due to the official status of the conceptual map of representations the language mediates (Hall 2003:21).

Connecting this to Smith, the myth of the ethnic past, symbols and cultural practices are confirmed as belonging to a certain community when they are officially documented, using the literary standard. The language gives people the possibility to include and understand themselves in a wider sense than merely as a member of an ethnic group, peasant or village person. Essential components of a national identity (national conceptual map) are accessed by the practice and status of the language. By acknowledging and absorbing the use of it is the national identity promoted, manifested and represented.

1.4.4 National Identity as Product of Discourse
With the definitions of Smith and Anderson in mind we see that the nation is imaginative and a mental construct. The understanding of the nation as an outcome of intricate imaginations and ideas that relies on components of communal unity, equality, autonomy, boundaries etc. have clear effects such as the comprehension of the nation as an essential “tangible” entity. The nation is legit to the extent one is convinced of it. The “making real/confirmation of its reality” of the nation demands emotional bonds and identification with the components which leads to national identification.

National identity reaches the minds of those who identify themselves, or identify others with the nation through discourse. Constructed and conveyed in discourse via and what is considered cultural expressions, legacies, traditions of the nation manifests as national identity as it is appreciated within the nation. Narratives of what is considered, and talk/language describing, national culture provide with confirmation of a nation’s existence and the existence of a national identity produced and affirmed as product of and within discourse. This also includes representations of art, architecture, geographical sites etc.
1.4.5 Maintaining (National) Identity

In a general sense, identity and the function of identification can be described as:

“[…] a matter of knowing who’s who (without which we can’t know what’s what). It is the systematic establishment and signification between individuals, between collectives, and between individuals and collectives, of relationships of similarity and difference” (Jenkins 2007:5)

Identity can thus exist on different levels i.e. national, regional/territorial, religious etc. but its maintenance relies heavily on social foundations (Jenkins 2007:4). Through social interaction is both the individual and collective comprehension of identity confirmed and maintained (Jenkins 2007:16).

Additionally, in the case of national identity are social rituals, bureaucratic and educational procedures, legislatively inscribed systems of classifications of the nation state active in composing mental structures accessing the mind (Bourdieu 1998:45f). Principles of common vision and division are imposed and become part of the foundations that construct national identity. The structures access people’s minds and become normalized aspects of individual and collective understandings thus pointing to that national identity can be identified as habitus. Bourdieu explains habitus as follows:

“[…] the habitus could be considered as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and appreciation […]” (Bourdieu 1997:86).

Involving Smith’s, Anderson’s and Hall’s perspectives; national myths, history, criteria for an official language, language use, national representations, boundaries etc. are promoted by the nation state and internalized into the members forming a national habitus. The imagination of a cohesive national community is internalized, confirmed and expressed by the members of the group. Bourdieu (1997:89) calls this process embodiment.

Bourdieu (2010:54) explains that one of the functions of the habitus is that it ensures an active presence of earlier experiences. A system of dispositions (thoughts and actions) reactivates the past in the present, assuring the action of its correctness (with the appropriate past as reference) and leads way for future appropriate behavior.
Widening the perspective, not only focusing on national identity/habitus an embodied identity and the sense of belonging can likewise be traced to an understanding of communal *kinship*. To identify and associate yourself with a specific group or community leads to a comprehension of yourself as part of a larger entity with whom you share cultural features, history, traditions and symbols that function as unifying markers within the group. Your belonging to a certain group is confirmed in interaction among your “own” as well as with the “surrounding world” (Jenkins 2007: 64).

Jenkins (2007:18) describes this as “*internal-external dialectic of identification*” i.e both outer and inner influence affect the formation of identity as well as how a certain identity is to be understood, both from the outside as well as from the inside.

Connecting this to Bourdieu we see that cultural practices, traditions and behavioral traits and so on thus manifest in the present through interaction as expressions of internalized schemes of references constructing a habitus that one can “label”. This “label” signifies certain or a combination of social, cultural, ethnic or/and national identity. The production and reproduction of identity within discourse is hence also revealed in and as part of habitus.

In summary, identity and habitus is assumed to be manifested among individuals who perceive themselves as belonging to a specific group (national or other) and maintained through social interaction with, and awareness of other groups. Depending on how and with whom or with what you associate yourself and likewise how others confirm or/and neglect your associations and actions, your habitus can be labeled as national, regional, cultural etc. This means that different cultural, societal, political etc. factors have various impact on individuals and collectives, depending of their degree or type of interaction and participation in society at large. Moreover, this means that a sense of identity helps us to sort the world and who we, and who others are in that world.

2. DATA, METHODS AND LIMITATIONS
With the purpose of getting direct information of perspectives regarding Megrelian identity processes I made a field trip to Georgia.\(^8\) Aiming to establish contact with Megrelians I approached my research from a qualitative stance involving interview methods and various forms of observations. By using these methods I wished to get personal experience of the

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\(^8\) See Appendix 2 for a map describing important cites and concerns for my study. See also Appendix 5 for illustrative pictures from my field work.
situation of the Megrelians. My plan was to access information that perhaps is not officially documented but that still exist in everyday social contexts.

Furthermore, I studied literature that has provided me with a deeper understanding of the present socio-political situation in Georgia in connection to the Soviet past. The reading of pre-Soviet historical development in Georgia has likewise aided me to get a wider picture of current day situation. Literature explaining and elaborating on Soviet and post-Soviet ethnic/national minority policies, politics and nation building as well as literature on Georgian history and political development contribute in comprehending the current condition of Georgia and the situation of the Megrelians.

Moreover, I used the Internet for two purposes. Firstly, as an informative compliment to more traditional sources in the search for forums and homepages concerning relevant information. Secondly, I used the internet as an interactive resource. The advantage of using the Internet, chatting with and using e-mail correspondence has allowed me to follow up certain questions after I physically have left the field. Furthermore, the Internet functions as an interesting basis for a Megrelian community that transcends physical space.

2.1 GEORGIA AS AN AREA OF STUDY
Georgia is a country in the Caucasus region bordering Russia to the north, Azerbaijan to the east, Armenia and Turkey to the south. The country is a democracy with a president and a parliament with elections every five years (Coene 2010:36). It is a mountainous country except from western Georgia where the fertile lowland faces the Black Sea (Coene 2010:4). It is geographically small and covers 69,700 sq. km. According to latest census in January 2012 the country has almost 4.5 million inhabitants.9

Following the census that covers ethnic groups in Georgia from 2002, Georgians (including Megrelians) form the majority with 83.8 % and noticeable minorities include Armenians (5.7%) as well as Azeri (6.5%). Georgians are divided into subgroups based on origin and regional affinity. Moreover, the Georgians can be divided into sub-ethnic10 groups. Being Georgian is connected to the use of any of the Kartvelian (Georgian) languages. This includes Kartuli, used in official circumstances and the first language of the majority of the Georgians but also Megruli, Lazuri and Svanuri. Each of the latter languages denotes a sub-

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9 National Statistics of Georgia (Website).
10 Sub-ethnic group is a term often used when explaining inter-ethnic-Georgian varieties. Not explained by the sources using this terminology following Smith (1999:156) sub-ethnic correlates with his terminology of ethnic fragments of a wider ethnic group.
ethnic group among the Georgians (Cornell 2000:129). Also Russians, Greeks, Jews, Ukrainians and many others inhabit the country making it highly ethnically diverse\(^{11}\).

War in Abkhazia erupted in 1992 and lead to a de facto loss of the territory. The Abkhazians were supported by Russia during the armed conflict (Coene 2010:151). In 2008 started another war with Russian military forces with ethnic Ossetians in South Ossetia which resulted that also this territory has become out of the hands of Georgian regime. IDPs from both conflicts are scattered in different settlements over the country (Coene 2010:154f). Russia still maintains military presence in both regions and political relations with Russia are tense. Unemployment rates are also high and many people live under poor conditions.

Many Georgians (and among them Megrelians) are religious, mostly Orthodox Christians. The Azeri minority is predominantly Muslim and Armenians Apostolic Christians (Coene 2010:78f, 84f). Religious practice is part of everyday life and churches, mosques and synagogues are well visited. Religious pluralism has existed in Georgia throughout history.

Georgia as a frame for investigating cultural, societal and political representations as well as identity issues is interesting since the socio-political “setting” is complex and diverse. Besides Georgian and Russian sources that covers Georgian history descriptively, including Megrelians to various extents, as I know Megrelians as a research focus has mainly been approached for their language. Manana Kock Kobaidze, Revaz Tchantouria and Karina Vamling at Malmö University have worked extensively in systematizing the grammar of Megruli. Vamling and Tchantouria (2005) have also performed a statistical survey investigating Megrelian attitudes towards their language. Moreover, Laurence Broers (2001 and 2004) at the department of Political Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies in London has published two article covering aspects of Megrelian identity.

With this as a backdrop for my study I argue that questions concerning Megrelians are fairly unexplored, especially for an English speaking public and hopefully will this study contribute with new and valuable information in this aspect.

2.2 DATA COLLECTION

In accordance with an ethnographic approach a variety of methods been has used collecting information of personal experience and attitudes for this study. Ethnography is one of the most diverse and overlapping approaches, encountered in several fields of qualitative social scientist inquiry, such as anthropological functionalism, feminism, hermeneutics, interview-

\(^{11}\) European Centre for Minority Issues (Website).
based studies etc. (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:2). As written by Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, when it comes to collecting data:

“[…] ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives […] watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artifacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issue that are the emerging focus of inquiry.” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:3).

Due to the broad and wide approach of ethnography reliability and validity of the findings could be considered problematic. However, according to Regi Enerstvedt (1989: 153) when performing qualitative research, the understanding of reliability as an assumption for duplication of the findings under identical conditions in order to secure validity, should be avoided. “Identical conditions” is a mirage and an ideal that is an unachievable precondition for qualitative research. Enerstvedt (1989:153f) points instead to accuracy during qualitative research. Accuracy will increase the preconditions for credibility i.e. authenticity, believability and plausibility of the results. Results are credible when methods for collecting and analyzing the findings are deemed appropriate for the undertaken research (Bailey 2007:182).

With an aspiration to rely on a consistent foundation and credibility in relation to my findings I narrowed down my main informants into a group where experience of social interaction on a regular basis with other Georgians was the overarching criterion. Moreover, two widely represented “types” or categories of Megrelians were deemed to correspond to the demanded criterion.

The first category is Megrelian IDPs from Abkhazia, and for this study I focused on those residing both in Tbilisi and Zugdidi. I focused on Megrelian IDPs since they are numerous and due to their displacement a steady interaction between them and other Georgians is common.

The second category is Megrelians who either live, have lived in or have a close relationship to Tbilisi. The choice of this category is also motivated by their experience of interaction with other Georgians outside of Megrelian territories.

Since we assume that identity is fostered in social interaction I deemed this frame as relevant and interesting due to the direct connection to an internal-external social setting, for both categories. In some cases my informants represent both categories simultaneously. It
should be underlined however, that my study only will provide us with perspectives related to those who suit my overarching criterion, and in a more narrow sense to those two types corresponding to that criterion, in any generalization of Megrelians.

My other experiences of interaction with Megrelians, not adhering to the specific target group, were however enriching. They provided me with wider understanding and gave me supplemented information of Megrelian lives, concerns, attitudes etc.

The aim of ethnographic studies is to access findings that represent symptomatic cultural constructions drawn from a wider cultural context (Maynes et al. 2008:130). The fieldwork was conducted during eight weeks from the end of February until end of April in 2012. Prior to departure I had established contact with Sokhumi State University in Tbilisi\textsuperscript{12}. They aided in my research providing with private lectures and further contacts at the Shota-Meskhia University in Zugdidi. Ilia State University in Tbilisi also helped me extensively in my research. Informal contacts in Tbilisi and Zugdidi were established via the Internet social network Facebook.

