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Georgian Chauvinism Raises Its Head Again

By Paul Rimple

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Relations between Georgian Muslims and Christians have been heating up in the village of Tsintskharo in the southeastern region of Kvemo Kartli. Lawmaker Viktor Japaridze said that if the controversy is not resolved soon, there could be bloodshed.

Tsintskharo was one of several Greek villages in Georgia that has become home to migrants from the high-mountain region of Svaneti and the Black Sea region of Ajara. The Christian Svans say Muslim Ajarans removed the crosses from the three cemeteries they share. On Dec. 15, the Christians retaliated by trying to prevent Friday Muslim prayers at a village mosque that opened two months ago in a local house. This is the second religious confrontation since October's parliamentary elections.

On Nov. 2, Christians in western Georgia protested the establishment of a mosque in their village and suggested that "someone will be murdered." Eka Beselia, the new head of the Committee for Human Rights, played down the incident, saying it was merely "an expression

of different opinions."

Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili says that the recent conflict may be a provocation aimed to discredit the Georgian state and that such confrontations are not familiar to Georgians. "[Our] history hasn't recorded even a single case of religious confrontation," he said.

Ivanishvili should brush up on his history.

Georgia was the scene of six blood-libel cases in the late 19th century, the most famous being the Kutaisi trial of nine in 1878. In 1895, Kutaisi Jews were victims of a pogrom, and in 1913 the deputy governor of Kutaisi led a gang that routinely extorted money from Jews and killed those who did not pay. More recently, Basil Mkalavishvili, a defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest, spent much of the 1990s and early 2000s leading assaults with cudgels, iron crosses and impunity on "nontraditional faiths" like Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and Pentecostal evangelists. It took Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili one year to arrest him in 2005. In March, Murman Dumbadze from Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream political movement accused a politician who did not protest the building of a mosque in Batumi of not being an ethnic Georgian.

When Saakashvili passed amendments granting minority faiths legal status in 2011, several Georgian Orthodox priests led protests, fearing that the law posed a threat to the national identity. Chauvinism is a Georgian reality. Pretending it doesn't exist or calling it a provocation will not make it go away.

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