

TRANSFORMATION OF GEORGIA'S ETHNOCULTURAL LANDSCAPE: SOCIOLOGICAL AND ETHNOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Article History

Received: 18.03.2026

Accepted: 05.05.2026

Published: 29.05.2026

Abstract: Georgia's ethnocultural landscape has undergone fundamental and multidimensional transformation over the past three decades. This transformation is the product of the interplay between post-Soviet transition, globalization, internal demographic mobility, and complex geopolitical realities. It extends well beyond surface-level cultural change, encompassing deep reconfigurations of social structures, identity politics, collective memory, and cultural practices. Adequate analysis of these processes requires an interdisciplinary methodological framework in which empirical data from ethnological fieldwork are synthesized with the theoretical instruments of sociological analysis, demographic statistics, and the conceptual models of cultural anthropology.

Four principal dimensions of this transformation are examined: (1) urbanization and cultural hybridization, with Tbilisi as a multiethnic laboratory in which diverse ethnocultural groups interact and generate new hybrid forms; (2) the experience of approximately 280,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, analyzed through the lens of collective memory, intergenerational trauma transmission, and adaptive identity formation; (3) the transnational dimensions of international labor migration, including the cultural practices of diaspora communities and their role in preserving and renegotiating Georgian ethnic identity; and (4) the role of digital media and social platforms in constructing, representing, and commodifying ethnocultural identities, including the ambivalent effects of ethno-tourism and the commercialization of cultural heritage.

Drawing on a multi-method approach that integrates systematic literature review, official statistical data (Geostat, World Bank, UNHCR, UNFPA), and existing ethnographic fieldwork, the study demonstrates that ethnocultural change in contemporary Georgia is neither linear nor unidirectional. Traditional identities are simultaneously preserved, hybridized, and redefined through the ongoing negotiation between memory and modernity, locality and transnationalism, authenticity and commodification.

Keywords: *Ethnocultural landscape, internal migration, cultural hybridization, sociological perspective, identity politics, internally displaced persons, transnationalism, digital media.*

Cite this article:

Vepkhvadze, T., (2026). TRANSFORMATION OF GEORGIA'S ETHNOCULTURAL LANDSCAPE: SOCIOLOGICAL AND ETHNOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(5), 38-42.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, Georgia's ethnocultural landscape has undergone transformation of a scope and depth that far exceeds the cultural changes typically associated with political transition. Shaped by the interplay of post-Soviet restructuring, globalization, internal demographic mobility, and complex geopolitical realities, this transformation encompasses deep reconfigurations of social structures, identity politics, collective memory, and cultural practices. The complexity of these processes demands an interdisciplinary methodological framework in which the empirical data of ethnological fieldwork are synthesized with the theoretical instruments of sociological analysis, demographic statistics, and the conceptual models of cultural anthropology.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia found itself at the epicenter of socioeconomic and political upheaval. The civil conflicts of the early 1990s, economic collapse, and the disintegration of state institutions profoundly altered the structure of society. As documented across the broader scholarship on post-Soviet transformation (see Salukvadze & Meladze, 2014; Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2012), this period in Georgia was not merely a change of political system but a wholesale redefinition of the entire social and cultural order, marked by intensive internal migration driven by both economic necessity and considerations of security.

The demographic shifts that commenced in this period continue to shape contemporary Georgia's ethnocultural landscape. According to data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the country's population has undergone significant changes since 1989, driven by both emigration and internal migration: Tbilisi's population has expanded through inflows from the regions, while many regional areas are experiencing depopulation and demographic aging.

Theoretically, this study draws on the concept of cultural hybridization as elaborated by Homi Bhabha (1994) and other postcolonial theorists, as well as on theories of transnationalism that emphasize multilayered cultural identities in the age of globalization. Arjun Appadurai's (1996) framework of global cultural flows is particularly relevant to the Georgian case, where the movement of media, finance, people, and ideas produces new configurations of identity and belonging. This theoretical pluralism enables a nuanced interpretation of Georgia's contemporary ethnocultural reality that neither reduces the phenomenon to a single causal logic nor treats it as merely a local expression of universal processes.

2. Research Methodology

This paper is grounded in a multi-method approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative data across three principal sources. First, a systematic review of academic scholarship in the fields of ethnology, sociology, and cultural anthropology was conducted, with particular attention to research focused on Georgia and the post-Soviet space more broadly. Second, official statistical data were analyzed, drawing on the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat), World Bank reports, documentation from United Nations agencies (UNHCR, UNFPA), and statistics from other international organizations. Third, the analysis incorporates findings from existing ethnographic fieldwork conducted in various districts of Tbilisi, IDP settlements, and regions across Georgia.