In Tbilisi I stayed in a hostel with the intent to meet Georgians that could contribute and help out in my research. This strategy turned out fairly well since many Tbilisians showed interest for my study helping me establishing contact with Megrelians living in Tbilisi. I visited Zugdidi twice and stayed in a hostel the first time and with two Swedes that worked for a Non-governmental organization (NGO) the second time. With the aid of the NGO-workers and my contacts at the Shota-Meskhia University I met and socialized with many Megrelians. I visited the Megrelian countryside several times and I also lived with a Megrelian family in the rural parts of Samegrelo for a week.

2.2.1 Observation

I came in contact with the Megrelian village family via an American that I met in Tbilisi. He worked as an English teacher in the village. Noted above, Megrelians are often associated with rural life and my intention was to capture and experience a glimpse of that. James P. Spradley (1980:3) underlines that to understand another way of life from the native point of view the initial aim should be to learn \textit{from} and not \textit{about} people. This includes social, cultural and political perspectives as well as how they are produced and reproduced in the specific setting. This is obtained by spending time with people from the group in focus.

\textsuperscript{12} The study was founded by a scholarship requiring a pre-established contact in the country chosen for field work. Sukhumi State University served as my main contact for this cause.
I lived with the family for seven days. During that time I managed to some extent actively become part of the life of peasant Megrelians helping out at the small farm. Juliet Goldbart and David Hustler (2005:16) emphasize on the importance of getting involved in everyday activities in order to comprehend the social world and how members of that social world understand the world they live in.

The role of a complete participant observer, where I am totally integrated as part of the focus group where my position as researcher not is reflected upon (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:82f) was far from my grasp. This was due to my short stay, not speaking Megruli or Kartuli (I communicated with them in Russian) and that I was treated as a guest. My position can be labeled participant as observer since I still participated and socialized with the family (May 1997:140). This of course limits my understanding of the Megrelian rural lifestyle but I still succeeded to gain direct information from the family by both casual talking and discussions.

In Zugdidi I “hung out” with a group of Megrelian teens at a local radio station. They introduced me to Megrelian traditional music and some contemporary music as well. We spoke Russian but among themselves they predominately spoke Megruli (though code shifting into Russian was common) Sometimes during broadcasting they made use of Megruli slang and phrases. Here I was also participant as observer.

In Tbilisi I used an observation technique called unstructured observation. With an open mind but with prior knowledge about a social setting I “knew” what I was looking for, this gave me the possibility to draw quick conclusions (Jones and Somekh 2005:140). My observations occurred at the big market, said to be partly “overtaken” by Megrelian traders and IDPs. I went there at different times accompanied by Megrelians and non-Megrelians to observe the interaction between traders and purchasers. Afterwards I asked my accompanied purchasers about their experience when purchasing and trading with a Megrelian.

Depicted earlier, perhaps as a slight unorthodox approach I have extensively used the Internet to either make contact with or as an instrument in searching for relevant information concerning Megrelians. It has predominately served me as a social medium. Colin Lankshear and Kevin M. Leander (2005:326) emphasize on the value of participant observation in cyberspace. I have befriended several Megrelians on Facebook after I met them in real life. This in order to secure their credibility as guides regarding Megrelian related topics on the Internet. As Lankshear and Leander (2005:326f) it is vital to strive for secure and reliable information on the internet since the information is often unregulated.
2.2.2 Oral Testimony and Personal Narratives
Dan Brockington and Sian Sullivan (2003:65) highlight the importance of oral testimony and personal narratives. Since the informants are given the possibility to speak for themselves without the interference of an official setting, diminishing symbolic violence in the relationship with the interviewer (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:167). Casual conversations should not be underestimated since they can provide with valuable information. Keeping this in mind besides my visit in the village I was on a number of times invited to Megrelian homes and spent long evenings talking about their lives and what it meant to be Megrelian. This occurred both in Tbilisi and Zugdidi.

By accessing and later analyzing oral testimonies and personal narratives this gives us the possibility to investigate more complex information. The stories shine light on information constructed in social relations and history, embodied by a person thus addressing us with information with a deeper and more complex nature (Maynes et al. 2008:41).

2.2.3 Interviews
Based on the criterion presented above I contacted Megrelians representative for my study, respectively. I used various channels such as my pre-established contact at the Sokhumi State University as well as the Ilia State University to get in contact with students that had left Samegrelo for studying in Tbilisi. These two universities attract students from all over Georgia which offers good opportunities for staff and students to socialize with various “kinds” of Georgians. At the Ilia State University I likewise interviewed teachers and administrative staff originating from Samegrelo.

With the help from staff from International Organization for Migration (IOM) I got in contact with Megrelian IDPs residing in various IDP-settlements in Tbilisi.

I came in contact with informants in Samegrelo fitting my criteria working at various NGOs with whom I established contact with prior to my visits there. The NGOs of interest have their basis in Zugdidi but the Megrelian staff I interviewed travels often to Tbilisi and other parts of Georgia on conferences and other meetings. With a notion of this social aspect of NGO-work I hoped to meet Megrelians who extensively travel or have travelled on a regular basis to Tbilisi. This turned out to be the case and all who I interviewed had either lived or travelled often to Tbilisi. Via the NGOs I also managed to get in contact with Megrelian IDPs from Abkhazia residing in Zugdidi.

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13 An international organization spread all over the world focusing on migrant issues and migration development.
My search for appropriate informants proceeded as follows. After establishing contact with an informant I asked if they knew other Megrelians that would correspond to the criteria for my study. This lead to a cumulative effect, also called the snowball effect/technique (Hammerslay and Atkinson 2007:105). The snowball effect/technique led me to meet Megrelians outside the universities, IDP-settlements and NGO-organizations, but that still corresponded to my overarching criterion. In the end I ultimately ended up with more possible informants than I had time to interview.

I intended primarily to solemnly conduct individual interviews. This was not always possible and a number of group interviews were also carried out. Following the structure of a semi-structured interview I had already prepared questions and statements that the informants was given the possibility to freely associate and elaborate on (May 1997:111). As this interview is quite open, it allows for the informants to a greater extent answer on their “own terms” and not have to choose from an already established choice of answers.

With the group interview I could get direct information when a certain statement by an informant was contested by someone else participating (May 1997:114). Also the group interview can bring a certain comfort to the shy person not feeling singled out by the interviewer (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:111). This allows for a shy person to possibly be more forthcoming and contribute to a higher extent in the interview.

Thirty-one Megrelians were interviewed in this manner during my field work. Twelve women and six men in Tbilisi. In Zugdidi I interviewed nine women and four men. The interviews were conducted at people’s homes (including IDP-settlements), offices and at cafés. I wanted to record every interview but was unfortunately not able to do that due to inconveniency expressed by some informants or by the abrupt decision to interview when I did not carry my recording device. On those occasions I took notes. The interviews were mainly conducted in Russian and sometimes English or a combination of the two depending of what the informants preferred. The interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hours in length. The recorded interviews were transcribed in their entirety.

2.2.4 Other Sources
I attended private lectures by three prominent linguists with Georgian and Abkhazian languages as their field of research. Two at the Sokhumi State University and one at the Shota-Meskhia University. The information shared with me helped to better understand the

14 See Appendix 3 for my questionnaire.
official perspective on inter-Georgian language issues. Moreover they recommended literature (in Russian) which I could access at the University library in Tbilisi.

At International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Tbilisi I was able to meet a psychologist and have an interesting discussion concerning the psychological effects of IDP-life. The representative had worked extensively with rehabilitation and resettlement procedures for Megrelian IDPs.

I brought up my interest for Megrelians in many social situations to get a feel for what people think about and associate with Megrelians. This was done nearly on an everyday basis with both people I knew and random people I met.

I also visited museums of Georgian history and art and private galleries with the objective to locate Megrelian cultural representations. The most interesting museum in this aspect is the Giorgi Chitaia Open Air Museum of Ethnography in Tbilisi, opened 1966. Traditional houses from all of Georgia have been transported to the museum grounds with the intention to show Georgia´s cultural diversity. I went there twice. On the first visit I took a guided tour and asked specifically about the Megrelian house, garden and way of life. The second time the staff recognized me and we talked for about an hour about the same topic.

Furthermore, worth to mention is the Dadiani Palace Museum in Zugdidi where Megrelian history and architecture is presented. The Museum is the former palace of the ruling Megrelian dynasty with Samegrelo as their domain. I visited the museum once.

2.2.5 Field Notes
During my stay in Georgia I kept a field journal in which I took field notes and wrote down reflections on discussions and experiences. Field notes are reflections of observed events with the aim to represent them in writing (Emerson et al. 2001:352). I started by compounding my notes into separate descriptive and later analytical texts (Hammerslay and Atkinson 2007:151). The purpose of this division is to keep the observed information clean from analytical interference at the initial stage. My aim was to write everyday but in reality I wrote approximately three to four days a week depending on if I experienced something that I deemed important.

Using a field journal is a great asset during and after field work since it gives you the possibility to reconnect with and “revitalize” past experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:150). With the use of field notes I could, at an early stage, structure my findings thus

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15 See Appendix 5 for pictures from the museum.
facilitating later analytical work (May 1997:145). With the help of field notes I collected statements of non-Megrelians which later could be used for quotes in this text.

Additionally, I made use of my multiservice android telephone containing a camera and a recording device. I continuously took photos of sites I visited and used the recording device as an addition to my field journal where I recorded brief reflections and experiences.

2.3 LIMITATIONS, COMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Involving people in social inquiry demands the researcher to be aware of the impact on the social setting he or she has. Reflexivity is required for the sake of understanding aspects limiting the research progress (Marcus 1998:193).

An immediate aspect that is a limit in my study is my lack of not knowing Georgian. In all social interaction I was a non-Georgian and definitely a non-Megrelian. As an outsider I could not completely blend in which limited my understanding social codes and behavior (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:73). Since I speak Russian fairly well and have Caucasian features (being “white”) most people assumed I came from the Ukraine. “Doors” were opened to me since many Georgians speak Russian very naturally whereas Russian was/is the lingua franca in the Caucasus region for a long time. Some of the informants or people I socialized with had studied at Russian School and speaking Russian was almost considered like using your native language.

Using Russian often put me in a specific position and my participation in social constellations was more inclusive than on those rare circumstances I used English. Speaking Russian in this post-Soviet context transformed me into someone you knew.

Coming from Sweden as a faraway visitor posed some “pleasant” disturbances. Interviews were sometimes delayed since the informants wanted me to share dinner with them first. Drinking wine at a Georgian table is very common and there was a risk that the host would be offended if I refused. This of course affected the quality of the interview that followed later on. Some informants focused more on me and who I was than answering my questions. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:65) state that this is a commonly encountered problem.

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16 I have spoken Russian on a regular basis since I was fourteen. I studied Russian at Lund University for one and a half year and one year in Saint Petersburg. According to many Russians I have met my accent reminds of the one of a Russian living in the Baltics. Although my Georgian and Megrelian knowledge is limited only to greeting phrases and very simple conversations, when used people were generally flattered that a foreigner had knowledge of their language. This was even more noticeable among Megrelians.

17 On several occasions I noticed that in social gatherings that included Georgians, Armenians, Azeri, Ukrainians etc. especially older people used Russian or switched between various languages with Russian as base as a natural way of communication.
My Swedish background and being a man also affected my study. After telling the family I lived with in the countryside about Sweden I experienced implications that they wished me to marry with their oldest daughter so that she could move with me to Sweden. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:73) discuss the “problem” of gender and clearly my sex played a role and perhaps did they allow me to stay with them due to the plans for their daughter. Being “white” was considered something beautiful by many and I noticed I was approached and engaged with due to my exotic phenotype.

It should also be mentioned that during my field work was the aim of my study often questioned and it raised suspicion both among scholars and “ordinary” people. Why had I such an interest in Megrelians? Did I seek to divide the Georgian nation? Was I financed by the Russian government? Both Megrelians and non-Megrelians sometimes claimed that Megrelians did not really exist and that my topic was unscientific. My trustworthiness as researcher with no political agenda was questioned. Some people refused to aid me due to their suspiciousness.

Even if I encountered some problems I still think my findings have granted me access to a field that many have not ventured to before. I hope that the disturbances only affected my research and analysis to a very limited degree.

