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## **The Effects of the Pandemic: The State, Citizens, and Ways of Communication**

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## **The Effects of the Pandemic: The State, Citizens, and Ways of Communication**

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper explores the impact of the pandemic on ethnic minorities and how locals perceived the state's response. One of the significant effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was the direct engagement with state institutions, resulting in a novel interaction experience. The pandemic essentially revealed the role of the state during times of crisis, exposing its vulnerabilities and deficiencies. Crucial national decisions were formulated and executed by the state. This study will examine the subject of ethnic minorities in relation to the perception and understanding of the Marneuli and Bolnisi districts across the nation when these areas were designated as quarantine zones due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, the paper will analyze the severity of communication and language barriers in regions densely inhabited by ethnic minorities, drawing on James C. Scott's term "legibility" to describe the relationship between the state and ethnic minority group.

Additionally, this paper will address the response of the local population to the stringent measures implemented by the state, such as lockdowns and restrictions. It will explore the methodologies and forms of protest employed by the residents of these districts to express their discontent. The study will also assess the outcomes of these protests and the level of organization they exhibited. Furthermore, an analysis of the strategies adopted by the population to coexist with the pandemic and adhere to state regulations will be conducted.

**Keywords:** *Covid Pandemic, Marneuli, Ethnic Minority, State Language, Lockdown*

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic, as a global phenomenon, has profoundly impacted virtually every facet of life. It has served as a lens through which we have gained a deeper understanding of the issues and challenges facing modern Georgian society. In addition to the virus itself, the pandemic has provided a unique opportunity for us to engage with state institutions and assess our perceptions of them. Notably, it has underscored the pivotal role of the government during crises, illuminating both its strengths and weaknesses in decision-making and execution (Lehtinen & Brunila, 2021). Managing the pandemic has made the state's presence more

palpable and concrete (Nyers, 2006). This situation has accentuated the issues surrounding public perceptions of the state, particularly among specific groups who had seldom encountered such circumstances. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, diverse segments of the population have interpreted the state in various ways, often resulting in confrontational debates. Meanwhile, the independent Georgian state has struggled to convincingly convey the possibilities inherent in equality and equal rights to its citizens (Zviadadze, Jishkariani, 2018).

The issue of equality took on particular urgency during the pandemic, exemplified by the lockdowns imposed on two regions predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities—Marneuli and Bolnisi. Ensuring equality, communicating effectively with its citizens, and curbing the spread of the virus became imperative tasks for the Georgian state in the context of COVID-19. This reality, which transcended the mere management of a pandemic, prompts reflection on the arduous and protracted journey of ethnic minority integration into Georgian society. It also highlights the state's weaknesses and its occasional inability to safeguard the well-being of its citizens adequately. Examining our experiences within the COVID-19 quarantine spaces will deepen our understanding of a society that has, at times, been regarded as foreign, alongside the virus.

This article seeks to delineate the role of the state during the pandemic and how specific decisions and actions were perceived within the Azerbaijani community. To achieve this, I will draw upon examples from events unfolding in Marneuli. It is instructive to observe how the state manifested itself during times of crisis, the expectations placed upon it, and the outcomes it delivered. This exploration also delves into the response of Georgian society when confronted with the threats posed by the virus, shedding light on our ability to address pandemic-related challenges as they resurfaced with increased urgency. Furthermore, this article aspires to offer a conceptualization of place and territory, unraveling what sets Marneuli apart from other regions or the nation as a whole. Why, on 23rd March 2020, was Marneuli subjected to lockdown measures? To answer this question, we must first comprehend how Marneuli is perceived within Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani societies and how these perceptions shape notions of self and otherness. Subsequently, we will dissect the rationale behind the state's decision to designate Marneuli and Bolnisi as quarantine zones. Was such a measure necessary, inevitable, or intrinsic to the state's response? Of particular interest is the consideration of whether this moment can be characterized as a "state of war," where the demonstration of power becomes a matter of political ontology. How does the state harness the metaphor of war to manage collective anxiety? The pervasive sense of insecurity and unease transforms into fear,

a sentiment that is more amenable to control and manipulation. Lehtinen and Brunila, in their collaborative work on the political ontology of the pandemic, endeavor to elucidate how the state's adoption of a war-centric framework can lead to expressions of racism, where individuals from different nations and minority groups are portrayed as "enemies" and "threats" alongside the virus (Lehtinen & Brunila 2021).

Additionally, this article will scrutinize society's response to the state's stringent measures, including lockdowns and restrictions. What forms of protest did society employ to articulate its discontent? To what extent was this protest organized, and what tangible outcomes did it yield? Moreover, we will explore how the populace adapted to coexist with the pandemic and the regulatory measures implemented by the state. In this context, we will also touch upon one of the cornerstone elements of Azerbaijani culture — the wedding — which faced severe restrictions during the pandemic. The underground celebration of weddings, particularly during a specific phase of the pandemic, can be interpreted as a reaction to state sanctions, among other forms of protest.