The integration of these three sources is methodologically deliberate. Statistical data establish the demographic parameters and structural contours of transformation; ethnographic data provide the experiential texture of identity processes that aggregate statistics necessarily obscure; and the theoretical literature supplies the analytical frameworks for interpreting the interaction between structural forces and individual or collective agency. It is important to note that this paper draws primarily on existing fieldwork and published data rather than original primary fieldwork conducted by the author. The synthesis presented here is thus best understood as a theoretically informed secondary analysis and a contribution to ongoing scholarly debate, rather than as a report of new empirical findings.

3. Urbanization and Cultural Hybridization

3.1 Tbilisi as a Multicultural Laboratory

Intensive urbanization constitutes one of the most significant drivers of ethnocultural landscape reconfiguration in Georgia. Massive migratory flows from rural to urban areas create a unique sociocultural dynamic in which traditional rural identities undergo substantial transformation within the context of contemporary urban culture. As Castells (1996) observes, urbanization in the modern era represents a fundamental reconfiguration of social relations, values, and identity rather than a mere demographic redistribution.

This process is not a mechanical assimilation but a complex dialogue between tradition and modernization that generates new cultural hybrids and syncretic forms. Tbilisi, as Georgia's largest urban center and a historically multiethnic metropolis, constitutes a particularly significant site for studying these processes. As documented by Salukvadze and Meladze (2014), the capital functions as a space in which the dynamic interaction of diverse ethnocultural groups continuously unfolds, shaped by patterns of internal migration that have restructured the city's social composition over successive decades.

Tbilisi's population reached 1,237,000 in 1989, declined to 1,082,000 by 2002 as a consequence of the economic crisis of the 1990s, and has since recovered through internal migration from the regions, standing at approximately 1,084,000 in 2024. The coexistence of Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Ossetians, and other minorities creates a multicultural fabric in which processes of assimilation, accommodation, and cultural resistance unfold simultaneously. Tbilisi's historically multiethnic character generates a distinctive context for cultural diversification: not merely an ethnic coexistence, but a process of dynamic cultural exchange, mutual influence, and the continuous creation of new hybrid forms.

Georgia's ethnic composition has also undergone significant change. The proportion of ethnic Georgians increased from 73.7 percent (1989) to 86.8 percent (2014), primarily as a result of the emigration of non-Georgian ethnic groups. This demographic shift has been accompanied by transformations in the public presence and institutional visibility of minority cultures, a dynamic that warrants sustained ethnological attention.

3.2 The Preservation of Regional Identities in Urban Space

Migrants arriving in Tbilisi from the regions, motivated by the pursuit of economic opportunity and aspirations of social mobility, frequently maintain strong ties to their regional identities. They

form specific micro-communities within the city that preserve the distinctiveness of regional dialects, culinary traditions, religious practices, and social networks.

These micro-communities are manifest in particular residential neighborhoods, markets, and public spaces, where regional identity functions as both a resource of social capital and a marker of cultural distinction. The Didube market, for instance, was historically known as a concentration point for migrants from Kakheti, while the area surrounding the so-called Deserters' Market was traditionally associated with western Georgia. These geographical concentrations create enclaves of regional cultures within the urban environment, sustaining traditional solidarity networks and mutual-aid mechanisms.

As Van Assche and Salukvadze (2012) note in their analysis of Tbilisi's planning and social transformation, the spatial organization of the city reflects and reinforces patterns of ethnocultural differentiation. Sennett's (1977) conception of the city as a social theater is particularly apt in this context: public spaces in Tbilisi serve as sites for the performance and representation of regional identities, while linguistic practices, including the use of regional dialects and accents, function as markers of identity and signs of social belonging.

4. Internally Displaced Persons: The Politics of Identity and Memory

4.1 Collective Memory and the Transmission of Trauma

Particular sociological and ethnological significance attaches to the approximately 280,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing in Georgia who were displaced from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. This population represents a critically important case for studying the processes of identity construction, the preservation of collective memory, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. As Halbwachs (1992) argues in his foundational work on collective memory, group memory is not simply an aggregate of individual recollections but a socially constructed and institutionalized process — a claim that acquires particular force in the context of communities whose shared spatial anchors have been severed by forced displacement.

Georgia currently has 277,403 registered IDPs, of whom approximately 200,000 were displaced from Abkhazia during the armed conflicts of the early 1990s, and an additional 26,000 were displaced as a result of the 2008 war in Georgia. As Gogishvili (2019) demonstrates through empirical analysis of neighbourhood-level data, IDPs residing in collective centers experience pronounced effects of social and spatial isolation, with significant consequences for their integration trajectories and identity formation.