2.4 MAIN INFORMANTS

In this section are the informants whose interviews that were recorded presented. Their names have been replaced with pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity. Those participating in group interviews are presented together. Quotes are in this study, referred to the separate person and not to the interview. The informants are presented due to how they were interviewed i.e. some are presented in the same text since they were interviewed the together.

Zugdidi Area

Lali (Interview conducted in English)

Lali is an IDP that fled from Abkhazia during the war in in 1992. She is in her late twenties living with her mom in central Zugdidi. Originally settled in Tbilisi and lived there for ten years. She received her educational diploma in Tbilisi and her ties with Tbilisi are still strong. She goes there regularly to visit relatives or on business trips. Lali’s Megruli knowledge is

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18 See Appendix 2 for the geographical location of the cities, villages and regions of origin or current location of the informants in relation to their presentation texts.
limited. Opportunities for speaking Megruli on a regular basis are few. Megruli is considered a language and not a dialect.

**Medea (Interview conducted in English)**

Medea is in her forties and lives in a small village outside of Zugdidi. Apart from a brief stay in Tbilisi she has lived her whole life in Zugdidi. However, she often travels to Tbilisi on work related matters. She returned to Samegrelo during the armed conflict between Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze since she wished to be with her closest relatives during the conflict. Medea is first Megrelian and then Georgian. She is proud of her heritage and enjoys speaking Megruli that is a proper language. She uses Megruli with her relatives and friends. She revers Megrelian traditions but opposes some rural traditions that she thinks is to uncivilized. Megrelians are the backbone of Georgia and it would not exist without Megrelian culture, wittiness and wisdom.

**Tamazi (Interview conducted in Russian)**

Tamazi is in his mid-fifties and lives in Zugdidi where he has lived his whole life apart from his student years in Tbilisi. He has Megrelian relatives from Abkhazia living in Tbilisi and visits them two-three times a year. Megrelians are trapped in a sociopolitical constellation that hinders them in their self-realization. Megruli is his first language and rather speaks Russian instead of Kartuli as a protest against Georgian nationalistic politics that he claims undermines Megrelians. Tamazi writes in Megruli and earlier promoted a Megrelian newspaper. He works with internet radio transmissions in Megruli. It is depressing that young Megrelians are losing affection for the language and that they fall victim for official language politics. He would like to see an autonomous region in order to secure the Megrelian heritage. The understanding of Zviad Gamsakhurdia as a separatist is promoted by Georgian politics thus hindering Megrelians to speak of autonomy without being accused for separatist intentions.

**Natia (Interview conducted in Russian)**

Natia is an IDP from Abkhazia in her late thirties. As an IDP she was first settled in Tbilisi and lived there for a couple of years before moving to Zugdidi. In Abkhazia she almost solely spoke Megruli except from when she studied in Sokhumi where she spoke Russian. Her family has been writing poems and short stories in Megruli. She could not save any of the
writings when she fled. Megruli is very dear to her and she explains that when she speaks she can truly express her feelings. The language is the key to understand and to “be” Megrelian. Without it is it impossible to assert one’s “Megrelianess”. She feels a special bond with Abkhazians since they share many traditions and characteristics with Megrelians.

**Elene and Ketevani (Interview conducted in Russian)**

These women are in their mid-forties and come from Zugdidi but Elene studied and lived in Sokhumi. She is now an IDP along with the rest of her family. Ketevani studied in Tbilisi. She often spends time in her house in rural Samegrelo. They stress the uniqueness of their culture and language. They are not better than other Georgians but there is “something” with Megrelians. They use Megruli every day. When Elene lived in Sokhumi she mainly spoke Russian and Megruli. Ketevani lived a “Megrelian life” in Tbilisi socializing mainly with other Megrelians. They would like to see a written Megruli standard and a wider acknowledgment of Megrelian culture but they know that these topic are taboo. Due to their work they often travel to Tbilisi.

**Tinatin (Interview conducted in English and Russian)**

Tinatin is in her late twenties and comes from Zugdidi. She speaks Megruli as often as she can. Being Megrelian is an advantage since you speak a specific language creating a unique bond among your kin. Megrelians are the smartest and most talented Georgians and people are envious of us. The culture and traditions in eastern Georgia are weak copies of the original Megrelian ones. She would like to see Megruli media (newspapers, radio and television). She uses Kartuli when she works but in other cases she either speaks only Megruli or a mix of Kartuli and Megruli.

**Tbilisi**

**Akaki (Interview conducted in Russian and English)**

Akaki is in his mid-twenties has lived and studied in Tbilisi for six years. He comes from Zugdidi and goes there as often as he can to visit relatives or celebrate holidays. He speaks Megrelian only with his uncle and sister in Tbilisi. He misses family and the semi-rural lifestyle of Zugdidi. Tbilisi is too big and stressful and people are not polite. The Tbilisi city culture does not allow Megrelians to be Megrelian. People react funny or shows discomfort
when he speaks Megrelian. He is proud of his Megrelian heritage but since Tbilisi undermines it he is not comfortable. When he speaks Megrelian he can truly be himself.

Shorena (Interview conducted in Russian)
Shorena is in her early fifties comes from a small village near the Adzyubzha settlement in Abkhazia and fled to Tbilisi in 1992. She misses Abkhazia deeply and during the Soviet Union everyone lived peacefully together. She constantly underlines the specific culture of hospitality that signified her Megrelian lifestyle. She lives under poor conditions in an old hospital that functions as an IDP-settlement in central Tbilisi. Shorena works at the market and sells homemade Sulguni (Megrelian cheese considered a delicacy). She speaks Megruli on a daily basis at her work. She is positive and explains that Megrelians always “find a way” through all troubles.

Irakli (Interview conducted in Russian)
Irakli is in his in his mid-thirties and was born in Tbilisi. He his Megrelian since his family originates from a village outside of Khobi in Samegrelo. They still have a house there and he goes ther on vacation and during the summer months. Irakli explains that he is Megrelian since he has a Megrelian surname and in his family they cook Megrelian food and follow customs from Samegrelo. He does not speak Megruli but would like to. However, Megruli is a dialect and has a funny melody. Irakli claims that Megrelian IDPs that work in the market are untrustworthy and try to fool you when they get the chance. He is actually pretty tired of all the Megrelians that have moved to Tbilisi.

Maia, Tamta, Ekaterine and Manana (Interview conducted in Russian and English)
These girls are twenty-one years old and study at one of the universities in Tbilisi. Two are from Samegrelo. Maia is from a small village outside Anaklia near Zugdidi and Tamta is from Jvari in northern Samegrelo. Ekaterine and Manana are from Ochamchira in Abkhazia. Ekaterine is an IDP and lives in Tbilisi. Manana still has her family in Ochamchira and spends her holidays there. Everyone but Manana have family in Tbilisi. They have adapted to Tbilisi life and feel at home. They usually speak Megruli with each other. As linguist students they are taught that Megruli is a dialect of Kartuli since it lacks a written standard. Megruli and Megrelian traditions are very important for them. It is important to know Megruli since some of their relatives do not understand Kartuli. According to them is it amusing when people
have prejudice about Megrelians being liars. Others just do not understand since you have to be clever when you socialize with Megrelians.

**Giorgi and Zurabi (Interview conducted in Russian)**

Giorgi and Zurabi are twenty-two years old. They fled Abkhazia as children and live now in Tbilisi. Giorgi comes from the Gali region and Zurabi from Ochamchira. Mevruli is their preferred language and speak it at home. They are proud of their roots but do not remember Abkhazia. The loss of their homeland is present in their minds and they feel an emotional pain which they share with their relatives. Giorgi was given the chance to visit the village where he was born two years ago and says that this was one of the most important episodes of his life. Mevruli is a language and the dialect discussion is only political propaganda. Both experience that they are discriminated since their language is not recognized. Megrelians are very special and have excellent characteristics such as wittiness, talent and easily adapt to new situations. There exists a unique bond among Megrelians.

**3. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND**

In order for us to better comprehend current Megrelian representations and identity issues, is it necessary to take a closer look on the attitudes toward minorities in the Russian Empire and also how the Soviet Union’s policy on nation building was explicated. This information will provide us with a first glimpse from where public discourse of Georgian national identity derives and on what historical foundations it relies. Embedded in, and in connection to the foundations that support Georgian national identity are also factors of other ethnic and sub-ethnic constellations processed, thus giving us information that extends our understanding of Megrelian identity and Megrelian representations’ complexity.

Important Georgian historical events during the reign of Imperial Russia, Soviet Union as well as the turbulent post-Soviet development of Georgia will briefly be described, with the aim to show sociopolitical aftereffects of Russian and Soviet political influences. Also here, the purpose is to provide with early, as well as recent years, historical and political development as a frame for later discussions.
3.1 GEORGIA AND THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

The people living within the territory of the Russian Empire were not a homogenous group\textsuperscript{19}. That was also never the intent of the governing Russians. Some halfhearted attempts were carried out with the aim to bring the people within the empire together under Russian Orthodox Christianity. This was only partly successful and the ethnic diversities were not overcome by these attempts (Suny 2001:44).

The Russian Empire differed from the model of the European national state. Instead of relying upon a widespread and implemented nationalism, that exceeded all the differences among the ethnic groups\textsuperscript{20}, the structure of the Russian Empire was based instead on imperial dominion over conquered and claimed territory. Nationalism was represented by the dominant Russians (Suny 2001:39). Similarities in political structure can be seen with the Habsburg Empire, with a clear centralized government and, to different degrees, developed and underdeveloped peripheral regions (Hobsbawm 1989:30f).

Before Russian annexation of Georgia in early nineteenth century the land was caught in the middle of two Muslim powers and was partly or completely under influence of either of them. Western Georgia was controlled by the Ottomans and eastern parts were under Persian influence ruled by the Safavid dynasty (King 2008:23). Borders were not strictly defined and people were able to move back and forth (King 2008:22). When the Safavid Empire began to decline the Ottoman Empire missed its chance to seize and expand into all of Georgia due to Russian annexation of both western and eastern Georgia in the early nineteenth century. The different rulers of various parts of Georgia were either forced in or gladly accepted the new incorporation with Orthodox Christian Russia (Suny 1994:64). As a result of the Russian annexation the borders were more rigorously defined and Georgia became a frontier nation of the Russian Empire (King 2008:24).

Georgian nobility maintained their governance over Georgian lands (under Russian influence and directions) and were closely associated with Russian aristocracy and nobility.

\textsuperscript{19} In extreme and rare cases are nations constituted by a single ethnic/national group. Nevertheless, the idea of national unity based on a single group is an ideal that many nations strive/strived for; hence the common understanding of a nation state connected to a certain group of people (Smith 1999:154ff).

\textsuperscript{20} During the Russian Empire and Soviet Union terminology, such as \textit{ethnic, ethnic groups} etc. was not widely used. \textit{Nationality} was the established term even for ethnic groups that did not enjoy recognition in relation to any Russian territory or recognized Soviet nation (Suny 1993, 2001; Zimmerman-Brodsky 2003 among others). The word \textit{Narodnost} (“people”) a sub-category to Nationality not requiring a territorial affinity was also briefly in use during Soviet times (Broers 2001:4). However, in this text I will use a terminology that involves ethnic groups, ethnic etc. with the aim to include all minorities, with or without land claims/associations.
Eventually, Georgian nobility was integrated in the state apparatus of the Russian Empire (Suny 1994:65f). The Georgian noble elite was, from being politically divided, united under Russian influence in the mid nineteenth century Georgia (Suny 1994:75).

Georgian serfs (villagers, farmers, shepherds, etc.) were thus not highly affected by the Russian domination in everyday life since it was mainly Georgian aristocratic families that interacted with the Russians (Suny 1994:79). However, after a series of peasant uprisings, starting with Megrelians in Samegrelo against the Megrelian noble Dadiani family, the Russians decided to abolish serfdom in 1861 (Suny 1994:96f). This resulted in discontent among some of the Georgian aristocracy since many lost their primary economic reliance.