In the concluding section of this article, we will synthesize the insights gleaned from the convergence of the state and the virus in Marneuli, considering the lessons learned from their interaction. Furthermore, we will delve into the process of integrating the Azerbaijani community into Georgian society within the framework of the pandemic's reality.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology employed in this study encompasses both ethnographic research and a review of existing scientific and periodic publications. To specifically address the research objectives, I conducted eight in-depth interviews with individuals who played a pivotal role as "mediators" between the state and the population during the pandemic. These mediators were tasked with addressing issues that neither the state nor the citizens could manage in isolation. Throughout the pandemic, these respondents actively voiced the concerns of Marneuli residents, effectively bridging the communication gap and mitigating the damage inflicted on the local community and Georgian society for various reasons. These individuals served as primary sources of information, offering insights into the hardships and experiences induced by COVID-19 regulations within the minority-populated region.

It is worth noting that the interviews were conducted exclusively in the Georgian language. Six of the eight narrators are of Azerbaijani descent and acquired proficiency in the Georgian language later in life, after their childhood. The remaining two respondents represent ethnic

Georgian and Armenian communities residing in Marneuli, adding diverse perspectives to this study. Two of the six Azerbaijani narrators do not currently reside in Marneuli but maintain close ties to the community through their activism. Additionally, it is pertinent to mention that this research commenced after the pandemic had concluded. Nevertheless, I have been engaged with the Azerbaijani community in Georgia for over a decade, both professionally and personally. I have closely observed the challenging process of their integration, including my involvement in teaching the Georgian language to Azerbaijani and Armenian citizens of Georgia, as well as administering the "1+4" Georgian language program at TSU, which continued during the pandemic. Hence, my personal reflections contribute to the research presented in this article, making me a participant and narrator of these pandemic narratives.

The high degree of openness and honesty exhibited by my respondents can be attributed to the fact that I have known half of them for many years. Several factors guided the selection of these narrators. In addition to their direct connection to Marneuli, I sought to ensure diversity in experiences to offer a comprehensive perspective. One of the narrators had previously worked at the local self-government within Marneuli city hall during the pandemic, serving as the conduit and representative of state policies to the local population. To protect their privacy, this narrator's name will be anonymized when quoted, while the other narrators will be acknowledged by name, despite the sensitivity of the topic.

Beyond the ethnographic research, which entailed fieldwork in Marneuli and its surrounding villages, I conducted interviews with 30 residents of Marneuli using a bilingual questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to elicit their experiences during the pandemic and the Marneuli lockdown, and respondents were encouraged to share openly and anonymously. This research aimed to validate the narratives and perspectives expressed by my narrators in their interviews.

In terms of the theoretical framework, the study aligns with James C. Scott's concept of "legibility" in the context of state-local community interactions. In this context, "legibility" refers to the clarity and comprehensibility of a given situation, which enables the state to exert control, manipulate, and exploit. When a state encounters difficulties in managing certain territories due to a lack of understanding of the local population and their unique characteristics, it may resort to increasing legibility. James C. Scott discusses scenarios where highly modern ideologies-driven state institutions fail to subjugate extensive territories in the name of technological progress or other imperatives, such as the pandemic. Scott identifies four key factors at play when advanced technologies, particularly during the pandemic, clash with local

knowledge and experience, which he terms "Metis." Metis, borrowed from Greek mythology, represents local knowledge grounded in empirical evidence, complexity, and a deep understanding of coexistence with the local ecosystem—wise and cunning. During the pandemic, the state imposed lockdowns on territories it deemed less legible, aiming to enhance predictability through control. In this context, the state assumed the role of an administrator, exerting authority over society and nature, grounded in a sense of self-assuredness and the ethos of technological progress and legal authority. It selected relatively "weaker" civil societies, where its control was less widespread. This perspective frames the 2020 pandemic in Georgia, highlighting the state's encounter with Marneuli and Bolnisi residents in the Georgian language context.

### **The Emergence of COVID-19 and State Decisions**

Similar to the rest of the world, the arrival of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, in Georgia was met with significant resistance and varied interpretations. Expectations regarding the virus's spread began to solidify around mid-February 2020. As the global dynamics of the virus became increasingly evident, it was reasonable to anticipate its arrival in Georgia. Public discussions concerning remote learning capabilities and other preventive measures to curb the virus's spread served as indicators of this growing awareness. Reports of the lockdown in Wuhan, China, had already circulated (Radio Liberty, 2020), and media outlets had portrayed the dire situation in Europe, particularly Italy (Kunchulia, 2020; Matitaishvili 2020). As the virus's geographic footprint expanded, the central question at that time revolved around when, from where, and by whom the virus would be introduced to Georgia.

The identification of the first COVID-infected citizen marked the beginning of a new pandemic reality. The identification of this individual went beyond mere medical interest and triggered extensive public discussions. The first report of a COVID patient in Georgia emerged on February 26th, 2020. The Minister of Health Affairs urgently announced this development, providing information on the expected risks to the country's population (Radio Liberty, 2020). This announcement marked the initiation of a new and unfamiliar reality characterized by shock and drama.

