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The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia

'Great Georgians'

On 16 January 2009 Georgian Public TV broadcast a peculiar show. This was a TV format which — under different names — had run in many other countries. 'Great Britons' in the United Kingdom and 'The Name Russia' in Russia were the direct predecessors of the Georgian version of this TV show, which this time was entitled 'The Great Ten'. The aim of the show was to select, with the active participation of the audience, ten 'great Georgians' from history and to rank them according to their popularity. The show quickly became very popular, but two months after its start the Georgian Orthodox Church declared that its format was unbecoming.

The reason for this protest was for many a real surprise. In the list of 'great Georgians' there were many people who had in the past been canonized by the Church. These were not clerics in the first instance, but kings, writers and public figu es whose authority had been earned exclusively through their secular activities. But, in the view of the Church, persons regarded as saints should not be subjected to a completion among each other. It was this competition between the saints which the Church regarded as blasphemy. Only the active resistance of liberal circles saved the TV show from being discontinued altogether. But still a fundamental change was made to its format: Ten 'great Georgians' were selected in the end, but without ranking them against each other, that is, without defining the place of a particular person on this 'top ten' list.

One should not consider this story as an exotic or insignificant episode; at least it was not regarded as such in Georgia. On the contrary, it became the centre of media attention and a hotly debated issue in the public sphere. The reason for this interest can be explained by the fact that the fate of the interpretation of national culture in Georgia was at stake. TheGeorgian Orthodox Church attempted to present its religious interpretation of the most important personalities of Georgian history and culture as the decisive one and to bar any other interpretation as illegitimate. Thus this debate touched upon questions of the form and function of nationalism in the country as well as on the role played by the Orthodox Church in forming nationalism.

Three Forms of Nationalism: Ethnic, Civic, Revolutionary

A consistent narrative about the types and development of Georgian nationalism has appeared in Georgia during the last decade. This narrative tells us that during the first years of independence, ethnic nationalism dominated the political and societal scene. This ethnic nationalism was particularistic and exclusionist, based on principles of blood, kinship and descent. It was the major factor behind the ethno-political conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (together with the mirroring minority ethnic nationalisms that developed in these breakaway regions). This ethnic nationalism had its origin, paradoxically enough, in the Soviet Union which, in parallel to the declaration of internationalist principles, also offici ly and unoffici ly fostered a particular form of nationalism. One of the reasons for the fall of the Soviet Union, alongside its ailing economy, was its inability to contain this nationalism, especially on the periphery, such as the Caucasus.

According to this narrative, one of the major achievements of the period after the November Revolution of 2003 was overcoming ethnic nationalism and developing its civic counterpart. The State, on the levels of both policy and officia discourse, stopped differentiating between its citizens according to their ethnic background and elevated citizenship to the only principle according to which it defined Georgian identity. This was explicitly interpreted by representatives of the new political elite as a major societal and political change, heralding not the overcoming of nationalism as such, but rather the establishment of its civic form, able to encompass representatives of all ethnic and religious communities inhabiting the country.

This classifi ation of two types of nationalism is certainly not a Georgian invention. It goes back to as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, to the works of the German author Friedrich Meinecke,[1] who distinguished between *Kulturnation* and *Staatsnation.* This distinction later found many different forms while maintaining its kernel: Western and Eastern, ethnic and civic, cultural and political, subjective and objective nationalisms. As applied to post-Soviet space, Ukraine and Kazakhstan are considered to be the embodiments of civic nationalism, while in Estonia and Latvia ethnic nationalism is supposed to have dominance. This distinction has been often criticized because it marks all too overtly one side of the difference as positive and the other as negative. But the following question is an interesting one in the contemporary Georgian context:Is this distinction adequate enough to cover the intricacies of the development of Georgian nationalism since1990? Perhaps it could be shown that the empirical material presented to us by recent Georgian history is far from being exhausted by this simple dichotomy,

and the narrative that is based on it cannot be taken as the last word on the history of nationalism in Georgia.