The noble families who benefitted from the reforms turned automatically into elites promoted by the Russian Empire. This inspired to anti-Russian movements in Georgia but they were all just minor threats with little or no real effects (Suny 1994:98). Similar processes of favoring certain groups in the Russian Empire were seen also elsewhere. This kind of politics resulted in that different ethnic groups enjoyed different prestige and acknowledgment during Imperial Russia’s reign over Georgia (Coene 2010:126).

The Ottoman Empire existed as an opposing power to the interest of the Russian Empire in the Caucasus region. As they earlier dominated major parts of the Black Sea coast of Georgia, the people populating the area often had ties with the Ottomans. From the whole Caucasus area around 2.5 million Caucasians left for the Ottoman Empire during the period 1859-1920 (Coene 2010:127). This was an effect of both Russian politics, forcing indigenous ethnic groups to either adapt to Russian dominance or to move, and of Ottomans urging former populations to reunite with their Muslim brethren (Coene 2010:128). The many migrations and resettlements of various ethnic groups in the Caucasus and the Ottoman Empire during this time can be pictured as ethnic “seismological waves” with cohorts of ethnic groups, either allied with the Russians or the Ottomans, moving back and forth, stretching into each other’s territories.

National awareness among the Georgians was on its rise through national romanticism that flourished among the Georgian elite in the late nineteenth century, reaching everyone that was literate. This was a direct aftereffect of Russian education made available for Georgian elites. Many Georgian national classics were written during this era. Georgian language as an identity marker was stressed upon and served as a definitive differentiator towards other ethnic groups (Suny 1994:128fff). Due to heavy losses for the Russian Empire during the First World War, Russian troops withdrew from the Caucasus area thus allowing Georgia to
become independent (Coene 2010:131). In 1918 Georgia enjoyed both German and later British protection in order to avoid Turkish colonization. Georgian independence lasted from 1918-1920 and was forcibly incorporated in the Soviet Union in 1921.

This short historical genealogy is by no means complete, but it gives us a basic understanding of the situation in pre-Soviet times from where we can proceed in understanding the complex situation of Georgia during the Soviet Union. Historically has Georgia been a territory where different ethnic groups have coexisted. The land has been ruled by different powers allowing different degrees of independence. The Russian Empire allowed certain development and triggered the initial spark of national/ethnic identity among the Georgians, promoted by the educated Georgian elite.

### 3.1.1 Megrelian Concerns

That Kartuli today still is a vital Georgian identity marker have had serious effects on Megrelians, especially since they primarily speak/spoke the Megruli. During Russian domination over Georgian lands Russian ethnographers and linguists attempted to cover and organize the local linguistic and cultural varieties. Based on their specific language, Megrelians were seen as a separate ethnic group, compared to other Georgians. A written Megruli standard was introduced but was unsuccessfully implemented. Also newspapers were published in Megruli (Broers 2001:6). Even if Kartuli was the literary language before Russian domination its use was limited to the nobility among Megrelians. Western Georgia was (and is still) heavily influenced and associated with agrarian communities and lifestyles. Education was not widely available limiting the implementation of Kartuli among the Megrelians. Megruli was (is) thus the main language of communication in this region (Broers 2001:5f).

Even though, Georgian intellectuals opposed this development, Imperial Russia initiated what later come to develop into the Soviet policies of ethnic stratification. So, even if the Russians “united” Georgia under its rule the inhabitants of Georgian territories were divided into ethnic categories by Russian intellectuals. Megrelians who have had little connection with eastern parts of Georgia were at the same time clustered together with east Georgians as well as separated from them due to these policies (Broers 2001:5f). Hence, affirming that they differ from other Georgians and form a unique ethnic group.
3.2 THE SOVIET NATIONAL PROJECT
During the formation of the Soviet state the Bolshevik regime claimed the lands of the former Russian Empire. By doing so, the Bolsheviks also inherited an integral “problem” of ethnic pluralism that either was neglected, or was not conceived as a problem, by Imperial Russia (Suny 2001:7). The territory of the Russian Empire was inhabited by a plethora of ethnic groups that were as many as they were diverse, spread over the nations within the empire’s borders. Although the Russian Empire designated local elites and nobility into service of the empire the integration of the locals was limited, especially in the peripheral parts. Due to this, customs, languages, religious practices etc. were maintained (Suny 2001:41).

The Bolshevik did also not see any need for the Soviet Union to be ethnically homogenous. Class solidarity would overcome any obstacle founded on ethnic awareness, religion, language, customs etc. Each ethnic group would thus have equal rights to express their uniqueness (Zisserman-Brodsky 2003:20). Nevertheless, the Russians were still the dominant group and their domination was essential for the strategy to be fruitful. Russians portrayed the best example of a Soviet citizen and this example was to be emulated by other Soviet citizens.

The hierarchy within the Soviet federal model determined to what degree different regions enjoyed autonomy. Dina Zisserman-Brodsky (2003:24) states that a hierarchy among the different regions and ethnic groups was a causal effect of this policy. Implanted within this understanding of ethnic hierarchy also led way for non-equal rights among the ethnic groups and gave the means to promote ethnic stratification among the Soviet population.

Ethnic stratification was developed in the 1920s and further as internal passports were introduced where nationality and origin was declared. The Soviet Union hence turned into a state which formation was formed of units based of ethnic political aspects. This guaranteed the ethnic groups’ territorial identity and cultural and educational institutions in the local language (Suny 1993:101). Ethnic origins were associated with customs and languages as well as embedded hierarchical societal Soviet positions.

This policy, called nativization, was initiated in the 1930s and was an ongoing Soviet project, resulting in an institutionalization of ethnic groups as a part of the Soviet state apparatus. Minority languages without writing systems were provided with alphabets aiming to establish a standardized version of each language (Suny 1993:102). The aim was to implement education as a natural part of Soviet society and to reach as many citizens as
possible. Local dialects and languages were granted literary language status. The dialects and languages were documented and systematically refined (Suny 1993:101f).

National, ethnic and territorial awareness among the Soviet population was an automatic result of the nativization process. Another policy following nativization involved the promotion of local languages and dialects in the governance of national territories. The implementation of these new literary languages in the state apparatus aided the politicization process of the non-Russian Soviet citizens (Suny 1993:105).

The process of nativization also resulted in territorial awareness among the Soviet ethnic groups. This territorialization replaced earlier identities founded on religion and traditions hence initiating and increasing a perception of territorial belonging. The territorial belonging intensified as people migrated internally or were displaced (due to Stalin’s displacement politics), creating diaspora communities within the Soviet Union (Suny 1993:110). This was especially noticeable in the Caucasus area (Suny 1993:111).

Local traditions were spread all over the Soviet Union and with time you could easily associate music, dances, languages, customs etc. with certain regions and people from those regions. On a local level, ethnographic and local art museums were established as a part of the educational process. Local folklore and traditions were carefully documented.

The politics that followed later, Russianization i.e. implementing Russian language, culture in non-Russian cultures and regions bore little fruit in Georgia. This also counts for Russification (the process of changing non-Russian ethnic identities into Russian) that also was poorly executed in the Caucasus region (Coene 2010:87f).

3.2.1 Effects on Megrelians
Megrelians were documented as a separate ethnic group until 1930 and were then included in a wider category of Georgians, according to Soviet demography. Megrelians however, continued to refer to themselves as Megrelians rather than Georgians. Georgian intellectuals worked intensively to “civilize” peasant Megrelians by advocating for the use of Kartuli and declaring Megruli as a mere dialect (Broer 2001:7). The elite promoted a Georgian “high culture” that would better represent this “age of development” thus opposing the Megrelian rural and peasant way of life associated with backwardness.

Another effect on Megrelians was at a political level. They were represented in the Soviet state apparatus both at a local Georgian level at in the wider all covering Soviet level. Lavrenti Beria, a Megrelian and chief over the Soviet secret police was accused by Joseph
Stalin (who came from the city Gori in central Georgia) of collaboration with western powers. Stalin was convinced that Beria and other Megrelians in the Georgian branch of the communist party aimed for separatism. Stalin decreased Beria’s sphere of influence alongside with other Megrelians accusing them for treachery. It was later cleared that these accusations were fabricated. This event became known as “The Megrelian Affair” (Suny 1994:287).

As we can see Soviet policies have clear post-Soviet consequences. The implementation of ethnic awareness still exists in post-Soviet countries and this is especially the case in the Caucasus region. As we shall see, notions and stereotypical representations of Megrelians are highly affected by these policies. Also the Megrelian Affair can be included in the contribution in the “making” of Megrelian representations, but in this occasion on a political level, thus fueling also other representations from official institutions.

3.3 CHALLENGES IN GEORGIAN POST-SOVIET NATION BUILDING

As noted above Georgia differs compared to other nations in the Caucasus in the sense that it is extensively ethnically diverse to the extent that in regions with predominately Azeri and Armenian population is knowledge of Georgian very limited; in the remote mountain region of Svaneti is Svanuri the main language of communication; in Samegrelo Megruli; Russians, Jews, Greeks live side by side in cities and the countryside. Russian is widely known and often functions as lingua franca. As we shall see, the ethnic and sub-ethnic mosaic of Georgia must be taken into account when discussing the challenges of the country’s nation state building.

Rejecting Soviet rule in 1989, Georgia embraced revolutionary nationalism. After independence in 1991, the first democratically elected Georgian president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, led political campaigns advocating the dominance of ethnic Georgians over others. Even if he had supporters all over Georgia the main region, from where he also originated, associated with Zviadists (the name of his supporters) was Samegrelo (De Waal 2010:132). Gamsakhurdia aimed to create a unitary Georgia where Georgians formed the fundamental aspects of the nation’s society both politically and socially. Notably, Abkhazian and Ossetian minorities were afraid that their autonomy would be violated in establishing the Georgian nation state (Hille 2010:226). Six areas in Soviet Georgia had enjoyed different degrees of autonomy (Abkhazia enjoying the highest), and as denoted above, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia faced difficulties in uniting the people of different autonomous regions (Cornell 2000: 130).
Recent history has showed us the consequences of Soviet national policies of ethnic stratification and nativization that played a significant role initiating the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in 1992, with tens of thousands casualties as well as approximately 250,000 IDPs forced to move to other parts of Georgia (Coene 2010:149f). The recent war in South Ossetia in 2008 can also be seen as a consequence of the ethnic stratification and nativization policies (Coene 2010:154).

Inter-Georgian conflicts also arose in the aftermaths of the declaration of Georgian independence. Quite shortly after becoming president, Gamsakhurdia lost in popularity. Due to his autocratic position, behavior and anti-democratic actions, the opposition made a radical act and launched an armed attack on the president in 1991. In 1992 Gamsakhurdia was overthrown by the opposition and Eduard Shevardnadze (former Soviet politician) was appointed as new president. (Hille 2010:243).

Samegrelo was the region mainly supporting Gamsakhurdia and Megrelians were associated with the Zviadist movement. The Zviadists led several uprisings against Eduard Shevardnadze’s regime. Zviadists were also understood as a separatist movement (Coene 2010:155f). However, after the death of Gamsakhurdia the Zviadists lost their leader and dissolved (Coene 2010:156). The civil war and the Zviadist movement have had severe effects on how Megrelians are perceived. Yet again, Soviet ethnic stratification policies provided the means for diverging people into ethnic and sub-ethnic groups even in post-Soviet times.

Current politics in Georgia tries to deal with the aftereffects of ethnic stratifications that has, as we have seen, initiated or played a big role in several conflicts in Georgia. However, much indicates the opposite development. As English is being promoted Russian gradually disappears as lingua franca among Georgian citizens (including Russians, Armenians Azeri etc.) it loses its uniting element (Coene 2010:167f). A possible consequence of this policy is further exclusion from society for others than Georgians. Georgia also faces difficulties dealing with corruption, political instability and unfair treatment of people from different regions. Socio-economic problems are an integral part of nowadays Georgian society, associating certain problems with specific social or ethnic groups. The IDPs also function as a reminder of conflicts and divisions within Georgia thus increasing the notion of a future of possible uncertainties that might lead to new armed conflicts (Coene 2010:168).
3.3.1 Where do the Megrelians fit in?
In the case of the Megrelian population, due to Russian and Soviet politics, the Megrelian Affair, memories of the Zviadist movement, the loss of Abkhazia and the Megrelian IDPs etc. certain associations regarding Megrelians have developed. Although, stereotypical and prejudicial representations of Megrelians existed before Soviet Georgia, recent events increased certain aspects of how they are perceived.