The information gleaned from the identification of the first infected individual revealed several crucial insights:

- *Movement Trajectory: The first infected person's travel history indicated that they were a Georgian citizen who had visited Iran and returned via Azerbaijan. This information*

*revealed that the infected individual was an ethnic Azerbaijani, infected in Iran. At that time, the Islamic Republic of Iran, a neighboring country, although not sharing a direct border with Georgia, was already perceived as a significant source of the virus by the Georgian media.*

- *Local Community Identification: The first COVID-infected individual in Georgia was found to be a member of the Azerbaijani community within the country. Ethnic minorities living in close proximity to one another often have limited proficiency in the Georgian language, which frequently results in their exclusion from current events. When it was revealed that the first COVID-infected patient was a 50-year-old Azerbaijani man, this information further accentuated his perceived "otherness" and the perception of him as a threat, with the virus compounding these factors. This revelation also gave rise to xenophobic sentiments within certain segments of Georgian society.*
- *Expectations of Worsening Epidemiological Conditions: The public's reaction to the news of the first infected individual foreshadowed the potential implementation of preventive measures such as lockdowns, quarantine zones, curfews, and other measures tested worldwide.*

The identification of the first patient and the subsequent identification of their travel history created an expectation that the virus might specifically target the Azerbaijani community. This expectation culminated in the government's decision to impose lockdowns on Marneuli and Bolnisi.

As an ordinary citizen, one vivid memory from the pandemic was the sight of military personnel and checkpoints at the entrance to Marneuli. The association between the pandemic and a state of war had also become part of the rhetoric employed by world leaders. However, the deployment of military units to control certain territories altered the local understanding of reality. Isolating specific municipalities with the assistance of the military, labeling them as threats, equated them with the virus itself. This further exacerbated the perception among locals that they were isolated, sacrificed, and branded as "others." The militarization of the response contributed to heightened hate speech and increased alienation towards specific municipalities on a nationwide scale.



## State Decision and Marneuli Lockdown

A visit to Camilla's community radio office in Marneuli, approximately two years after the pandemic's outbreak, provided valuable insights. Camilla, the founder of Radio Marneuli, considers her work essential for community integration and the country's development. She recounted her initial reaction to the pandemic announcement and the unfolding events in Marneuli. She emphasized the incredibility of COVID-19 at the time, as the virus was not taken seriously. In her view, Marneuli's lockdown was influenced by the perception that events in Georgia rarely concerned the Azerbaijani community. This sense of exclusion led to the belief that everything was happening elsewhere, even within Georgia. The physical proximity and psychological connection to the rest of the country were virtually nonexistent, according to Camilla.

The lockdown of Marneuli elicited panic and a feeling of oppression among its residents. A lack of information fueled the spread of misinformation, further exacerbated by hate speech, as documented in various reports (TDI). Camilla highlighted the hardships faced by individuals instructed to close their businesses and stay at home. She noted that these individuals had never depended on the state, viewing it as their last resort. The sudden imposition of closures and state promises to deliver essential goods created a sense of dependence on the government that was previously absent.

According to Camilla, the local community had limited interaction with the state, primarily occurring when individuals reached pension age<sup>1</sup>. The absence of communication and collaboration between local government and the community radio station, which broadcasted in three languages, compounded the problem. The pandemic exposed the state's weakness in integration and communication with its citizens, eroding trust among the population.

Camilla's April 2020 interview shed light on the reasons behind anti-quarantine protests. She explained that the majority of Marneuli's population was self-employed, primarily engaged in agriculture. Quarantine measures and movement restrictions disproportionately affected them, as most relied on agricultural loans to sustain their livelihoods. For the first time, these individuals found themselves dependent on the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Low participatin levels and involvement in political life of ethnic minorities is evidenced by researches conducted around Georgia. Some numerous reports and recommendations speak about reasons to this, low level of knowing the state language, self-sufficient agriculture, stereotypical perceptions and Soviet legacy (The research on participation of ethnic minority representatives in political life, 2019) (Participation of ethnic minority representatives in political life remains a challenge, 2021) (Gabunia, Amirejibi, 2021), (Melikishvili&Janiashvili, 2021).



Kamran, who works for a non-governmental organization in Tbilisi, offered a critical perspective on the state's role in managing the pandemic. He possesses significant experience and actively advocates for the rights of ethnic minorities. Kamran emphasized Marneuli's significance as a center for ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia. It is a place where Azerbaijani culture, language, and community are prominent. According to him, the decision to lock down Marneuli for an extended period was not arbitrary.

Kamran speculated that the government may have believed it could not effectively control the situation in Marneuli due to language barriers and strained relations. The absence of media capable of conveying the Minister of Health Affairs' messages in the local language exacerbated the situation. He recalled a specific incident when the Prime Minister visited the barricades at Marneuli's entrance and assured the population that they had nothing to worry about. He emphasized the government's focus on agricultural products rather than the residents' health, creating the perception that the state prioritized products over people.