Without wanting to abandon this well-established distinction between the two forms of nationalism as such, I think that the Georgian experience of the last two decades demands the addition ofa third term designating a distinct type, the revolutionary one. This step has already been taken by Jack Snyder, who provided three different patterns of development of nationalism. In his analysis, civic nationalism is exemplified by Britain, and ethnic nationalism by Serbia, whereas the revolutionary form of nationalism is best understood when looking at France at the end of the eighteenth century. This French revolutionary nationalism was by no means ethnic. 'Citizenship was based on criteria of territorial residence and loyalty to French political principles, not on language or the ethnic culture'. But, according to Snyder, it was not civic either. 'The French varsion was collectivist, not individualist, and derived from participation in the community, not from individual liberties'. This emphasis on the liberty of the nation over the liberty of the individual is the trait that distinguishes revolutionary French nationalism from the civic British one. 'Nationalism in France', concludes Snyder, 'took the revolution-ary form, basing its appeals for collective action on the defence of political revolution that had brought to power a regime that governed in the name of the nation, and violently opposing those who were seen as trying to undo the change'.[2] When trying to find the reasons behind the rise of this revolutionary nationalism, it is the institutional vacuum, the absence of an effective institutional framework that is identified as the prime factor.In many ways this description fits the political situation in Georgia after the November Revolution of 2003.[3] Confronted with a failing state unable to spread a monopoly of legitimate power on its territory and to provide citizens with basic services, the new government had to start an extensive state-building programme and to mobilize the people for this purpose. This is when revolutionary nationalism made its appearance, aimed at establishing a novel kind of political identity and at protecting this identity from its enemies, both internal and external. It was interpreted as a civic form of nationalism, but this interpretation required a certain measure of aberration to be accepted as such. This nationalism was not aiming to preserve some political identity which had already existed. On the contrary, it wanted to revolutionize society by offering a new, more modern and dynamic interpretation of what it is to be Georgian in the twenty-first century. This was no longer based on ethnicity and emphasized the factor of citizenship as something defining the understanding of nationhood. In this regard it was inclusive, not exclusive. But this trait could not—and did not—take away its revolu-

tionary character. Revolutionary nationalism creates its own exclusions with a heightened sense of friend-enemy distinctions. It is also hard to reconcile with liberal values, appealing directly to the masses, transforming and moulding them into a new form.

Nationalism and Religion

But even with this correction of the dominant narrative and the replacement of 'civic' with 'revolutionary' nationalism, this framework can provide no explanation for the case described above; the conflict between the Church and liberal circles was not about ethnicity. It was the religious factor which played a decisive role in it, linked with the issue of the interpretation of the national cultural heritage. It was a question of the appropriation of Georgian culture by the Georgian Orthodox Church. How could this will to appropriate the whole of the culture come into existence? And what form doesthis will to appropriate take in Georgia?

If one argues that the dominant ethnic nationalism of the 1990s was first challenged and then changed on the level of officia discourse at the beginning of twenty-first century by a revolutionary form of nationalism, this still does not cover the whole complexity of this field The most important dimension of the phenomenon ignored by this narrative of a simple transition from ethnic to revolutionary nationalism is the religious one. It has been already noted that in post-Soviet Georgia the religious renaissance took a stronger and more vital form than in the other countries of the region, even those closest geographically, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan.[4] One of the salient features of this religious renaissance has been its close link to Georgian nationalism. The religious discourse is hard to differentiate from the nationalist discourse about the survival of the Georgian nation. Not only that: the kernel of the religious discourse in Georgia during the last two decades—propagated both by the Georgian Orthodox Church and others—is the narrative about the survival of Georgian nationhood.

This is a remarkable development since Georgian nationalism developed in a thoroughly secular context in the middle of the nineteenth century.[5] When analysing texts from the 1850s and 1860s where the project of Georgian nationalism was first articulated, one notices a complete absence of religious motives and themes. Theonly exception is when these themes are used metaphorically, but these metaphors are never taken very seriously. What is more, after a war with the Ottoman Empire the Muslim part of Georgia, when Ajara (lying in the southern part of the country by the Black Sea, on

the border with present-day Turkey) was incorporated into the Georgian territories by the Russian Empire, the ideologues of Georgian nationalism were quite explicit in relativizing the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the process of Georgian identity building. 'In our opinion, neither the unity of language, nor the unity of religion and kinship can fuse the people with each other as the unity of history' was the lesson drawn by the founder of Georgian nationalism,Ilia Chavchavadze, in 1877. It was precisely this secular nationalism which was decisive for the development of Georgian culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Without it, the cultural integration of the linguistically and religiously extremely diverse population of Georgia would have been far more difficul if not impossible.