The understanding of Megrelians as different, with characteristics such as troublemakers, dishonest tricksters, having separatist tendencies etc. is very alive in Georgia. Megrelian IDPs from Abkhazia also function as a reminder of war and lost territory hence associating Megrelians with these tragic historical events. The increased interaction between Megrelians and other Georgians due to above mentioned circumstances also contribute in the “making” of Megrelian representations.

Denoted earlier, Megrelians can trace their own history in a different direction than other Georgians due to their “recent” incorporation in a wider contextualized Georgian unity. Megrelian identity (or habitus) can harmonize or disharmonize with Georgian national discourse depending on how it is represented, included, understood and produced as part of Georgian national myths, traditions and collectivity.

4. ANALYSIS
In Georgia I often experienced fixated and prejudicial representations of Megrelians. Taken for granted is that Megrelians are a collective societal cultural and sometimes a political unit. This statement was never contested and those I spoke with constantly referred to “Megrelians” without problematizing the collective labeling.

Unraveling these fixated and prejudicial understandings of Megrelians a wide array of topics were revealed to me during field work. As a result of the ethnographic approach I was exposed to outer, inner, political, social and cultural aspects, interrelated to different extents in how Megrelians experience themselves to be represented. The full complexity of the different topics is to vast to be elaborated on in this study and also the short period of time I spent in the field only allows me to present a glimpse of this multifaceted matter.

In this chapter, in accordance with my aim, I will present how Megrelian identity processes interplay with Megrelian representations. From this perspective, by analyzing this interplay, I intend to present answers corresponding to the research questions. Each section in this chapter is based on a Megrelian representation and by focusing on how my informants relate to these
representations aspects of Megrelian identity negotiation will be revealed. Furthermore, Megrelian attitudes and experiences of the production, perception and projection of these representations will also be elaborated on. Based on the two questions above, the correlation between a Megrelian identity with the idea of a Georgian national identity will likewise be examined.

4.1 THE POLITICAL ARENA
Following Smith’s perspective, a nation is established when an ethnic group is politicized. Likewise in order to secure interests of a particular group within a nation is political representations of that group necessary. Smith writes:

“Any ethnie\textsuperscript{21}, then, that aspires to nationhood, must be politicized and stake out claims in the competition for power and influence in the state arena” (Smith 1999:156).

In order for us to understand how this accounts for the Megrelians we will need to take a closer look at the political development in Georgia in the early 1990s. Focusing on the politics of Gamsakhurdia one detects that in the pursuit of establishing a nation state the politicization of ethnic groups is inevitable which corresponds with the above statement of Smith.

Being part of the anti-Soviet national movements Gamsakhurdia understood post-Soviet Georgia as a nation state constituted of ethnic Georgians. Azeris, Armenians, Russians etc. were “guests” due to their minority in numbers (Suny 1994:324f). Important to remember is that even if the objective was to represent all Georgians, Gamsakhurdia and his politics eventually came to primarily represent and be associated with Megrelians.

As the first democratically elected president\textsuperscript{22} of independent Georgia, Gamsakhurdia’s presidential reign was short (six months) and he initially represented what seemed to be a national/ethnic unity of Georgians (1994:326). Thus, embedded in Gamsakhurdia’s political position followed also a political representation. Christopher Prendergast explains that political representations ought to be perceived as substitutes of the group they claim to represent i.e.:

“[…]certain persons stand for other persons as their representatives, a sort of making present the political subject through a process of standing for that subject” (Prendergast 2000:5).

\textsuperscript{21} Term used by Smith among others, basically meaning the same as ethnic group.
\textsuperscript{22} Gamsakhurdia was politically engaged also in Soviet Georgia with a clear nationalistic position (Suny 1994:325-327)
For a short while Gamsakhurdia gained the support of the majority of the Georgians. He was seen as their representative by acting and taking political decisions paralleling a Georgian political stance (Suny 1994:326f).

Looking back we know that his popularity rapidly decreased and Shevardnadze come to enjoy enough support to perform a coup, splitting the Georgians into two opposites. Gamsakhurdia’s position as a political representation was not completely erased and he enjoyed support mainly from Megrelians in Samegrelo. Gamsakhurdia switched from being a Georgian political representation into a Megrelian with consequences for how Megrelians are perceived even today. One can argue that Gamsakhurdia’s support in western Georgia can be traced back to his Megrelian roots due to the region’s historical, ethnic/cultural uniqueness. Following Jenkins’s perspective determining “who is who” (who is Megrelian) was thus easily done based on the knowledge of whom you supported politically. Two informants say:

“Gamsakhurdia was a Megrelian and I am a Megrelian. We share a common history and territory it would be odd if I did not support him and his cause” (Natia)

“Of course, we supported Gamsakhurdia, especially during the civil war. Both he and his famous father 23 were Megrelians and it was natural for us since we ourselves are Megrelians. (Medea)

Linking this to Jenkins the support for Gamsakhurdia can be understood in the light of notions of Megrelian kinship. Moreover, looking again at Smith might unravel important aspects in this specific case. Smith (1999:156) argues that sub-ethnic groups are bound to be politicized so that they can pursue politics favorable for them. It is vital to enter the political arena aiming to secure recognition “elsewhere”, not only politically. In the case of the Megrelians one informant express it like this:

“If Zviad Gamsakhurdia still would have been our president our presence would not have been forgotten about. He always underlined the importance of Megruli and our culture.” (Natia)

In theory, with political influence, is cultural and societal recognition ought to be secured. A sub-ethnic group is hence part yet distinctively separate in a wider ethnic composition, thus also displaying inter-nationalistic segments.

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23 Medea here refers to Konstantine Gamsakhurdia (1891-1975) a famous nationalistic and romantic novelist. He was also politically active with a strong anti-Russian and anti-Soviet emphasis (Suny 1994:233)
Smith (1999:156f) argues that once a group (ethnic or sub-ethnic) has been an integral part of the political arena is it almost impossible for them to be politically disengaged. This is because a dependency of the political representation has been established among those whom are represented. In the Georgian case this suggests that the Megrelians were cautious of not losing their representative in the political sphere, since without political representation, in the long run “accurate” cultural and societal Megrelian representations could not be guaranteed. The vast majority of non-Megrelian Georgians stopped supporting Gamsakhurdia in favor of Shevardnadze (Coene 2010:156).

By pursuing the interests of the represented, influencing the state in their favor might develop into disagreements with other representatives and raise interstate competitions. Certain groups become politically habituated and associated with political movements due to this (Smith 1999:157). In this case Megrelians were/are associated with extremisms and separatism due to the extreme and dictatorial like political ambitions of Gamsakhurdia. This political habituation and association is expressed by one informant:

“As soon as we talk of something that could count as politics, being a Megrelian, we are directly blamed of having separatist intentions. There is no room for fruitful political discussions concerning the importance of our language, culture or intentions. Instantly are we dismissed and accused for wishing to divide Georgia.” (Tamazi)

However, in Smith’s sense, the backing of Gamsakhurdia should not solemnly be based on actions of pure support for his cause, but also as a response towards Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze’s political advancement systematically pushed the Megrelian political representation towards the edge of the Georgian political arena. The process of excluding political Megrelian representations could not proceed without resistance due to the already established Megrelian dependency of their political representation. As explained by one informant:

Shevardnadze intruded in our politics and into our lands with his so called army that we all know consisted of criminals\(^{24}\). Never did we accept him as the rightful president because of his hideous crimes” (Medea)

\(^{24}\) Medea here refers to the Mkhredioni. A paramilitary group existing in the first half of the 1990s famous for looting and other criminal activity. Shevardnadze hired them to vanquish the armed members of the Zviadist movement (Zürcher 2007:138-139).
The first Megrelian representative in post-Soviet Georgia was ultimately erased from the political sphere when Gamsakhurdia died (possible murdered or rumored to have committed suicide) under mysterious circumstances in 1993 (Coene 2010:156). The Zviadists dissolved and Megrelian politicians were absorbed into other political parties.

Proposing that Beria also represented Megrelians, pointing to the Megrelian Affair, he and his Megrelian associates were similarly erased from the political arena during Soviet times in 1951 by Stalin from central Georgia (Suny 1994:287). Even if much suggests that this was a result of Stalin’s paranoid nature, the result was nevertheless that Megrelian political representatives were excluded from the political arena due to mistrust in their character. Megrelians seized to exist as a separate political group due to Stalin. One informant says:

“The suppression of Megrelians existed even during the Soviet Union. Stalin persecuted all Megrelians that were politically active accusing them for disloyalty. This is when it all started. People are afraid of our capability” (Giorgi)

Both Gamsakhurdia and Beria were seen as traitors, wary and distrustful favoring mainly Megrelians when Shevardnadze and Stalin represented a wider undivided entity. Based on this perspective and how Megrelians have been politically represented the notions of them as favoring separatist and disharmonic politics is understandable. Furthermore, this affects those Megrelians that did not support Gamsakhurdia since Megrelians often are stereotyped and perceived as a cohesive unit. Politicians of Megrelian origin are represented in the parliament but no party has a sole Megrelian political stand.

In Russia on the other hand the exiled Megrelian Nationalist Party claims to exist advocating strongly for a separate Megrelian nation state. How vivid this party is and how many followers it has is not clear. It was not recognized by those Megrelians I spoke to during my field research. If now this party exists it does aggravate the perception of Megrelian politics as separatist.

From a perspective connected to Smith, the ongoing integration of this ethnic fragment i.e. Megrelians in the construction of current day Georgia as a historical ethnic unit has effects on Megrelians. Based on the information from my informants and their view on historio-political events shows that there is a need among some Megrelians to be politically represented as to ensure their affinity to a wider Georgian incorporative politics. The challenge is however; as

25 Mingrelian Nationalist Party (Website).
soon as Megrelian politics are mentioned it is immediately assumed to be separatist in nature. Perhaps not always without grounds due to their history.

It should however be noted that nowadays some Megrelians support and some oppose the current president Micheil Saakashvili that comes from Tbilisi. This was also evident among my informants. There is no united Megrelian political attitude. Due to the violent past associated with the civil war between supporters of Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze almost all of my informants supported a politically united Georgia but where Megrelian concerns were more integrated.

As we see for most Megrelians, identity based on political foundations is mainly an assumption connected to historical events. An assumption and connection that still is very much alive nevertheless. However, if Megrelian politics function as foundation for identity the Megrelian identity does not wholly correlate with the idea of a Georgian national identity. This since separatism is then understood to be part of Megrelian politics and thus part of the Megrelian habitus.

4.2 NATIONAL OR/AND REGIONAL ASSOCIATONS
Focusing on how Megrelians are portrayed, as category, they represent a region putting them as one of many in the pluralistic Georgian society (Coene 2010:199). At the ethnographic museum in Tbilisi alongside Svan-towers and Adjarian Lazi-houses, are Megrelian houses and their lifestyle represented as rural, traditional and hospitable. The houses are well kept and traditional instruments and furniture are displayed as well as the structure of the famous Megrelian garden and agricultural system. Their rural and agrarian lifestyle is explained as most refined.

In this case, following Hall (2003:16), the displayed houses and gardens function as examples or specimens of Megrelians and their life. Mental associations are supposed to locate Megrelians in their immediate setting, surrounded by other Georgian regional representations, as a local variation but part of a greater Georgia.