During the lockdown, people in Marneuli had limited access to Georgian news and primarily relied on Azerbaijani and Turkish channels. However, Georgian and Azerbaijani communities did not share the same information, contributing to a lack of awareness. Kamran acknowledged that skepticism regarding COVID-19 existed in Georgian-speaking societies, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic.

To illustrate the contrast between a punitive state and a caring one, Kamran recalls a request for help that his organization received from one of the villages in Marneuli. In this incident, a man who was unaware of the curfew regulations left his home to buy bread and was subsequently fined by the state, an amounting to 3000 Lari. Kamran remembers this specific case as an example of a confrontation with the state, but it ultimately ended favorably as the fine was eventually annulled. However, based on his experience, such incidents should not have occurred in Marneuli. According to him, he encountered numerous individuals who had either been fined themselves or knew of others who had faced similar fines. Samira also recalled an incident related to fines, where an elderly man was fined on his agricultural land for collecting grass in his own field. Davit also shared a lighthearted anecdote, mentioning that a few of his colleagues in his village, Shaumiani, had received fines. However, they never considered paying the fines, and in the end, they were not required to do so<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the statistical data I requested from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia regarding violations of regulations during the pandemic period (March 21 - May 22, 2020) provide an interesting insight. Kvemo Kartli (1972 cases) ranks second after Tbilisi (2513 cases) in the number of fines. To put this into perspective with other regions, Kvemo Kartli far surpasses the combined cases recorded in Imereti, Racha-Lechkhumi, and Kvemo Svaneti (577 cases). Shida Kartli also falls significantly behind (559 cases).

Undoubtedly, the most formidable challenge highlighted by every narrator during the pandemic was the language barrier. While there were instances when state decisions and speeches by high-ranking officials were translated, this was insufficient. The situation in the Municipality often left people feeling like they were in an informational vacuum. The language barrier once again became a pressing issue, particularly in Marneuli, when people began applying for state compensation following the quarantine measures. The state provided assistance to those who had to stop working due to the pandemic (Government Decree №286). To receive a one-time cash allowance for children under 18, it was necessary to complete the application form in the Georgian language (Government Decree №286). Due to the language barrier, this benefit was not equally accessible to every Georgian citizen, as the form had to be completed exclusively in Georgian. Kamran recalls that he and his friends from the organization registered 500 beneficiaries in Marneuli villages within 11 days because the residents themselves encountered difficulties in completing the forms.

Giulgun, arguably the only individual in her village who is fluent in Georgian, was studying at the university when the pandemic began. In her letters, written from locked-down Marneuli and sent to the magazine Indigo, she recounted:

"This morning, we all received an SMS on our phones. The government is urging us to comply with quarantine rules. My father called me, asking me to translate what was written there. No one in the family besides me speaks Georgian. It was also me who informed the neighbors about the content of the message.

... In the evening, we received another SMS from the government, this time in Azerbaijani. They sent us the same message that I had already translated for my father. Now everyone could understand it." (Giulgun, 2020).

Now, Giulgun humorously reminisces about the emotional challenges she faced during the pandemic and quarantine. She had access to Georgian information channels and social networks, which made her uncomfortable as she observed accusations being directed towards Azerbaijanis living in Georgia, particularly those in Marneuli. At the time, these accusations deeply affected her, but she believes that hate speech was propagated by specific interest groups, bots, and trolls for particular objectives.

I have known Giulgun for several years, although I first visited her in October 2022. Her village, Teqalo, is located 27 kilometers away from Marneuli, in the direction of Sadakhlo. To

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Additionally, it's worth noting that Samtskhe-Javakheti (230 cases), which also includes ethnic minority settlements, lags considerably behind Kvemo Kartli in this regard. Notably, this region outpaces Guria (162 cases) in terms of the number of fines.

reach it, one must make a right turn from the central road. What struck me most about the village was the active use of yards for vegetable greenhouses. The abundance of harvest was impressive, visible from outside gardens. Giulgun's yard, too, was dedicated to bean and cucumber plantations. She explained that there was rigorous daily labor involved in managing these indoor and outdoor greenhouses. Every third day, a vehicle would arrive to collect their vegetables. Though not an everyday occurrence, Giulgun always helped with the harvesting and sorting of vegetables when she was at home. During the pandemic, she spent her time in the village, where neighbors frequently approached her for information, clarification, and to share their concerns. Various organizations also contacted her to inquire about the situation in the village. On one occasion, Marneuli Radio reached out to her, requesting assistance in organizing a video survey among villagers to assess their quarantine-related issues. I asked Giulgun to share the survey results with me. Among the foremost concerns of the local population was the sale of their agricultural products. The village residents were primarily dependent on agriculture, and many faced economic difficulties, especially those who had taken loans from banks. Consequently, discussions often revolved around the challenges associated with selling their harvest.

