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## GEORGIAN SECULARISM BETWEEN MODERNIZATION AND DEMOCRATIZATION: MINORITY ISSUES AND SOCIAL COHESION

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Georgia is a relatively small country with a mixed population: the overwhelming majority of Georgians belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church which has an important role in the Nation building of the country, but there are some significant religious minorities. Some of them are settled in territories which border with countries where they represent the majority, and Georgia has already suffered from breakaway wars in the recent past.

Since its independence from the Soviet Union, there were episodes of religious intolerance. Albeit the modernization which the country underwent in the last decade embedded an enforcement of secularism, up to recent days some cases were still registered of intolerance and of the manipulation of the religious sentiments for political purpose.

A sound secular and democratic order and a tolerant environment are the best protection for each and all citizens of Georgia, and a matter of urgency after the ignominious events of 17th of May, when antigay protesters led by Orthodox clergy violently prevented an anti-homophobia rally from taking place.

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The last census that covered the corpus of Georgian citizens, including their religious beliefs and ethno-linguistic affiliation, dates back to 2002. In April 2012 the government established a special commission in charge of preparing a new census. Like the last census, the next one will not cover Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two breakaway regions that have been *de facto* independent since the early nineties and which – after the 2008 August war – enjoy very limited international *de jure* recognition.

The unresolved issue of sovereignty over Abkhazia and South Ossetia is not the only thorny question in the state and nation building of post-Soviet Georgia. Albeit to a far less limited extent than twenty-two years ago when the country gained its independence, society is not yet fully inclusive: secularism and the issue of minorities were tackled in the state's modernization process, but full success still cannot be declared.

### ***Georgia, a multi-confessional country***

According to the 2002 census there were four main ethno-linguistic groups in Georgia (not considering the ethnic composition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as mentioned above): Georgian 83.8%, Azeri 6.5%, Armenian 5.7% and Russian 1.5%. The remaining 2.5% includes Ukrainians, Greeks, Jews and Kurds<sup>1</sup>. As a general trend since independence, the Russian community has been significantly decreasing in numbers, while the Azeri group has passed from being the third to the second most numerous one. The three main ethno-linguistic groups traditionally speak non mutually understandable languages and belong to three different churches. Approximately 10 percent of the population is at least nominally Muslim: Azeris, concentrated in the southeastern region of Kvemo-Kartli, ethnic Georgian Muslims of Ajara, and ethnic Chechen Kists in the northeastern region. Armenians, concentrated in the southern Samtskhe-Javakheti region, largely belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. There are an estimated 35,000 Catholics, ethnic Georgians or Assyrians, and 18,000 Kurdish Yezidis<sup>2</sup>. But the overwhelming majority of Georgians belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church.

### **The Nation and the Church**

The Georgian Autocephalous Orthodox Church has ancient roots. In around the year 480 AD, the Bishop of Mtskheta was elevated to the rank

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<sup>1</sup> See Ministry of Economic Development of Georgia, Department of Statistics, *2008 Statistical Yearbook of Georgia*, Tbilisi, 2008, p. 22,

[http://dwvg.ge/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Yearbook\\_2008\\_Final1.pdf](http://dwvg.ge/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Yearbook_2008_Final1.pdf) (25/02/2013).

<sup>2</sup> Data reported by the US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148936.html> (26/02/13).

of Catholicos of Kartli, a figure to be recognized in the year 1010 as a fully-fledged Patriarch with the official title of Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia. The autocephaly of the Georgian Church was abolished in 1811, ten years after the annexation of the Kingdom of Kartl-Kakheti to the Tsarist Empire. The local Church was subjected to the Russian Orthodox Holy Synod. It was only in 1917 – in the peak of the Empire crisis – that Georgian bishops restored their autocephaly, despite strong opposition from their Russian counterparts. A highly significant step, but a short-lived one in practice: in four years the Sovietization of the country was to profoundly affect the life of the religious community. During the Soviet years the Church had to go through all the hardship imposed by the doctrine of state atheism. In 1943, spurred by the war and the need for consensus, the Russian Orthodox Church eventually recognized the Georgian Orthodox Church as autocephalous. Almost fifty years afterwards, in 1990, full recognition was achieved when the Patriarch of Constantinople confirmed it. The timing was significant indeed: the following year the Soviet Union would collapse and Georgia would restore its pre-1921 independence.