Such institutions as national ethnographic museums aid in the understanding of a unified national community despite regional differences. The fraternal bonds overrule externally represented differences and are interpreted as the main uniting factor (Anderson 2006:7). This is a notion among many Megrelians I met. One informant explains:
“Georgia is one but with many different corners. We are all the same but with slight varied characteristics and traditions. Our Megrelian houses and gardens are prized among Georgians and we are proud to be Georgians, but with a Megrelian touch. (Lali)

The architectural and lifestyle variations are interpreted as originating from an original ethnic group or way of life. The territorial imagination is also confirmed due to the uniting aspects of bringing all the “corners” of Georgia together.

From another perspective, Megrelians can be singled out along with other sub-ethnic groups represented as something not fully representative as Georgians. Characteristic traits are mentally associated with the representations in the museum confirming their distinctive difference associated to their territorial origin. Including the Dadiani Palace Museum in Zugdidi that represents Megrelian distinctiveness, high aristocracy, history, prosperity etc. in this discussion opens up for an alternative association for how Megrelians are understood. With an emphasis on their uniqueness and separate territorial past a history that does not include eastern Georgia is available.

From Anderson’s perspective the perception of Megrelian territories as separate plays an important role in excluding non-Megrelians as well as including Megrelians in an imagined community. Moreover, following Jenkins, the notion of common territories may function as symbols of kinship. Smith (1999:110) argues that a compact and distinct territory is needed as a point of reference for ethnic minorities within a nation. This also accounts for Megrelians assumed to be sub-ethnic. Those that have moved to Tbilisi often nostalgically emphasize on the importance of their territorial origin:

“Every time that I am in Tbilisi I miss my home. Even if I make a career in Tbilisi I will never sell my family house in Zugdidi. The nature in Samegrelo is so great, far more beautiful than other places in Georgia. You can grow anything and have a truly good life” (Akaki)

“I miss Samegrelo. I go there as often as I can. We have a great and beautiful garden where we spend the summer evenings. I live not far from the Black Sea and I almost feel trapped here in Tbilisi, surrounded by the mountains. (Maia)

Smith (1999:29) argues that to be separated from ones homeland creates a uniting bond among those who associate themselves with this territory and its people.

The territorial alignment is however difficult to sustain since a large number of Megrelians do not associate themselves with Samegrelo. Many Tbilisan Megrelians with IDP-status
rather connect themselves with the territory of Abkhazia. Here territorial affinity to Samegrelo fails to function as a uniting factor for the Megrelians:

“Abkhazia is something of a “gold coast” in this region and I am proud to find my roots there. Samegrelo is of no importance to me. The loss of my homeland is my greatest pain and I wish for nothing more than to be able to move back.” (Zurabi)

“You cannot imagine the beauty of Abkhazia. In Sokhumi we had a very good life not comparable to the one I have in Zugdidi today. The air is fresh there and the water is clear. We lived in abundance. An ideal place and everyone else envied us for living there” (Elene)

The loss of Abkhazia as well as the IDP-situation serves as uniting, separating Abkhazian Megrelians from other Megrelians. This also includes Megrelian IDPs living in Zugdidi.

Megrelian lifestyle in Samegrelo and Abkhazia (Gali) is considered to be rather “uncivilized”, rural and backward compared to the life in central and eastern Georgia. The fertile soil that makes it into a natural agricultural region proposes a territorial association that includes aspects of backwardness and lack of educated people connected to a rural way of life. Megrelians living in cities also claim that the real Megrelian is rural and lives a traditional life, working the soil:

“We call us Megrelians but there is little that differ us from our neighbors. The life in the country is the true life of a Megrelian. There is a rural and honest pride among them. They adhere to traditions and are not affected by what is going on here in the city” (Shorena)

“You should make a visit to a village. There you will see real Samegrelo, meet true Megrelians and experience true hospitality. (Ekaterine)

Samegrelo as a territorial representation does hence function differently depending on who you ask. Officially is it portrayed as a national region forming a part of a wider Georgia but depending on perspectives can it also function as a node for a separate history and past providing Megrelians with a “lost” or “occupied” homeland:

“We have our own history and our territory has been far greater than it is today. It expanded along the coast of the Black Sea past current day Abkhazia and all way down into modern Turkey. It is only in recent history that we form a unity with eastern Georgia.” (Tamazi)
If Megrelian territory of Abkhazia is included in this notion of homeland will it be possible to incorporate IDPs in the understanding of a Megrelian unified territory as a base for a common regional affinity. Noted is also that nowadays many Megrelians that live in Tbilisi consider the city to be their home:

“I have lived in Tbilisi my whole life. It would be strange to call Samegrelo my home. This does not mean that I am not Megrelian however.” (Irakli)

“I am probably Tbilisian by now. My life is here in Tbilisi. I would like to have a better connection with Samegrelo but there is just nothing there for me. (Tamta)

Samegrelo and Abkhazia are only nostalgic ancestral memories at best for many Megrelians that made a life in Tbilisi. Still, these territories play a significant role for Megrelians in their identity negotiation. Samegrelo and Abkhazian territories with Megrelian populations function as a prime reference point for a Megrelian identity to all my informants. The territorial representations are interpreted differently depending on perspective. Formally, Samegrelo is a Georgian territory but at the same time it represents distinctiveness as a rural “underdeveloped” and a backward striving region. Many Megrelians are associated and associate themselves with Samegrelo but IDPs rather relate themselves to Abkhazia. Some associate themselves with Tbilisi with little or insignificant physical connection to Samegrelo or Abkhazia. Still, nonetheless the regional associations are ever prevalent in Georgian everyday society. According to my informants, in order to be Megrelian, you are required to locate your, or at least your family’s origin, in Megrelian territories. Here we clearly see what Jenkins label as the internal-external dialectic of identification, connected to territory, and how it interplays with Megrelian self-understanding.

4.3 LANGUAGE OR DIALECT?
The most obvious feature that represents Megrelians as a group and also attests for a distinct ethnic past is Megruli. The linguists that I spoke to all agreed that Megruli does not fulfill the scientific criteria for earning the status of a language. One linguist from Samegrelo argued that it could be defined as a speech but definitely not as a language. This confirms Smith’s statement that intellectuals often contribute in promoting nationalism by advocating in favor of a national language dismissing other languages of their status.
As noted previously the language has attracted the attention of non-Georgian linguists arguing in favor of determining Megrelians as separate from other Georgians based on this aspect\(^\text{26}\). Apart from a few Megrelians I met, differentiating Megrelians as separate from other Georgians in an international context was comprehended as aftereffects of Russian policies with interfering effects embraced by some Megrelians only:

“There is no difference between Megrelians and other Georgians. Our dialect is nice and so but it does not mean that we are not Georgians. Russians have systematically throughout history tried to separate and bring disorder to Georgia with their ethnic politics.” (Elene)

“We are all Georgians. It is good to know Megruli or perhaps Svanuri or Lazuri but it does not make you into something other than Georgian” (Shorena)

Some though do not agree on this:

“Our language is not Georgian. Every Megrelian ought to be aware of that. The language is ancient and connects us to our Megrelian past.” (Tamazi)

“We are taught that Megruli is a dialect but I think it is more than that. Coming from Samegrelo I know that our language has existed separately from Georgian. That makes us into something different. Still Georgians, but different” (Tamta)

During my time in Tbilisi and other non-Megrelian areas I experienced that the language appears as a distinguishing marker for who is considered to be Megrelian. It is often assumed that Megrelians prefer to keep to themselves in situations including other Georgians. On informant explained with a smile on her face:

“Even during a supra\(^\text{27}\), if there are two Megrelians at either end of the table we will be loud and shout to each other in Megruli during the whole gathering”. (Manana)

Interesting is that quite many Megrelians that I spoke with, both in Tbilisi and Samegrelo, revealed that they had limited or only passive knowledge of Megruli. This was particularly noticeable among those younger than thirty:

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\(^{26}\) See Vamling and Tchantouria (2005) among others.

\(^{27}\) Ritualized Georgian dinner including a tamada, toastmaster. Traditionally a social gathering for weddings, birthdays etc. (Coene 2010:201).
“I am Megrelian even if I do not speak or understand the language very well. I would like to learn it better but I only speak it with my grandfather and other close relatives” (Akaki)

“I can speak Megruli but I rarely do so. Not even with my boyfriend who is also Megrelian. When I hear older people speak it is hard for me to understand nuances and exactly what they are talking about” (Lali)

The language was said to be of great emotional value to almost all of with I spoke to and appreciated as important:

“Megruli is such a rich language with so many variations making it very beautiful. Some words have a deeper meaning when it is expressed in Megruli instead of Kartuli. When I say brother in Megrelian the emotional bond goes deep. There is no comparison in ordinary Kartuli. (Tinatin)

Orally, Megruli is represented as a component of regional Georgian folklore. Several songs and dances make part of a wide repertoire that constitutes the diversity of Georgian folkloristic traditions. Megrelian songs are often sad and melancholic but likewise there are songs and dances of hard working farmers and portraits of witty Megrelians. The folkloristic representations carry and convey stereotypical connotations of Megrelians. Images and language work as symbols of a representational system (Hall 2003:5) that creates and recreates the image and understanding of Megrelians through the symbols. Again are Megrelians connected to rural life, they are liars, untrustworthy and so on.

Due to the high number of Megrelian IDPs from Abkhazia residing in Tbilisi, Zugdidi and other settlements is the language to a great extent represented as a social category. The language is associated with low-status, the street and unemployment. Even though some IDPs have succeeded in making a life outside the IDP-settlements and have become integrated in Georgian society many IDP-Megrelians live under poor conditions. You often hear Megruli at the bazaar and the main one in Tbilisi is said to be overtaken by Megrelians. In Zugdidi, it is said to be overtaken by IDPs speaking Megruli and Russian. One informant says:

“You cannot go to the bazaar anymore without meeting a Megrelian that tries to fool you. I know that the IDPs have a difficult life but they are everywhere. I try to avoid bargain with them since I do not feel comfortable in their company” (Irakli)
In this specific circumstance is Megruli and Megrelians connected to a specific class or behavior both in Tbilisi and Zugdidi. This perspective suggests an overall low status of Megrelians in connection to their language.

Two distinct dialects of Megruli exist, the Northwestern Zugdidi-Samurzakano and the Southeastern Senaki dialects (with several local variations). People from eastern Samegrelo sometimes hesitate to use Megruli in Zugdidi since they have noticed that their dialect is made fun of and not appreciated there. Eastern Megruli is to a higher extent under the influence of Kartuli whereas many Megrelians from that area live in the borderlands of Samegrelo and central-west region Imereti.

Lacking an official literary standard is an obstacle in forming a Megrelian community where the language as a uniting aspect is central. Anderson (2005:42) points to the advancement of an oral language into a written to become an instrument of power for advancing in society. As noted above the fixated written language unites and creates an imaginary bond among those who are literate. The current lack of a written standard does not allow for Megruli to be promoted into the equal status of Kartuli which cripples the uniting aspects of thus losing its power aspects. It remains as a dialect of Kartuli; as the speech of the uneducated and rural Megrelians. From the perspective of Hall, only through proper Kartuli can Megrelians access fixated and “accurate” information of themselves that manifests in the conceptual maps that they share with other Georgians. They officially exist through the use of Kartuli.

Although it lacks an official written standard people do write in Megruli. Mostly it is used in informal texts using Georgian letters:

“When I write text messages with my phone or on Facebook to my Megrelian friends I use Megruli.” (Manana)

“I only use Kartuli at the university or in other official circumstances. When I chat on Facebook with my family or friends in Samegrelo it is almost entirely in Megruli. I enjoy both to speak and to write in Megruli.” (Maia)
On the internet there also exists a Megrelian Wikipedia site\(^{28}\) in Meqreli and a pro-Megreli Facebook group with more than 6000 members with a vivid forum with articles and internet links in Megreli\(^{29}\). Other internet sites also exist promoting a written Megreli.