Giulgun could not recall with certainty whether her village participated in protests, but she did remember protests taking place in Marneuli. Additionally, I asked her about the issues that arose during the pandemic. After contemplating, she mentioned that women experienced additional burdens and increased responsibilities. Furthermore, according to her observations, instances of violence against women grew because men were predominantly at home, leading to frustration and aggression.

### **Protests and Demonstrations in Marneuli**

If there is any place where Marneuli and protests are mentioned, Samira Bayramova's name invariably comes up. Samira is widely recognized in social networks, political circles, and diplomatic spheres. Her active civic engagement has long drawn the attention of the broader society. I recall her posts on social media dating back to the early stages of the pandemic, and I've known her personally since 2015 when she was an active student. I remember her inviting me to celebrate Novruz Bayram at her family home in Marneuli as a student, which was a pleasant and unconventional offer. Samira is known for her directness and her tendency to be highly critical of the government, the state, and Georgian society in general. She spares neither Azerbaijani community representatives nor non-governmental organizations when expressing

her opinions. She fearlessly speaks her mind and defends what she believes to be right. When necessary, she confronts representatives of radical political groups.

On January 8, 2022, when I called her and asked for a meeting, Samira agreed, but she informed me that she needed to confirm it with her security team. She had been under police protection for months due to threats from radical forces. Samira had protested against the opening of the “Alt-Info” office in Marneuli, even painting the office windows in the colors of the Ukrainian flag. This act led to violent threats against her. On March 22, 2022, the Prosecutor's office recognized Samira as a victim and enrolled her in the special protection program (Tskipurishvili, 2022). Given these circumstances and following all protocols, I met Samira near her temporary residence in Tbilisi at the appointed time.

Before delving into the topics of COVID-19 and Marneuli, I asked Samira to explain her character and demeanor. She smiled warmly and shared that she had always been a unique and rebellious child. Her mischievous and defiant nature was apparent from an early age, prompting her family to hesitate about sending her to a public school due to concerns about her behavior. Consequently, she attended a private school, which she considered an advantage over her older sister, who attempted to exploit Samira's behavior to her own advantage. In their traditional community, the birth of a second daughter after the first was less desirable, especially for her grandmother, who expressed her displeasure to the extent that they delayed naming the newborn. Doctors had also informed Samira's mother that she could not have more children. In traditional societies, including Georgian culture, not having a son is considered a significant issue. Samira discovered these details from her mother, who half-jokingly shared them with relatives. Samira overheard these conversations, and the revelations had a significant impact on her. From a young age, she was closer to her father and more familiar with his work than with her mother's household chores. Consequently, she was raised with a "boyish" upbringing, which she perceived as compensation for her biological femininity. Several years later, her family experienced a miracle: her mother became pregnant and was expecting a boy. Samira vividly recalled her joy and excitement during this time. She personally selected a name for the baby, Samyr, the male version of her own name. When the baby was born, the family celebrated, but tragically, Samyr passed away soon after birth. This occurred during the tumultuous 1990s, a period of instability in Kvemo Kartli and throughout Georgia. During that time, visiting a doctor was challenging and unsafe. The child succumbed to a severe illness exacerbated by the chaotic conditions, and medical intervention was impossible. Samira was deeply affected by this tragedy, which further heightened her sensitivity to the challenges faced by individuals living

in turbulent environments. Despite the loss, Samira's family continued to treat the male child as if he had been born and raised in their family. Nevertheless, the traditional beliefs about gender differences left a lasting mark on her and her family. The uncertain atmosphere of the 1990s regarding minorities in Georgia also contributed to their unease<sup>3</sup>.

Samira shared,

"Imagine, I was the first girl from my village to come to Tbilisi and pursue higher education. Previously, students either went to Marneuli or Baku for their education. I was the only one actively integrated into Georgian society. I convinced my family that not all Georgians are hostile. This fear still lingers. However, families with students who have connections with Georgians undergo a transformation. They become convinced that Georgians are not enemies. It's safer in Tbilisi; we are a normal country, and whatever happened in the past remains in the past" (Samira, 2022).

Samira's personal experiences help explain the prevalent sense of alienation and distrust between Georgian and Azerbaijani communities

When discussing street protests, Camilla recalled a pivotal moment when the mood of the assembled crowd in front of the City Hall was aptly captured by the phrase, "Not the virus, but starvation will kill us!" This phrase was also used as a headline by Netgazeti when reporting on the gathering of the Marneuli population on March 30 (Apremashvili, 2020).

When examining the protests that occurred in Marneuli during the pandemic, one cannot overlook March 21, 2021, when self-organized citizens purposefully celebrated Novruz Bayram in the heart of Marneuli. Lighting bonfires after 9 pm, during the curfew, in the streets of Marneuli was a clear act of protest against the state's unequal treatment of different ethnic and religious groups. Sofio Zviadadze describes the events of 2020-21 in Georgia during the pandemic as the "optic illusion of tolerance." She highlights the state's selective approach in lifting the curfew on January 6, 2021, favoring particular religious groups. According to her, the government did not consider the Azerbaijani community's initiative to recognize Novruz as a national holiday or their request to lift the curfew for one day.