#### ***The status of the Orthodox Church in the Georgian constitutional order***

During the First Georgian Republic (1917-1921), Orthodoxy was declared the State religion. The 1921 constitution contained the first specific provision about the division of State and Church. In the Soviet decades of atheism and internationalism, religious and national identities became even more interlinked. When the post-Soviet constitution was drafted, lawmakers opted for a secular state but with recognition of “the special role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia”<sup>3</sup>. The 1995 Constitution was to be amended a few years later. A paragraph was added to include a reference to the Constitutional Agreement – or Concordat – signed in 2002<sup>4</sup>, which granted the Church not only ownership of its assets but also a unique position in the state legal framework: all religious groups – but the Georgian Autocephalous Orthodox Church – were to be registered as either unions or foundations. Formally, the only recognized Church operating in the territory was the Georgian Orthodox Church, while all others submitted their applications to the Ministry of Justice as civil organizations.

The Constitutional Agreement was the fruits of pressure from society. On restoration of independence, Georgia witnessed some episodes of religious intolerance. The then President Eduard Shevardnadze met halfway the

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<sup>3</sup> Art. 9§1 of Constitution of Georgia, adopted on 24 August 1995, available at [http://www.parliament.ge/files/68\\_1944\\_951190\\_CONSTIT\\_27\\_12.06.pdf](http://www.parliament.ge/files/68_1944_951190_CONSTIT_27_12.06.pdf) (26/02/13).

<sup>4</sup> Full text of the Constitutional Agreement, only in Georgian, available on the official website of the Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchate.ge/?action=text/samartali05> (26/02/13).

requests for a stricter identification of the Nation and the Church, still preserving secularism as the state doctrine. But the poor rule of law could not prevent religious minorities from harassment.

### *The issue of religious minorities*

In the nineties, the fact that some religious groups were correlated with specific ethno-linguistic communities (e.g. Armenians, Azeris) fuelled confrontation. After the tragic breakaway wars of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, a sense of frustration and disbelief towards minorities was mixed with resurgent national pride. Such a mixture exposed national or religious minorities to the threat of small ultra-orthodox and/or ultra-nationalist groups. Not only traditional religious minorities suffered from sporadic attacks, but also the ‘new churches’ such as Jehovah’s Witnesses<sup>5</sup> and Baptists. Between 1999 and 2004 two notorious religious leaders, Basil Mkalavishvili and Petre Ivanidze, perpetrated a number of crimes against religious minorities. Some two hundred attacks took place, including physical violence, destruction of places of worship and burning of religious literature. Mkalavishvili’s raids remained largely unpunished until he was sentenced in 2005. His trial was marked by a very nervous atmosphere and a climate of intimidation against witnesses who had suffered from the violence<sup>6</sup>, and Mkalavishvili himself remarked, “Dozens of people if not more – including priests of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate – should be on trial, but they never will be”<sup>7</sup>, casting a shadow over the role played by members of the Georgian Church. Indeed, religious nationalism scored some consensus within the ranks of the Orthodox Church and in civil society. As a consequence, the government (and the prosecutor) was rather cautious in tackling the issue.

Another source of concern was – and to a certain extent still is – the issue of restitutions and property disputes. During the Soviet regime religious properties were confiscated. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian state either conceded the use of places of worship or returned some properties. The main mosque and two synagogues in Tbilisi, for example, remained state property but were operated by their respective

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<sup>5</sup> In 2001 Jehova’s Witnesses applied to the European Court of Human Rights against the Georgian Government (see

[http://www.cilevics.eu/minelres/archive/07122001-13\\_09\\_18-8229.html](http://www.cilevics.eu/minelres/archive/07122001-13_09_18-8229.html) – retrieved 26/02/13). In 2007 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Georgia had violated three articles of the European Human Rights Convention.