Over three decades, IDPs have experienced a complex and frequently contradictory set of circumstances that require sustained negotiation between the memory of the past and the demands of the present. Displaced communities maintain a strong connection to the cultural memory of their lost homeland, commemorating traditions specific to Abkhazia or the Ossetian-inhabited region, preserving and ritualizing narratives of pre-displacement life, and sustaining a collective discourse of nostalgic identification. These memory practices function not only as mechanisms of emotional continuity, but as strategies for preserving identity and as sources of communal solidarity.

Contemporary IDP scholarship recognizes that the trauma of displacement becomes a central organizing component of identity, structuring both individual and collective narratives. The memory of a lost home, expressed through the detailed recollection of particular places and the evocation of childhood experience, creates what may be termed an emotional geography: a social practice that transforms private remembrance into shared cultural reality.

4.2 Adaptation and Hybrid Identities

Alongside these memory practices, IDPs have necessarily developed within their new environment, building new social networks, adapting to new economic realities, and forging hybrid identities that integrate the memory of the lost homeland with the experience of the new setting. This is not a simple binary opposition but a complex process of negotiation among different layers of identity. Displaced individuals navigate several temporal and spatial horizons simultaneously: an idealized memory of the past, the pragmatic demands of the present, and an uncertain orientation toward the future.

Of particular analytical interest is the situation of the second and third generations, born after displacement, for whom direct experiential engagement with the lost territories is entirely mediated through parents' narratives, family photographs, and oral histories. For these generations, Abkhazia or the Tskhinvali region constitutes a mythologized space, an idealized past existing at the intersection of memory and imagination. As Hirsch (2012) argues within the framework of postmemory, the second and third generations inherit not direct experience but memory narratives that profoundly shape their identities, notwithstanding that they have never directly encountered the originary trauma.

At the same time, these generations are fully integrated into the social environments in which their actual lives unfold. Their cultural identity constitutes a complex synthesis of the idealized image of the lost homeland and the concrete, everyday experience of the new setting. Ethnological fieldwork in collective centers, compact settlements, and communities of IDPs integrated into the urban fabric reveals a multilayered picture of identity politics, intergenerational trauma transmission, cultural resilience, and adaptive capacity.

The level of social integration varies significantly by type of settlement. IDPs residing in collective centers more frequently maintain a separate social identity and exhibit lower levels of integration into local communities, whereas displaced families dispersed through the urban fabric tend to undergo social assimilation more rapidly. This observation does not imply a severance of ties to their origins; dispersed IDP families frequently remain united within social networks sustained through shared religious and cultural events, demonstrating that spatial integration and identity continuity are not mutually exclusive.

5. International Migration and Transnational Cultural Networks

5.1 The Sociocultural Dimensions of Labor Migration

International labor migration constitutes a further decisive factor in the contemporary transformation of Georgia's ethnocultural landscape. A significant proportion of Georgia's population is employed in various European countries, the Russian Federation, and Turkey, creating intense transnational ties and substantially

reconfiguring the cultural practices, value orientations, and identity strategies of both migrants and the families remaining in Georgia.

Labor migration is not merely an economic phenomenon; it exerts profound effects on cultural change, gender roles, family structures, and social values. The prolonged absence of men from the household alters gender dynamics, reinforces women's decision-making role within the family, and gives rise to new forms of domestic organization. As Badurashvili (2004) notes in her demographic research, migration has a significant impact on reproductive behavior, household size, and intergenerational relations, with effects that extend well beyond the immediate economic gains associated with remittance income.

Diaspora communities develop distinctive forms and practices for the preservation of ethnic and national identity, which often diverge from prevailing cultural norms in Georgia and are at times more conservative and traditionalist in character. Migrants actively maintain the Georgian language, national traditions, and religious practices, which frequently function as markers of identity and as means of cultural demarcation from the receiving society. Alongside this conservative dimension, diaspora members absorb elements of the host society and produce hybrid cultural forms. Remittances, the transmission of ideas and values, and transnational family structures generate a complex cultural circulation that exerts influence on both the sending and the receiving social spaces, reflecting the phenomena described in transnationalism theory, in which migrants maintain multiple identities and connections across different geographical locations.

5.2 The Role of Diaspora Communities in Cultural Preservation

Georgian communities abroad, particularly in Europe and North America, develop organized structures for the preservation of cultural identity. Georgian churches, cultural centers, language schools, and social clubs function as spaces for the institutional reproduction of ethnic identity. These institutions not only sustain traditional practices but also shape new forms of expressing Georgian cultural distinctiveness adapted to the diasporic context: what is produced is not a mere replication of homeland culture, but a selectively maintained and actively reconstructed version of it.

The situation of second-generation migrants, born and raised abroad, warrants particular attention. For this generation, Georgian identity is inherited rather than organically acquired and requires deliberate effort to sustain. Language instruction, the study of Georgian history, and visits to the homeland become significant instruments of identity construction. As Rumbaut (2004) observes in his generational research on immigrant cohorts, the second generation frequently encounters a dual sense of marginality, finding itself not fully accepted by either the parental homeland or the receiving country. This structural ambivalence generates a distinctive form of identity work that differs qualitatively from the identity negotiations characteristic of both first-generation migrants and the populations of the origin country.