In 1987 the Georgian Orthodox Church canonized Ilia Chavchavadze. Thiswas regarded as a logical development of the burgeoning nationalism which was becoming stronger and stronger in the disintegrating Soviet Union. But this canonization could be considered as the beginning of anew and distinct form of religious nationalism[7] in Georgia, which claims to continue the older, nineteenth-century form of nationalism, but in reality is in strong contrast with its secular kernel. In the eighties and at the beginning of the nineties it was the so-called National Movement which integrated elements of explicit religious content into their form of ethnic nationalism. Messianistic expectations became the horizon for national identity building. The heritage of Orthodox Christianity was advanced as an essential factor for the formation of national self-awareness. But what is interesting at this early stage of the deployment of religious nationalism is the fact that it was by no means dominated by the institution of the Church. On the contrary, this new form of nationalistic ideology was advance by informal networks in civil society and by political actors who managed to come to power carried by the wave of national upheaval. It was only after the full disintegration of the Soviet Union, civil war and ethnic conflicts that the Georgian Orthodox Church started to become the institutional embodiment of this new form of nationalist ideology. But it came into its own only after the revolution of 2003 and the spread of the new kind of revolutionary nationalism.

At first glance, the paradox of the situation lies in the fact that a religious nationalism appealing to the past, to the biologically understood essence of national identity and to the story of its religious salvation, gained popularity after the revolution of 2003, that is, after the modernization project had beenexplicitly endorsed by the political elite with its strong revolutionary-nationalistic sentiments. But this paradox is only a superficial one. It is not difficult to see the rise of religious nationalism as a backlash against the modernization project with its new form of revolutionary nationalism.

What are the distinctive features of this religious nationalism? It is an ideology which makes religious affiliation to Orthodoxy an essential factor in determining national identity. 'Georgianness' lies in 'being Orthodox'. Reli-gious nationalism offers a sustained narrative telling the story of the survival of the Georgian nation in almost biologizing terminology grounded in theo-logical propositions. The kernel of this narrative is about Orthodoxy saving 'Georgian blood', 'Georgian genes', and Georgian identity as such.

Th ough this discourse religious minorities are excluded. Since religious and ethnic identities are very strongly linked through this discourse, the achievements of revolutionary nationalism with its stress on citizenship and integration are brought into question. According to the Georgian constitution, Church and State are separate but, first y, the Church is the most trusted institution in the country and, secondly, most political parties tend to make the religious nationalist discourse their own, which makes its influ - ence much stronger. Theconstitutional agreement between Church and State, which recognizes 'the special role' of the Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia, is an institutional source of this influence.[7]

Church and State

There were several reasons why the religious factor was not important in the development of nationalism in the nineteenth century.[8] The Georgian Orthodox Church had been in decline since the seventeenth century and the nationalist mobilization of Georgians within the Russian Empire concentrated on other institutions and issues, such as dynastic and territorial ones. It was also signifi ant that Orthodox Christianity was a factor through which occupied Georgia was brought closer to the occupying Russian Empire rather than distanced from it. It was this relative weakness of the institution and the identity of the confession which gave the Russian Empire the possibility of abolishing the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church without many problems (whereas in Armenia, for example, the autonomy of the Church could be preserved). In many places Russian became the language of the liturgy, which increasedthe distance between the Georgian population and the Church.

Contemporary research has shown us that during Soviet times religious communities were not treated in homogenous ways by the State.[9] Following policies aimed at the elimination of religion in the twenties and thir-ties, the situation changed during the Second World War, when the Church was instrumentalized for mobilization purposes. But real revitalization of

the Church—both in Russia and Georgia—took place in the late seventies, when all the other Soviet institutions controlled by the State gradually lost their authority. It was against this background that the Church started to gain prestige, which only grew with the rise of the national movement in the late eighties.

At present, tension between the two forms of nationalism has had an unexpected consequence. As each of these nationalisms is institutionalized — the State having officially adopted revolutionary nationalism, and the Orthodox Church having endorsed religious nationalism — there appears a tension, sometimes even a conflict between Church and State. Thisis unex-pected and surprising, since there is no tradition of this kind of conflict in Georgia, and the Byzantine idea of 'symphonia' between the secular and the sacred instances of power, whatever its actual implementation, is still consid-ered to be normative within the Orthodox Church. This can be clearly seen in the example of the Russian Orthodox Church which, after the fall of the USSR, developed in the direction of merging with State interests.[10] Much the same development occurred in Georgia in the nineties and at the beginning of the new millennium, but everything has radically changed since the Revolution of 2003. On the surface, on the level of ceremonies and discourse, the unity of the Georgian Church and the Georgian State seems to be intact. But hidden tensions seem to accompany this relationship, sometimes turning into open conflicts.