<sup>6</sup> F. CORLEY, *GEORGIA: Two leaders of religious violence finally sentenced – but what about the others?*, Forum 18 News Service 2005, 01 Feb. 2005, Oslo, available at [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=503&pdf=Y](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=503&pdf=Y) (26/02/13).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

religious communities. On the other hand, the Georgian Orthodox Church not only had many properties returned, but also received state support for their restoration. Besides what seemed like unequal treatment, the Armenian Apostolic Church claimed that the property disputes were resolved with a clear bias in favor of the 'titular' Church. There is an open controversy surrounding some thirty churches, some of which are claimed by both the Armenian and the Georgian churches. In 2009, a disputed Armenian church collapsed in Tbilisi. The church was reportedly built in 1356 but was closed during the Soviet era and used as a warehouse. It did not reopen after the country's independence, when the title to the property passed to the Ministry of Culture. The following year the Armenian Apostolic Church released a statement accusing the government of failing to preserve Armenian holy sites<sup>8</sup>.

### Modernization and the Churches

After the Rose Revolution (2003) a new government came to power. The new president, Mikhaïl Saakashvili, committed himself and his leadership to Euro-Atlantic values and the modernization of Georgia. The program implied that protection of religious minorities was to be heeded, in line with international standards and consistent with the conventions Georgia was part of. The country has been a member of the Council of Europe since 2001, but many of its provisions or guidelines were neglected by the Shevardnadze administration.

Not by chance Basil Mkalavishvili and Petre Ivanidze were finally tried and sentenced in 2005; a first sign was thus sent. But it was more of a sign than a program. Still, the government maintained a cautious attitude to issues related to the Church, knowing that its popularity in the country was high.

Be as it may, religious minorities benefited from a more secure environment after the implementation of the post-Rose Revolution reforms. At the same time, their position in the legal framework of the state remained unclear and weak.

Things were to develop during President Saakashvili's second mandate (2008-2013), for different reasons.

On one hand, the Georgian Church voiced its criticism of the leadership, claiming that it had not managed to avoid the 2008 war. After the war, the Patriarch Ilia II opened a diplomatic channel with the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church, and traveled to Moscow even though all diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed.

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<sup>8</sup> US Department of State, *op. cit.*

Ilia II has been the Patriarch of Georgia since 1977. After a very promising start, relations with the post-Rose Revolution government progressively cooled. Especially after the war, the Church lamented scarce visibility on television. An open crisis erupted in 2009. Tea Tutberidze, a member of the Liberty Institute, an NGO very close to the regime, posted on Georgian websites and YouTube video footage showing Ilia II with a voiceover insulting President Saakashvili. Although this was an action performed by a private citizen, rumors spread that it mirrored the position of the authorities<sup>9</sup>. Since 2007, Ilia II played a more relevant role in the political arena, when he deemed it necessary. He mediated between the authorities and the opposition after the 2007 political crisis and, as mentioned above, criticized the government about the war and who bore responsibility for it.

### Religious minorities and modernization

The war was to impact not only State-Orthodox Church relations but also State-Other Church relations. In its aftermath, in an effort to regain domestic and international credit, Mikhail Saakashvili launched a second wave of democratization and reforms. After long and not easy negotiations, in 2011 the Georgian parliament passed amendments to the civil code allowing religious minority groups in Georgia to be registered as legal entities of public law, welcoming the observations of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe<sup>10</sup>. The issue was highly politicized, with the opposition

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<sup>9</sup> K. LIKLIKADZE - L. FULLER, *Who Has An Interest In Discrediting Georgia's Patriarch?*, Caucasus Report, in Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 23 October 2009, available at [http://www.rferl.org/content/Who\\_Has\\_An\\_Interest\\_In\\_Discrediting\\_Georgias\\_Patriarch/1859177.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Who_Has_An_Interest_In_Discrediting_Georgias_Patriarch/1859177.html) (05/03/13).