6. Digital Media and New Arenas of Identity Construction

6.1 Social Media and the Representation of Ethnocultural Identities

Analysis of contemporary ethnocultural landscape transformation is incomplete without accounting for the role of digital

technologies and social media. These platforms create a qualitatively new arena for the construction, representation, and negotiation of ethnic and regional identities, one that does not merely accelerate existing processes but introduces novel logics of visibility, circulation, and audience. In Castells's (1996) terms, the network society generates cultural dynamics that are structurally distinct from those of earlier media environments.

Critical analysis of online discourses reveals how ethnocultural stereotypes are reproduced or, in some instances, deconstructed in digital environments. Regional Facebook groups, short-form video content on platforms such as TikTok, and YouTube channels function simultaneously as archives of regional culture, platforms for its popularization, and spaces for the transmission of cultural heritage to younger generations who may have no direct experiential connection to the traditions being documented.

Regional content circulating on social media frequently presents local traditions, culinary practices, or folkloric elements in modernized, popular formats. These practices simultaneously perform a dual function: familiarization and distinction. Younger users deploy regional cultural capital to generate social value and assert a distinctive identity within a competitive digital attention economy. As Bourdieu (1984) argued, cultural capital is always hierarchical and embedded within relations of power; the digital mediation of that capital does not dissolve these hierarchies but reconfigures them according to platform-specific logics of engagement and visibility.

6.2 The Commercialization of Cultural Heritage and Ethno-Tourism

Digital media also produces complex and ambivalent effects on cultural heritage. The promotion of UNESCO World Heritage sites, the rapid expansion of ethno-tourism, and the broader commercialization of cultural heritage may support the preservation of traditional culture and stimulate interest among younger generations, while simultaneously risking the transformation of authentic cultural practices into staged performances for tourist consumption.

Svaneti, Tusheti, Kakheti, and other regions are increasingly becoming sites of ethnographic spectacle, where local culture is partly staged for an external audience. This process generates new forms of cultural representation in which traditional practices become theatricalized and adapted to tourist expectations. Svan defensive towers, which historically served as protective structures and symbols of family lineage, today frequently function as photographic landmarks and tourist attractions. Traditional Svan hospitality rituals organized for visitors retain some authentic elements while being simultaneously adapted to contemporary tastes and commercial demands. In MacCannell's (1976) terms, this constitutes an instance of staged authenticity, in which authenticity is not an objective condition but a socially constructed and commercially mediated experience. The analytical challenge is to recognize both the genuine preservation impulses and the commodifying pressures at work in these processes, without reducing either dimension to a mere by-product of the other.

7. Conclusion

The contemporary transformation of Georgia's ethnocultural landscape is a multifactorial, multilayered, and complexly determined process. The findings synthesized in this paper demonstrate that ethnocultural change is characterized by

simultaneous and contradictory tendencies of preservation, hybridization, and redefinition, and that no single explanatory framework captures its full dynamics. Post-Soviet transition provided the structural conditions for these transformations; globalization and digitalization have progressively reshaped their form and tempo; and the specific geopolitical circumstances of the South Caucasus have lent them a distinctly Georgian character.

Tbilisi's urban space functions as a laboratory of cultural hybridization in which regional identities retain their social vitality while being continuously transformed and renegotiated. The experience of internally displaced persons reveals the intricate dynamics of collective memory, trauma, and resilience: successive generations maintain meaningful connections to a lost homeland while forging new, contextually adapted identities whose complexity cannot be reduced to either assimilation or stasis. International migration generates transnational cultural fields in which identities are not anchored to a single geographical location but sustained across multiple spaces, and diaspora communities tend to preserve ethnic identity in forms that are often more conservative than those prevailing within Georgia itself.

Digital technologies amplify all of these processes, creating new platforms for cultural representation and transmission while simultaneously producing new challenges related to authenticity, commodification, and the risk of cultural simulacra. Critically, the Soviet-era policy of "national in form, socialist in content" continues to leave discernible traces in contemporary ethnocultural practices, and a critical ethnological perspective reveals how postcolonial structures persist in present-day identity politics in ways that are not always visible to mainstream sociological analysis.

Future research should sustain the monitoring of these processes, with focused attention on the experiences of younger generations and on the long-term effects of digitalization on ethnocultural identity formation. Longitudinal, multi-sited ethnographic studies, combined with systematic sociological survey data and demographic analysis, would substantially advance understanding of these dynamics. Such research is of decisive importance not only for academic knowledge but for the design of culturally sensitive social policies capable of responding to the diversity of contemporary Georgia.

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