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<sup>3</sup> In the 90s, the collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by the reinforcement of nationalist traditions. This facilitated ethnic minority groups living in the country to become labelled as the "others". This was augmented by two conflicts inside the country, recognised as ethnic conflicts. Therefore, the division of the country's population based on ethnicity was not creating favourable conditions for imagining the establishment of a united independent state. For rethinking the Dmanisi Municipality conflict that happened on May 17, 2021, research authors dive into the causes of confrontation and recall 90s. As the authors say, discussions are hugely complicated by the traumatic memories of the population and the deficit of scientific reflection in Georgian academic circles (Mamedli & Chachibaia, 2021)

"If not for an unequal approach towards minorities and the dominant religious (Orthodox Christian) groups, this decision could be interpreted as strict adherence to regulations. But in reality, we were facing tactical discrimination because the government had already lifted curfew restrictions on other occasions, including religious celebrations, such as when the Georgian Orthodox Church celebrated Easter" (Zviadadze, 2021).

The Azerbaijani community's request to establish Novruz as a national holiday and to lift the curfew for its celebration was, in part, a response to the irritations and non-acceptance they had experienced. The anger directed at the Azerbaijani population and the equating of them with the virus had a detrimental impact on the integration process within Georgian society. It is worth noting that the idea of establishing Novruz as a national holiday and the request to lift the curfew for its celebration were initiated by samira Bayramova (Nergadze, 2021). Her Facebook campaign in this regard gained wide resonance and received support from activists in Tbilisi, who traveled to Marneuli to join in the celebration.

The celebration of Novruz Bayram holds particular significance for Mariam as well. She fondly remembers the positivity associated with Novruz celebrations since her childhood. To her, it marks a new year when they bid farewell to winter and welcome summer. Mariam works at the Democracy Development Center in Marneuli and resides in the village of Tamarisi with her family. Despite other opportunities, she has never contemplated living elsewhere. It's a unique experience for her to represent the majority as an ethnic minority in a place where the ethnic minority is the majority.

Mariam actively participates in the integration of ethnic minorities, utilizing her extensive experience and efforts. During the COVID-19 restrictions, they made active use of social networks and established an open group called "Stay at Home – Live from Marneuli" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/274468463543836>). Through this group, they gathered information about the specific needs of individuals or families and connected them with people who could assist. The platform also featured informational posts, and municipal representatives were added to the group. Besides managing the Facebook group, Mariam also had to assist Marneuli TV during the lockdown. One of the TV hosts, who resided in Teleti, was unable to move around due to Marneuli's lockdown. Mariam readily agreed to help, despite her concerns about the virus. She went to work daily, disseminating crucial information. As a result, she has vivid recollections of Marneuli's protests and the efforts to address the issues at hand.

When asked about her observations regarding the pandemic's impact on Marneuli's society's integration, Mariam noted the remarkable solidarity and individual initiatives displayed by the local population. There were reports of bakers distributing bread for free on social media after Marneuli was placed under lockdown. Samira initiated a fund collection to purchase essential items for those in need.

### **Life in the Pandemic and the Adaptation Period**

Despite their confusion and feelings of injustice, the population of Marneuli found ways to coexist with the pandemic. This was primarily evident in their attempts to circumvent regulations and in their high degree of solidarity.

While strolling along the central roads of Marneuli on September 25, 2022, I explored wedding venues, curious about the ongoing preparations. I was deeply impressed by what I observed, both in terms of the grandeur of the venues and the thoroughness of the preparations. Passersby would enthusiastically respond to inquiries, with those involved in venue preparations showing great eagerness to explain their actions and motivations. At times, they spoke in broken Georgian, while other times, they called upon others to provide explanations in either Georgian or Russian. During that day, I visited five wedding venues, all of which were bustling with wedding preparations. I couldn't help but notice cars adorned with ribbons on the streets, crowded beauty salons, and brides' entourages. As Jeikhun explained, the significance of weddings, their scale, and extravagance, are particularly pronounced in Marneuli during the spring and fall seasons.

My interest in these topics was piqued by my encounter with Jeikhun a few months prior. Jeikhun is a journalist working for one of the prominent private TV channels, and his popularity extends beyond Marneuli. Although I had never taught Jeikhun Georgian, I still considered him my student. During his preparatory course in the Georgian language, he frequently visited the dean's office, posing numerous questions. He once told me, "Please don't be offended by my numerous questions; this is my way of practicing the Georgian language." It was hard to fault the polite young man who always knew his goals and intentions. Jeikhun's journey to recognition within Georgian society was a long one, and he always approached xenophobia directed at the Azerbaijani community with caution and humor.