Books with poetry in Megreli as well as a Kartuli-Megreli dictionary have been published\(^{30}\). Even the celebrated national poem *Knight in the Panther’s Skin*\(^{31}\) was translated into Megreli with reactions of disdain from Georgian intellectuals. The translation was almost viewed as sacrilegious (Broers 2001:21). I was told that there was a newspaper in Abkhazia rumored to use Russian letters for writing Megreli. In Tbilisi a newspaper is issued for a Megrelian public written however in Kartuli. Many informants would also like to see a newspaper issued in Megreli:

“It would be nice to read the news in Megreli. It should be issued from Samegrelo. I would improve my language and we would reach those few with poor knowledge of Kartuli” (Ketevani)

“My father, he does not speak Kartuli very well but we live in Tbilisi. He has been speaking Meqreli and Russian his whole life. A Megrelian newspaper or any other media would of course be of great value to him or any other in his situation.” (Giorgi)

This development and the existence of written Megreli reveal a reaction against the official discourse of Megreli merely being seen as a dialect. Continuing the work initiated by Russians in the nineteenth century promoting Megreli as a proper language might develop the language into a strong symbol for Megrelian unity.

As Megrelians mostly are Christian Orthodox and Kartuli is the sacred language for the Georgian Orthodox liturgy, the language connects present day Megrelians with other Georgians and eastern Georgia sharing a “divine” history. The church and church service has however served as forum for advocating Megreli as a proper language. One informant says:

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\(^{28}\) Megrelian Wikipedia (Website)

\(^{29}\) See Appendix 4 for extracts from the websites.

\(^{30}\) Examples of books are *Megruli Poezia* (Mingrelian poetry), Bakmi’ Tbilisi, Georgia 2007; Alio Qobalia, *Megruli leksikoni* (Mingrelian dictionary), Tbilisi 2010, Artanuji, among others.

\(^{31}\) This epic poem (*Vepkhistq´aosani* in Georgian and *Uilosht’q´ebani* in Megreli) written by by Shota Rustaveli in the 12th century is considered as one of the most sacred texts containing the true essence of Georgian values, traditions, moral and ethics. It is taught in school and Georgians are expected to be able to recite central passages of the poem (Suny 1994:39).
“I attended a church service in the countryside where the liturgy was held in Megruli. I was so surprised and pleased at the same time. I did not know that it existed before but one of my friends has showed me recorded church services in Megruli on the internet. (Tamazi)

The “violation” of proper Georgian as the literary and sacred language suggests attitudes among Megrelians that promotes a divided Georgia. Yet again Megrelians are associated with separatist intentions and with a distrustful character not fully in sympathy with other Georgians.

From the perspective of Smith, the merge of Megrelians into the overarching category of Georgians is not without problems since intentions are prevalent in revitalizing a Megrelian identity with its own language as core. As depicted above a territory can likewise be at hand for this process. The solidarity through an official language as Smith (2009:82) proposes is only an assumption and evidently not enough for some Megrelians advocating in favor for an official recognition of it as a proper language.

The stigmatized position of Megruli is contested by the documentation of the language; the production of lexicons and grammar books; printed Megrelian poetry and the translation of The Knight in the Panther’s skin etc. This brings forth Megrelian intellectuals that earlier never existed since Kartuli was the language of the educated. The promotion of a language through intellectual activities representing a higher class that represents a bigger group aids the language in its pursuit of official recognition (Smith 1999:167). With a literary tradition to rely upon the Megrelians may emancipate from representations connected to backwardness, rural life and peasantry. Megrelian as a sacred religious language could also contribute in establishing a Megrelian Orthodox unity challenging the position of the Georgian Orthodox church´s importance.

The question of Megruli’s credibility is divided even among Megrelians. The lack of knowledge; the existence of different dialects; no official utility; not wish to be represented as being part of a low social class etc. hinders the language in becoming a uniting aspect.

Attempts exit nevertheless that aims to create a literary standard that makes it possible for Megrelians to assemble around a standardized version of the language. Despite the attempts though, in official national discourse, Megruli is still considered merely as a dialect.

Additionally, the use of Megruli on the internet establishes a unity among those also residing outside of Georgia. According to those Megrelians I have met that have lived in Russia explained that the Megruli is the inter-Megrelian language of communication, not
Increased internet activity through forums and websites might unite Megrelians, no matter where they reside, as a transnational community.

4.5 NAMES AND DESCENT

Your surname in Georgia reveals your heritage and where and with whom you belong and are associated with. The surnames often reveal your ancestral roots and different regions in Georgia are traditionally associated with certain variations of surnames. This is common knowledge among Georgians of all background and it is with little effort a Georgian can categorize someone based on information of a person’s surname. Surnames ending with –shvili are traditionally central and eastern Georgian. The ending –dze is considered central as well as Adjarian and Gurian. The ending –iani is traditionally associated with Svan people (Coene 2010:200).

It is also rare that you switch your surname when you marry. Even if people to a greater extent leave their home region, mainly for Tbilisi or Kutaisi, than they used to and Svans and Megrelians live all over Georgia the surname associations remain. However, the associations are decisive and do not always correspond to what people actually associate themselves with. So, static as these associations may seem, they contain contested truths of origins and associations; especially in the case of the Megrelians.

In Samegrelo and among Megrelians in and from Abkhazia the surnames tend to end with –ia, -ua or –ova (Coene 2010:200). These endings are considered Megrelian and also apply to those born elsewhere in Georgia thus representing a Megrelian unity that transcends territorial affinity. Informants that speak Megrelian well told me that as soon as they discover a surname that sounds Megrelian they automatically switch language to check if the person is a “true” Megrelian or only by name. From Anderson’s perspective is it thus easy to comprehend a Megrelian community based on name associations.

Confirming who is Megrelian by surname likewise facilitates to locate Megrelians historically, politically and socially. From Smith’s perspective is it possible to locate ethnic predecessors by focusing on the surnames. With the surnames as reference is it possible to trace the groups past contributing in the establishment of the genealogy of the group.

Assumed affinity by surname has led to an overestimation of the size of the Megrelian population. One informant says:
“We are everywhere. Just look at the names and you see that we are all over Georgia. Even on TV there are so many with our surnames (Tniatin)

Another one says:

“I believe that there are at least 800 000 of us. That includes of course those living in Russia or anywhere else abroad” (Zurabi)

Many non-Megrelian Tbilisians I spoke to explained that nowadays is the city crowded with Megrelians and the native Tbilisians are the ones who need to adapt to Megrelianess and not the other way around.

However, not everyone with a surname with one of these endings agrees to be Megrelian. In Tbilisi I met several people with Megrelian surnames that did not understand themselves to be Megrelian (only of a distant Megrelian descent). Likewise, they were not considered Megrelian by their friends. In Zugdidi on the other hand I experienced that it was common to cluster those with “appropriate” surnames as part of the Megrelian community. Few as they may be there are also Megrelians with surnames ending with –dze, -shvili or –iani. Among the latter the most famous are the noble Dadiani family. In public discourse it is very unlikely that anyone would assume a Megrelian affiliation based on those endings apart from the famous Dadiani name.

Surnames as criteria for determining a Megrelian affinity is thus not completely without problems although it is common to make this association. People are clustered and associated with Megrelians involuntarily and sometimes without approval. Those Megrelians with “wrong” surname endings have to “prove” their affinity by knowing the language or claim territorial origin. Incorporating Hall in this discussion proposes that the surnames represent a set of concepts and traits associated with behavior, descent, class etc. The conceptual map instantly positions the person and brings forth effects that are noticed in the relations. Non-Megrelians with prejudicial understandings act in one way and Megrelians in another. These dialectic processes of recognition confirm and affect both parts by projecting stereotypes that are already manifested and manifest in people’s conceptual maps. Common perspectives of Megrelians with specific characteristics can thus be related to their surnames.

Focusing further on the surnames connecting it to earlier discussions of political representations we now understand the immediate association of Gamsakhurdia as Megrelian.
His counterpart Shevardnadze had an Adjarian, Gurian or central Georgian affinity. The same symbols of associations counts for the dichotomy Ber-ia (Megrelian ending) - Stalin whose original surname was Djuga-shvili connecting him to central or eastern Georgia. The current president’s surname is Saaka-shvili and the estimated successor Ivani-shvili. Their associations are definitely not Megrelian but as denoted above Saakashvili gain support also from Megrelians.

4.6 THE MEGRELIAN CHARACTER

“During the Soviet Union there was a Megrelian who was appointed to work as an English teacher in a small isolated village in northern Siberia. The pupils were supposed to prepare for higher education at the linguistics department at the Moscow State University. He did not know any English of course, but he still managed to find a way to get the job, you know how Megrelians are. He stayed in the village and taught the poor people Mequru and made them think they were actually learning English. After a couple of years the students finally attended the Moscow University but no one could understand a word of their English. When it became evident what had happened the students were sent back to the village only knowing Mequru and not English. The Megrelian was persecuted and sentenced to serve time in prison for fraud.”

The story above is widely known in Georgia and is by many claimed to be true. The story contains many of the associated traits considered to be part of Megrelian nature and the traits distinguish them from other Georgians. The stereotypical traits of Megrelians remind of their difference that is related to their territorial affinity and language. This suggests that they are not capable of fully representing a Georgian national habitus but rather a regional version or a distinct Megrelian habitus.

To have a natural affinity for being a good liar (and a wish to be one) along with dishonesty are characteristics said to be specifically Megrelian. People explained to me that Megrelians supposedly prize lying but do not lie to or fool any of their own.

During my field work I was warned several times in Tbilisi for travel to Samegrelo since it is inhabited by “dishonest criminals who most probably will try to fool me”. Notions of Megrelians being dishonest and good liars are quite often clarified to be part of the Georgian

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32 Not only Megrelians are considered as noticeably different. Svans are considered as rather stupid and easy to fool, as part of coming from the mountains. People from Racha are generally “slow” and forgetful. Regional stereotyping is part of everyday life and categorization in Georgia. It is also part of Georgian humor with plenty of funny stories involving stereotypes from different regions. Due to their number (Compare with Svans estimated to constitute approximately 15000-30000 and that they are isolated in the mountains) Megrelian stereotypes are by far the most distinct and commonly heard of.
humor. This may also be true but still I met people of different background emphasizing on these Megrelian traits as real.

Through Kartuli and Georgian society are thus Megrelians represented negatively as dishonest and cunning liars. As these traits are understood to be essentially Megrelian they connote Hall’s (1997:24) definition of the reflective approach to representation. From this perspective is language a mirror that reflects something that is “true”. The words “lie”, “liar”, “dishonest” etc. represents thus an essential Megrelianess or Megrelian habitus that is confirmed every time one is exposed to a lie by a Megrelian. This also includes other traits e.g. hard working, humorous rural, backwards striving etc. however the most common representation in this aspect are that they are liars and dishonest.

Megrelians react differently to this assumed essential nature of their character:

“I feel offended. Why do people in Tbilisi think that of us? They do not know how hard we work for Georgia and this is what people think that we are. (Ketevani)

To be offended by the statements are rare and this attitude is the most common:

“When I hear that we are liars I take it as a compliment. This is how it is. You have to be smart when you are with Megrelians. People think that we are liars but they are just not clever enough. We are witty, fast and funny and if you are not, then too bad.” (Tinatin)

“We are not liars or dishonest but we are smart and cunning. Let me illustrate. If a tree is blown down and blocks the road a Svan would just force it open with might. He would go on and on until he or the tree breaks. A regular Georgian would try to discuss with the Svan on how to best arrange for the removal of the tree. While the Svan and Georgian discuss, the Megrelian would have figured out several ways of coming through and made the other two do the work for him”. (Shorena)

Here we see an example of the internal-external dialectic of identity where the presumed nature of the Megrelian habitus is embodied and transformed into something positive by Megrelians. Within the Georgian national discourse, that allows for Megrelians to be represented negatively, they react and resist but resisting and absorbing the representation in this way confirms the representation since it is part of the discourse. This is due to the fact that mainly Megrelians see these traits positively.
In connection to the assumed dishonesty and criminal nature connections are made to a broader criminal network that has Soviet roots. Implied by both Megrelians and non-Megrelians, Georgian criminals that are members of Russian organized crime primarily are Megrelians. The connection with criminality fuels the notion of Megrelians being dishonest and wary. One informant explains:

“If Georgia does not give us the possibility for self-realization they leave us no other choice than to try for ourselves. I do not blame them for becoming criminals or part of Russian criminal organizations” (Tamazi)

To be a criminal is seen as resistance to Georgian dominance and not necessarily as something negative. It should be noted however that many Megrelians were offended when associated with criminality.