<sup>10</sup> "Although the authorities have taken many steps in recent times to address the integration of National minorities in Georgian society, there are still a number of outstanding issues. These include, inter alia: [...] strengthening religious intolerance and providing a proper legal status for minority religions [...] We also extensively discussed the issue of religious tolerance and the situation and status of other faiths in Georgia. The Georgian Orthodox Church is the main religion in Georgia. The Church is protected as both a church and a public entity. Other religious denominations and groups can only register as nongovernmental organisations and non-profit-making private-law-associations. Therefore, they are not able to enjoy the same conditions in respect of the exercise of their religious activities. The absence of a proper legal status has resulted in a number of problems, including those relating to property rights (see also below), and the situation is unsatisfactory. We have therefore called upon the Georgian authorities to adopt a specific law on religion that would give an adequate legal status and protection to other faiths than the Georgian Orthodox Church". Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), *Honouring of obligations and*

siding with the most conservative sectors of society. After the adoption of the law, a huge protest march took place in Tbilisi<sup>11</sup>, while the international community hailed the step taken by the authorities, praising its consistency with Georgian international commitments.

David Aprasidze, a Georgian scholar and political expert, came to the conclusion that, “The elite governing Georgia since the Rose Revolution of November 2003 seek modernization, not democratization. [...] The Georgian elite under Saakashvili’s leadership started the project of quickly modernizing the country and society. They believed that it was necessary to transform Georgian society, which they considered to be pre-modern and dominated by traditional values which contradicted modernity. Ethnic nationalism and the increasing Orthodox religious identity of Georgians were seen as the most challenging issues”<sup>12</sup>.

Georgia is a more secular state than it was before the Rose Revolution, but pre-modern beliefs and the relation between modernity and religion are still an issue. To quote a recent case, in 2011 the government issued electronic ID cards, but some Orthodox groups campaigned against them until the Georgian Holy Synod issued a statement clarifying that the electronic cards are not “a seal of Antichrist”<sup>13</sup>.

### **More democracy, hopefully not less secularism**

The parliamentary elections of 2012 brought to power a ruling elite that opposed Saakashvili, his administration and his government. After a long and extremely tough election campaign, Bidzina Ivanishvili and his team won 85 seats out of the 150 in the Georgian parliament. The United National Movement, President Saakashvili’s party, won the remaining 65 seats. Alternation to government seldom happens in post-Soviet countries, and it was agreed with much satisfaction by the international community to be a remarkable step on the path to democracy.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, the present prime minister, is personally pretty much close to the Orthodox Church, although of course he pays respect to other churches in the country. Before and after the elections the issue of

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*commitments by Georgia, Information note by the co-rapporteurs on their fact-finding visit to Tbilisi (22-24 March 2010), AS/Mon(2010)24rev., p. 4-5, available at*

[http://assembly.coe.int/CommitteeDocs/2010/20100624\\_amondoc24rev\\_2010.pdf](http://assembly.coe.int/CommitteeDocs/2010/20100624_amondoc24rev_2010.pdf) (05/03/13).

<sup>11</sup> Civil Georgia, *Protest March Against Law on Religious Minorities Status*, 10 July 2011, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23730> (05/03/13).

<sup>12</sup> D. APRASIDZE, *Lost in Democratization and Modernization: What Next in Georgia?*, in ‘Caucasus Analytical Digest’, 2 September, pp. 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Civil Georgia, *Church says new ID cards ‘Not a seal of Antichrist’*, 6 July 2012, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24973> (05/03/13).

secularism flew in the mainstream of public tensions, with both domestic and regional implications. In May 2012, a dispute emerged between Georgia and Azerbaijan about a section of border in the area of the David Gareji monastery complex, causing an immediate reaction by the then opposition parties. The David Gareji monastery complex is located on the border and for some time Azerbaijani police did not allow visitors to access the Azerbaijani side, until an agreement was reached. In the same month, the first ever Gay Pride march held in downtown Tbilisi ended in scuffles, when gay activists were stopped by a group of men among whom were some Orthodox priests<sup>14</sup>. The political struggle also touched the relationship between the office of the President and the Armenian religious minority. As a result of a broad amnesty voted by the new majority, Vahan Chakhalyan, an Armenian activist who was serving a prison term, was released in January. President Saakashvili had vetoed the amnesty – which was then signed by the Parliamentary Speaker – and suggested that Chakhalyan had been released upon the request of the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Karekin II. His statement caused an immediate firm reaction from the Armenian Diocese in Georgia, that invited politicians “not to use for their short-term political objectives issues, which directly concern peace and calmness in our multiethnic homeland, as well as relationship between our brotherly people of Georgia and Armenia”<sup>15</sup>.