"I was doing some shoots in Bolnisi. I approached taxi drivers who were waiting and asked, 'Now that the pandemic is over, how do you feel?' One of them cursed and said,



"They brought it to us...'. I remained silent; there was nothing more to say." (Jeikhun, 2022).

Jeikhun refrains from generalizing the xenophobia of a few individuals to all Georgians. He considers himself part of Georgian society and is judicious in his assessments. When I inquired about his perspective on Marneuli, he described it as a robust and economically active place.

"Marneuli is a city of affluent people, millionaires." (Jeikhun, 2022)<sup>4</sup>.

This half-joking remark caught me by surprise, so I sought clarification. Jeikhun explained that the population of Marneuli works tirelessly day and night, with Azerbaijani residents known for their strong work ethic. He attributed the lavish weddings held during the fall season to financial prosperity, dowries, and related expenses. Wedding costs were on a constant rise, and those employed in the wedding industry were prospering. In essence, he singled out the wedding business. We might wonder what Marneuli had been doing for the past two years; were there no weddings? Mariam recalled the sanctions and the public's response to them. She mentioned that even though gatherings were prohibited, the sound of wedding celebrations was a constant presence immediately after the quarantine was lifted. Mariam overheard a conversation in a salon: people from other regions would also come here, and the police would turn a blind eye. Sometimes, we find ourselves asking, "Why were we even in lockdown?"

I also discussed this topic with Camilla, who confirmed that weddings were celebrated during the pandemic.

"Weddings still took place in Marneuli, despite the restrictions. People organized them for 150 guests instead of 400 and had to keep them discreet. It seemed that the local government was aware. They would request not to post pictures immediately and to wait five days. That's how it was. Some even waited until after having a child to share the pictures." (Camilla, 2022)

Giulgun also remembered weddings in the village during the pandemic, acknowledging that some may have been fined but didn't seem to mind. When asked why weddings were so important to the people in Marneuli, she explained that they held great significance, particularly for women. For many of them, weddings represented a rare opportunity to leave the confines of their homes, dress up, socialize, and feel like a part of society.

Regarding weddings during the pandemic, Samira shared her recollection:

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<sup>4</sup> A particular research that speaks about the conditions hindering Azerbaijani community integration, and amongst others names social and economic deprivation (The research on the participation of ethnic minority representatives in political life. 2019)

"When the rules were very strict, there were no wedding celebrations. However, those with close ties to the local government still managed to celebrate. They knew they might face fines but still insisted on celebrating: 'We have no choice; the wedding must go on!'" (Samira, 2022).

Thus, celebrating weddings during the pandemic and participating in them became a form of protest and adaptation for the population. One of the most significant aspects of this culture transformed into a unique form of resistance and defiance, a reaction to what was perceived as unfair and repressive restrictions.

Every narrator recounted feelings of deep solidarity and concrete actions associated with this sense of unity during the pandemic. After Marneuli went into lockdown, there were reports on social media about bakers distributing bread for free. Samira herself initiated a fundraising campaign to purchase essential supplies for the neediest.

"I would say that Marneuli sets an example in Georgia when it comes to social assistance, sharing, and support." (Jeikhun, 2022)

Social media also shared stories about a family in Marneuli's village of Maradisi. They were hospitalized due to Covid but received help from others in plowing their potato field (Radio Liberty, 2020). Camilla and Jeikhun mentioned the positive role played by the Marneuli mosque in distributing humanitarian aid. Jeikhun mentioned that even the city hall would supply products to the mosque, knowing it would reach those in the most need. Samira remembered that both the Imam Ali Mosque and the Marneuli Eparchy distributed assistance. When I probed further, assuming that the Eparchy would assist Georgians and the Mosque would help Muslims, Samira corrected me. She said they provided assistance to both. Samira recalled an interesting anecdote when the representatives of the Imam Ali Mosque, unable to use cars due to restrictions imposed by the City Hall, ingeniously turned to using a donkey to transport goods.

"The sheikh of the Highest Theological Division of Muslims of Georgia, Mirtag Asadov, said that Marneuli City Hall did not allow them to use cars for distribution, so they resorted to using a donkey to pull a cart" (Radio "Marneuli", 2020).

As Mariam noted, during the pandemic, no distinctions were made among citizens, and everyone extended a helping hand to one another. "Camilla's Radio" and its entire team made efforts to reach out to the Armenian community in Marneuli in their native language. One Armenian-speaking member of the radio station now translates the news into Armenian.

Nevertheless, as Camilla pointed out, the Armenian population in Marneuli faces identity challenges, making it difficult to understand their specific needs in the community.