There is a very interesting case of conflict between the government and the Church which was closely related to determining the question of what is Georgian national culture and who has the right to dispose of it. A number of Georgian monuments on Turkish territory are in urgent need of restora-tion. In exchange for the right to restore these monuments, the Government of Turkey is asking the Georgian government to restore and/ or reconstruct four mosques on Georgian territory. Thisrequires an agreement to be signed between the Georgian and Turkish governments. A draft of this agreement was already ready in 2007, but the Georgian Orthodox Church opposed its signature. The Georgian government, finding itself in a difficul situation be-cause of opposition protests, decided not to go against the Church and did not make the issue the subject of a public debate. But this tension turned into a conflict when the Government tried to push again for the signing of the agreement in 2011. In this case also, it is a question of defining how to understand national culture and national identity. For the Georgian Orthodox Church, the medieval monuments on Turkish territory are of no direct interest, since even after restoration they will have only a cultural, not a reli-gious function. As for the State, it is confronted with the task of preserving

the cultural heritage of the country. These two perspectives produce two different discourses, both of which are strongly nationalist, but they clearly differ from each other.

One could interpret this as a process of re-traditionalization going against — but also in parallel to — the project and process of modernization. If the modernization project with its revolutionary nationalism can be interpreted as an attempt by the political system to transform the whole of society, then the re-traditionalization process with the religious nationalism that accompanies it can be viewed as an attempt to impose religious semantics on the totality of societal and cultural phenomena. Being a form of nationalism — a modern phenomenon *par excellence* — religious nationalism would like to become the locus of resistance to modernity. This is its major problem: It cannot allow itself to be seen as it is, it can only exist on condition that it obscures and conceals its modern character, refers to an imaginary past, and blocks an understanding of the fundamental contingency of the social order.

Notes

1. Cf. Brubaker, Rogers: The Manichean Myth: Rethinking the Distinction between 'Civic' and 'Ethnic' Nationalism'. In: Kriesi, Hanspeter; Armingeon, Klaus; Siegrist, Hannes (Hg.): Nation and National Identity. The European Experience in Perspective. 1999, pp. 55-72. [A different version of the present article was published in German as "Nationalismus und Religion in Georgien", in: G2W, (2011) 6, 16–19].
2. Snyder, Jack: From Voting to Violence. Democratization and Nationalist Conflict. 2000, p. 156.
3. Cf. Wheatley, Jonathan: Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union. Ashgate Pub. 2005.
4. See Charles, Robia: Religiosity and Trust in Religious Institutions: Tales from the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), in: Politics and Religion 2010, 1-34.
5. Reisner, Oliver: Die Schule der georgischen Nation. Eine sozialhistorische Untersuchung der nationalen Bewegung in Georgien am Beispiel der 'Gesellschaft zur Verbreitung der Lese- und Schreibkunde unter den Georgiern' (1850-1917) (= Kaukasienstudien, Band 6). Wiesbaden2004;

6. For the analysis of the rise of religious nationalism worldwide during the last decades, see Juergensmeyer, Mark: The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State, Berekely, Los Angeles 1993;
7. Abashidze,Levan: Das Recht der Religionsgemeinschaften in Georgien. In: Lienemann, Wolfgang; Reuter, Hans-Richard (Hg.): Das Recht der Religionsgemeinschaften inMittel-, Ost- und Südeuropa.Baden-Baden 2005, S. 191-206.
8. Cf. Jones, Stephen F.: Religion and Nationalism in Soviet Georgia and Armenia. In: Ramet, Pedro (ed.): Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics. Durham 1989, S. 171-195; Grdzelidze Tamara; George, Martin; Vischer, Lukas (ed.): Witness Th ough Troubled Times: A History of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, 1811to the Present. London 2006.
9. Cf. Ramet, Sabrina P.: Nihil Obstat. Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia. Duke University Press, 1998.
10. Cf. Knox, Zoe: Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism. London 2005.