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**Sunni-Shia current interactions in Georgia: foreign
influences and “soft power” tools**

The report aims to focus on the current Sunni-Shia interactions in Georgia, the challenges that probably will face Shia populated areas of the country caused by the dissemination of Sunni Islam (also radical). This reality necessarily has an impact on the security environment of Georgia and the region as well.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) war led to the shifts of the geopolitics and regional order in the South Caucasus. Within the framework of current transformations, the study of the Islamic factor in Georgia and the perspectives of its development are of great importance.

The report is going to discuss the following questions: what are the features of State-Shia community relations in Georgia? What kind of integration policy is implemented in the country's Shia community? What identity transformations are taking place among Shia at the current stage? what tools of “soft power” do external players (Iran, Turkey, and Azerbaijan) use in order to enforce their influence? Whether the trends of Sunni Islam are becoming dominant among the Shia population of Georgia? Does the enforcement of Turkey's influence, sometimes also mediated by Azerbaijan, lead to a weakening of Iran's position in the Shia areas of Georgia?

The three regional states, Iran, Turkey, and Azerbaijan, are trying to spread their influence in the Shia populated regions of

Georgia by emphasizing the economic, ethnic, cultural, and religious instruments.

Turkey and Azerbaijan consistently implement a "soft power" policy in the Azerbaijani populated regions of Georgia, the aim of which is to increase the influence of the Turkic element in those regions (as a counterweight to the existing influence of Iran).

The best tools for spreading Turkey's religious influence are the new generation of Muslim clerics who have received theological education at the highest religious institutions in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, have superior religious knowledge, adequate preaching skills, and external support.

The expansion of the radical Sunni Islamic ideology also contributes to the retreat of traditional Shia Islam in the Azerbaijani populated regions of Georgia. Turkey, also using the Islamic tools, is trying "to push out" Iran of the ethnic Azerbaijani areas of Georgia, strengthening the frame of Turkish Sunni Islam.

For Turkey, Georgia has both geopolitical and geo-economic importance. It can serve as the shortest and most stable transit to the Caucasus and Central Asia. Within the framework of current balance of power in the South Caucasus, Ankara and Baku will continue to use all the possible tools - investment, cultural, religious, ideological and military - to keep their influence in Georgia.