Davit enrolled in a Georgian preparatory course in 2018 and was one of my most outstanding and memorable students. When asked about his origin, he identifies as being from Shaumiani, rather than Marneuli. For him, Marneuli is closely associated with the Azerbaijani community, which is consistent with the perception held by most of the Georgian population. Consequently, he does not consider himself part of Marneuli. Davit shares an anecdote from a time when states and borders did not exist in their current form, highlighting that Marneuli was once a village similar to Shaumiani, where his ancestors lived. When asked about where his fellow villagers purchase essential goods, he mentioned that Shaumiani has a variety of stores, markets, and supermarkets. Regrettably, Shaumiani lacks banks and similar institutions. Davit is studying computer science and was well-versed in technology even before starting his university education. He shared that people often turned to him for assistance with technology-related issues. He mentioned that he was always available to help when someone's phone or computer needed repair. Regarding the language dynamics in his village, Davit, who speaks Georgian fluently, noted that he can also communicate effectively in Azerbaijani and Russian. He added with a smile that he is not as introverted as some might expect from a programmer and enjoys socializing. In his village, residents are more proficient in Russian and Azerbaijani than in Georgian. When asked about how the local population perceived the pandemic and lockdown, Davit's response echoed those of others. To the locals, the virus did not seem real, but the lockdown and restrictions did, and they believed these measures were aimed against them rather than for their protection. It's worth noting that this sentiment was not unique to the Georgian-speaking community; it was a common perspective, albeit intensified by the ethnic aspect, both internally and externally.

The survey results from the Marneuli population largely support the opinions expressed by my narrators. One notable difference is that approximately one-fifth of the respondents believed that the government's decision to impose a lockdown in Marneuli was justified and necessary, asserting that the government had done its utmost to ensure the population's safety. This positive assessment of the government's handling of the pandemic contrasts with the views of my narrators but somewhat balances the overall perspective. In online responses, participants shared interesting insights about their perceptions of Marneuli's territory. While some referred to Marneuli as predominantly associated with the Azerbaijani community, others regarded it as

a multicultural and diverse place<sup>5</sup>. This remote and anonymous survey closely aligns with the accounts provided by the narrators.

The narrators, with whom I had candid and extensive conversations on various pressing issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Marneuli lockdown, shared that their criticisms of state policies were not directed at Georgian society as a whole. Most of them expressed feeling a sense of support and solidarity from the active segment of Georgian society during the Marneuli lockdown. However, they were critical of the Georgian state's inability to provide adequate care for ethnic minorities, promote their integration, and ensure their protection. Some of their criticisms also extended to neighboring countries attempting to exert influence in the region, which, in their view, could hinder the integration process. The unique experience of the pandemic underscored the need for clear communication with state institutions and revealed existing problems that required recognition and resolution rather than concealment.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic brought unresolved issues to the forefront, particularly regarding the perceptions of the state among ethnic minorities. The use of military forces and the presence of soldiers at the entrances to Marneuli and Bolnisi exacerbated dissatisfaction among the minority communities residing there. The pandemic made the state more tangible and concrete for its citizens, which was a novel experience. Unfortunately, this increased interaction with state institutions did not result in a positive experience. This was partly due to the restrictive measures imposed during the pandemic and the excessive mobilization of repressive measures. It was also influenced by the painful memories of the 1990s, which left deep scars on the relationship between the Georgian and Azerbaijani communities.

In the case of Kvemo Kartli, alienation persisted without sufficient efforts from the state to bridge the gap. During the pandemic, against a backdrop of information scarcity and uncertainty, the local community perceived the state's decision to lock down Marneuli and Bolnisi as actions against them rather than for their protection. The state's restrictions disrupted the daily routines, mobility, and various economic activities of the population.

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<sup>5</sup> The researcher, Alexandre Boshishvili, referring to historical sources and documents, speaks of the historical experience of Kvemo Kartli and Marneuli, describing them as multiethnic and multicultural territories (Boshishvili, 2020).

Looking back, it is challenging to definitively assess the necessity of the lockdown in Marneuli and Bolnisi. However, it is a fact that the state lacked direct channels of communication with the residents of these municipalities, leading to the decision to impose control and lockdown as a relatively straightforward approach. Even in the midst of a lockdown, communication with the local population proved essential. The pandemic revealed that the Georgian state did not fully understand its citizens, highlighting the need to shift its focus from control to the protection, integration, and participation of its diverse population.

In the face of the pandemic, the Azerbaijani community in Marneuli demonstrated its ability to organize and express protests when necessary, showing solidarity and creativity as essential tools for coping with the crisis. Solidarity became a means of dealing with the pandemic alongside traditional ways of life. The inconsistent and unfair approach of the state was met with solidarity and resourcefulness by the local population, as described by James C. Scott in his concept of "metis." The local community responded with experience and knowledge to the state's attempts to assert absolute control. The pandemic experience underscored the necessity for the Georgian state to better understand and address the needs of its citizens, particularly its ethnic minorities. The criticisms voiced by the narrators reflect the shortcomings in the state's integration policies. Despite the state's use of military and wartime rhetoric during the pandemic, which fueled hate speech and alienation, these criticisms were not primarily directed at ethnic Georgian citizens. Instead, they viewed the pandemic as a significant challenge that exposed existing problems requiring recognition and resolution rather than concealment.

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