As prime minister, Ivanishvili has not promoted any significant change regarding Georgian secularism, but the difference between Saakashvili and Ivanishvili is palpable<sup>16</sup>. If his personal belief is confined to the private sphere and does not affect the *res publica*, it will not be a source of further confrontation in a society which is undergoing a long and exhausting process of political polarization. His recent remarks<sup>17</sup>, when asked by journalists about the relations between the state and the Church, seem to be in this direction. At the same time, beyond official statements, the matter of how much secularism permeates the ruling elite is still an open question, even more in a society where the new wave of civil rights is gaining ground: among

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<sup>14</sup> BBC news Europe, *Fighting at gay rights march in Tbilisi Georgia*, 17 March 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18109022> (05/03/13).

<sup>15</sup> Civil Georgia, *Armenian Church in Georgia 'Condemns' Saakashvili's Statement on Chakhalyan*, 27 January 2013, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25685> (05/03/13).

<sup>16</sup> Civil Georgia, *Ivanishvili, Saakashvili at a reception in Georgian Patriarchate*, 14 January 2013, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25640> (05/03/13).

<sup>17</sup> Ivanishvili replied to journalist during a press conference after having expressed his respect for the Church but still the right for citizens to criticize it: “How religious personally I am – that’s another issue and it’s not interesting for you, Civil Georgia, *Ivanishvili on Georgian Orthodox Church*, 10 April 2013, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25938>

them, the rights of the gay community which has been largely discriminated so far. Ivanishvili has been attributed with an alarming remark, if confirmed; when asked why he prefers Russia to America as a strategic partner, he allegedly replied, “At least, in Russia, you don’t have to get gay-married”<sup>18</sup>.

The remark mirrors an attitude which is spread in the Georgian society, where conservative and regressive behaviors and respect for the national cultural heritage are often not perceived as different matters. An attitude that paved the way to the ignominious violent anti-gay protest which on May 17, the world day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), prevented a peaceful rally from taking place. Some Orthodox clergymen were leading the protesters who broke thorough the police cordon and forced the evacuation of the participants of the rally. Participants had to flee in busses which were attacked, while a sort of man-hunting continued in the streets of Tbilisi.<sup>19</sup> The brutal and barbaric display of homophobia caused a strong reaction by a shocked international community, from the European Union to the United States. While investigation is proceeding, the debate about what happened and about the responsibility of the different layers of the Orthodox Church opened the Pandora box of what some Georgians name as “Theocracy against Democracy”, a topic that injected a new possible challenge to social cohesion in the public debate. In this context the brave words of the Parliamentary Chairman Davit Usupashvili, who with moderation but firmness defended the secularism of the state, are a sign that there is the room for a positive development.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusions

In October 2013, Georgia will hold presidential elections, thus putting an end to a virtually two year long tough electoral campaign. During this extended and complicated process, there have been episodes of manipulation of religious sentiments for political purposes. While a truly competitive political environment is to be welcomed, the terms of political struggle and the principles governing the public debate should not be a source of destabilization, as a general rule. In the case of the Republic of

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<sup>18</sup> M. IDOV, *Georgia’s next Leader may be a billionaire zookepr with albino rapper children*, in ‘New Republic’, September 2012, available at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/107831/meet-the-billionaire-zookeeper-albino-rapper-children-who-may-be-georgias-next-leader#>.

<sup>19</sup> Some footages of the aggressions and of the homophobic crowd were posted on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kLQB0SG6jQ>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dcb1aWDrjzE>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBshyyKQqoY> *et alia* (retrieved on 24/05/13).

<sup>20</sup> Civil Georgia, Usupashvili Denounces Patriarch’s Statement Made on the Eve of Anti-Homophobia Rally, 21 May 2013, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26089>.

Georgia this can be firmly assessed, as the country has to face many challenges. It is a relatively small country with a mixed population. Some of its religious minorities border on countries where they represent the majority, and Georgia has already suffered from breakaway wars. The country is undergoing a delicate political transition in which populist temptations or conservative involutions might further fuel unnecessary social confrontations. A sound secular and democratic order and a tolerant environment are the best protection for each and every citizen of Georgia.