As earlier depicted Samegrelo is mainly a rural area with an agrarian tradition. The linguist I met in Samegrelo pointed to the etymological meaning of the word Megrelian (Megreli in Georgian and Margali in Megruli). Historically has Megreli and Margali as words been used in defining a peasant. This means that a rural and agrarian persona is embedded in the linguistic aspects of defining Megrelians. Established understandings, based on ethnographic knowledge, points to that rural life is likewise associated with traditional life in Georgia. Likewise, traditional implies backwards striving and underdeveloped lifestyles. Specific Megrelian traditions are portrayed as old fashioned and not part of modern Georgia, even by some Megrelians:

“The tradition of weepers and loud mourning that are part of our burial rituals are a bit too much. Some even bring an orchestra for this event. It goes on for days or even weeks. It is not the part of the life we live today. […] In the rural areas some still practice “bride napping”, stealing a bride from another village and then force her to marry someone she does not know. This is not who we are today”. (Medea)

Some still revere old traditions:

“If the son in a Megrelian family is unmarried, his fiancée is not welcomed to share a meal with the family’s father. It is not seen as proper behavior from the fiancée if she sits by the same table

33Although not exclusively Megrelians, but Megrelians are said to hold high positions in these organizations traditionally called Thieves with a code of honor (Varese 2001:146).
as the family father. She is not even allowed to enter the room. […] If someone in the family dies we all dress in black for at least forty days. No television, no radio nothing. As a widow, you should dress in a black robe for minimum two years. […] My husband was killed during the war in Abkhazia. Winter came and I did not even wear my winter coat since I should suffer and remember the loss of my husband. Never should I marry someone again”. (Natia)

Among other Georgian widows is it also common practice to dress in black but the Megrelians are considered to exaggerate this. Many shared traditions are seen to be exaggerated when performed by Megrelians. Incorporating Bourdieu in this discussion the habitus of Megrelians does not completely correlate with the national Georgian due to its exaggerated nature. Georgian national discourse emphasizes heavily on the value of traditions but the Megrelian version is aberrant.

Looking again at the quotes above they imply that traditional gender roles are embodied in the Megrelian habitus. Women are subdued by their husbands even after they passed away. I will not make a further gender analysis but it is worth noting since traditional gender roles often are seen as forming part of backward striving lifestyles thus conforming Megrelians as this. In Zugdidi I observed many widows dressed in black robes, both young and old. Perhaps not too odd to see so many widows since several men were killed in the war in Abkhazia and Zugdidi is densely populated with IDPs.

The Megrelian habitus is negotiated constantly. It responds to outer projections by transforming them into connote positive traits, still the habitus or assumed habitus confirms them as aberrant and different from “normal” Georgians. This despite the fact that most Megrelians count themselves as first and foremost Georgian and then Megrelian. Often was it explained to me that eastern Georgians were less Georgian than the Megrelians. Several informants underlined this constantly and proudly told me: “Megrelian – is the highest kind of Georgian”.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS
By dealing with its past as a patron nation of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union, the process of establishing a common foundation for a united Georgian identity is ongoing. The historical interference of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Georgia has contributed to Megrelian identity processes that are noticeable today. As we have seen at various times, Megrelians have been understood as not Georgian but mostly as part of a wider Georgian entity.
Connecting to the aim and research questions, based on the sayings of my informants, we see that Megrelian identity processes are dependent on the existence and idea of other Georgians as counterpart. Constantly are Megrelians referring to who they are i.e. origin, character, language etc. in relation to non-Megrelian Georgians. This notion of understanding is also supported in connection to how they perceive themselves as represented. Generally are Megrelians represented as a one among many variations of Georgians and this comprehension is likewise deeply rooted among most Megrelians. Only a few see themselves as distinctly not Georgian.

Megrelians are represented in various ways and associations and relations, production and reproduction of Megrelian representations are an integral part of Megrelian identity processes. Politic, regional affinity, names, language, and characteristic traits are all representations that Megrelians deal with when determining their “belonging” and identity.

Regarding politics many Megrelians experience to be stigmatized by the deeds and attitude of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Only a minor support for a pure Megrelian political attitude has been detected in this study, but still do Megrelians experience to be associated with stereotyped separatist and extreme politics whenever they are understood as a “political” group.

Megrelians often emphasize on territorial affiliation to, and the rural lifestyle of Samegrelo as important. However those coming from Abkhazia do not share the same affection for Samegrelo as expressed by other Megrelians. Instead Abkhazia is referred to as a territory of great affection. In any case territorial representation is part of the founding elements supporting a Megrelian identity.

Surnames do not offer any reliable foundation in order to judge who is Megrelian and who is not. The surname endings that are considered Megrelian do not necessarily denote a Megrelian person. I met several people with Megrelian surnames that did not consider themselves as Megrelian. However, according to some of my informants is anyone with a Megrelian surname Megrelian.

Megruli is probably the most obvious Megrelian representation. All of my informants have a relationship to the language. Some speak it well, others do not. However, everyone judge it as an important Megrelian identity marker. Although no official written standard Megrelians use it when writing to each other. Books are translated, poetry is written and internet sites favoring Megruli exist. This suggests, even though its official status as merely a dialect, it will continue to exist and function to signify Megrelianess.
The assumed Megrelian character/habitus is very much alive and most Megrelians appreciate the ascribed traits but rather in a positive way. Negative stereotyping from outside is renegotiated and interpreted as denoting a positive trait or as a lack of character of someone not being a Megrelian.

The representations are also acknowledged from “outside”. The associations and representations experienced by Megrelians from “outside” function dialectically as platforms for interaction and identity negotiation. The experienced perspectives and renegotiation of stereotypical traits “construct” them as a representation of a cohesive unit.

Additionally, from an unfavorable perspective for the Megrelians, as soon as a trait is observed or experienced from the “outside” is the stereotype exposed and the differentiative nature, in comparison to other Georgians, confirmed. This challenges their credibility to be considered as good Georgians or fully Georgians.

However, Megrelians are seen nowadays in all positions in Georgian society. Some make a career and live in Tbilisi; others live a quiet life in the rural parts of Samegrelo. They are in many aspects completely similar to other Georgians and mainly see themselves as someone with much in common with the “standard” Georgian. The results of this study hence suggests that, Megrelian identity perhaps does not correlate entirely with the idea of the “standard” Georgian national identity. This does however not mean that the majority of them or others do not consider them as something other than Georgian. Merely as different Georgians.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY MAPS OVER GEORGIA
Sample of maps illustrating the shifting territorial conditions for Megrelians over time.


Map 3. Georgia as a Soviet republic. Megrelian territory is henceforth comprehended as part of Georgia. Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adjara were however autonomous republics within Soviet Georgia (Suny 1994:184).

Map 3. Modern day Georgia including the de facto self governing and separate regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (maps.google.com).
APPENDIX 2. ETHNOGRAPHIC MAP
Map illustrating important places for and from my field work. The map shows sites I have visited and also cities or villages referred to as places of origin for my main informants.

- **Samegrelo**: Main region for the Megrelians and where Megruli predominately is spoken. The approximate location of the village where I stayed with the Megrelian family for seven days is marked “Village”.
- **Gali Region**: Abkhazian territory where Megruli is predominately spoken.
- **Abkhazia**: De facto self-governing and separate region from rest of Georgia. Earlier home for many Megrelians but most fled to other parts of Georgia during the civil war that erupted in 1992. Main languages: Russian and Abkhazian (Except for Gali where Megruli is widely spoken).
- **Svaneti**: Mountainous Region where Svanuri is widely spoken.
- **Autonomous Republic of Adjara**: Self-governing region within Georgian territory since Soviet times.
- **Lazi Community**: Formerly one of the main tribes alongside Megrelians in the ancient kingdom of Colchis. Now only a disappearing remnant consisting approximately of 2000.
- **De facto self-governing region after civil war in 2008. Mainly home to ethnic Ossetians and where Ossetian language is widely spoken.**
APPENDIX 3. QUESTIONAIRRE FOR MY SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS
Tbilisi

- How long have you been living in Tbilisi?
- Why did you move here?
- Have you experienced to be specifically treated as a Megrelian here in Tbilisi?
- Do you have Megrelian friends in Tbilisi?
- Is there a Megrelian community in Tbilisi?
- Do Megrelians “hang out” in certain places?
- What does it mean to be Megrelian?
- Do you have any special customs/traditions/food?
  - Do you follow these traditions?
- Do you have family in Samegrelo/Abkhazia?
  - How often do you see each other?
- What is does “home” (Samegrelo/Abkhazia) mean to you?
- Which dialect/language do you speak? How well?
  - Which language do you speak most often?
  - Here in Tbilisi how often do you speak Megruli?
  - Under which circumstances do you speak Megruli?
- What do you think when Megrelians who do know or want to speak Megruli?
- Is there a need for media in Meguli such as radio/TV/newspaper?
SAMEGRELO

- How long have you been living Samegrelo?
- Were you born here?
- What does it mean to be Megrelian?
- What is does “home” (Samegrelo/Abkhazia) mean to you?
- Do you have any special customs/traditions/food?
  - Do you follow these traditions?
- Do you have Megrelian friends in other regions?
  - Do you travel there?
- Is there a Megrelian community outside Samegrelo?
- Have you experienced to be specifically approached in other regions?
- Which dialect/language do you speak? How well?
  - Which language do you speak most often?
  - Here in Samegrelo how often do you speak Megruli?
  - Under which circumstances do you speak Megruli?
- What do you think when Megrelians do not know or want to speak Megruli?
- Is there a need for a media in Megruli such as radio/tv/newspaper?
APPENDIX 4. WEBSITES IN MEGRULI WEBSITES


Picture 2. Extract from a pro-Megruli Facebook group.
APPENDIX 5. ILLUSTRATIVE PICTURES FROM MY FIELD WORK

Illustrative Pictures from the Giorgi Chitaia Open Air Museum of Ethnography in Tbilisi

a) Side of a Megrelian house from the 19th century transported to Tbilisi from rural Samegrelo. Main building to the right. Winery and grain storage to the left. On the top right in the distance, a Svan Tower.

b) Front and entrance of the same house as above.

c) Portrait of the Master of the House.

d) The best room i.e. guest room. Bassinet on the floor.
e) Wine barrels and wine press outside grain storage house. Wine making is typically considered a man’s assignment.

f) Inside the serfs’ house, displaying various objects such as bassinet and musical instrument Chonguri from western Georgia.

g) Close up Chonguri. The instrument has four strings. The visually similar Panduri instrument from eastern Georgia has three.

h) Model of a rural Megrelian house and garden.
Pictures from Samegrelo


j) Main esplanade in the center of Zugdidi.

k) Residential houses in Zugdidi.
1) The radio station *Atinati* in Zugdidi, where I "hung out" with Megrelian teens.

m) Unfortunately the only picture from the village I stayed in. Taken from a car window.

Easter Monday with a Megrelian Family in Tbilisi

o) On Easter Monday in Georgia is it common to remember, eat and drink with your deceased relatives at the family grave. Here a Megrelian family with a widow dressed in black that invited me to celebrate with them.

p) Picture of me and the family.

q) Easter food. *Paska* on the top, a pastry traditionally eaten during Easter. *Sulguni* cheese in the center. Colored eggs at the left symbolizing the blood of Christ.
Megrelian IDPs

r) The big bazaar in Tbilisi. Said to be “overtaken” by Megrelian traders and IDPs.

s) Small area for planting in an IDP-settlement in Didi Dighomi, Tbilisi.

t) IDP-settlement outside Tbilisi housing many Megrelians from Abkhazia.

u) Shorena’s room in an old hospital that serves as an IDP-settlement in central Tbilisi.
All Pictures were taken with my camera during my fieldwork in Georgia in the beginning of March to the end of April in 2012.