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Struggle for Power: Religion and Politics in Georgia from the 90s to the Present

Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and proclamation of Georgian independence, the Georgian Orthodox Church successfully filled in the political and social vacuum left behind the old ideology.

As David Lane notes, the fall of the Soviet Union contributed to the formation of a new civic concept in post-Soviet and Eastern European countries[1].

Lane also adds that new national identity of post-Soviet countries was formed in an interesting environment — in the wake of economic and political globalization[2]. Today, all three Baltic countries and a range of post-Soviet states, which experienced economic and political transformation in a short period of time, are in the European Union[3].

Since 1991, independent Georgia is undergoing democratization and construction of a civil society[4]. When discussing these processes, it is interesting to touch upon the Georgian Orthodox Church and its role in the contemporary Georgian nation state.

Even in the last years of Communist leadership increased interest in the Church was apparent. It needs to be noted that the so called intelligentsia, – representatives of educated strata, started to attend the Patriarch's sermons[5]. Among them were members of scientific circles too. For instance, lab scientists from Abastumani Astrophysical Observatory, who at the time were the elite of Georgian scientific society, would often attend and later discuss the Patriarch's sermons[6].

Today, the disposition of Georgian society and specifically of Georgian youth, towards religion and the Church is an interesting topic for researchers since the issue is comparably understudied. Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union international academic society was primarily interested in Georgian linguistics, literature and history[7]. After the declaration of independence, when Georgia entered the lines of sovereign states, international scholars started to take interest in the region from the perspective of international relations, emphasizing national security and economy[8]. Nevertheless, more and more articles and critical essays are produced on the topic of identity and contemporary Georgian nationalism. Systematic studies of Georgian collective

identity and scholarly works on these topics, however, are still scarce[9]. Exceptions include the World Values Survey (2008) funded by the Soros Foundation and the Caucasus Barometer, an annual family survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) program[10].

According to the 2010 study of CRRC, 82% of Georgians identify themselves as Orthodox. 51% of the population thinks that religion plays a fairly important role in their everyday life, while 41% considers that religion plays a very important role in their daily life. The same study suggests that 47% of respondents between 18 and 35 years old deem religion as fairly important, and 48% as very important in their daily life[11].

Politics is one of the domains were growing significance of the Church in the development of national identity is obvious. "The Role of the Orthodox Church in the Development of Georgian Identity", a collaborative research initiative between the Caucasus Swiss Network and Ilia State University, includes interviews with Georgian politicians. The interviews are aimed at determining the attitude of major political parties towards the role of the Church in politics, rights of religious and ethnic minorities, church-state relationship, status of the Church, and so on. Based on the research outcomes it can be argued that contemporary Georgia is in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, since the declaration of independence it has been striving to build a European-style democratic system, which requires the acknowledgement of diversity and multicultural principles only feasible through the separation of church and state and 'religiously neutral' social conditions[12]. It must be added that the interviews conducted in the framework of the research revealed that the majority of main political parties supports the establishment of a European-style democratic system. Simultaneously, as we will discuss later, a large section of Georgian political elite acknowledges the special role of the Orthodox Church in society and supports the reinforcement of its status in one form or another; this tendency inadvertently contributes to a stronger role of the Church in the public domain.

Persecuted during the Soviet Union, religion in independent Georgia successfully incorporated nationalist ideology in its agenda and became a catalyst in the process of nation-building. In this regard, contemporary Georgia differs from today's Europe where religion is practically absent from public domain due to secularization and plays a very modest role in politics. It must be noted that the importance of secularization and its role in democracy, governance, and global politics, is gradually becoming a subject of dispute[13].

Modernization of a society was believed to contradict religion: if one accelerated, the other decelerated[14]. One of the eminent representatives of this theory, Peter Berger, made a bold statement by predicting the demise of religion: *"we need to presume that by the 21st century religious believers will*

only remain in small sects, united against the secular culture of the world" [15]. This prediction was based on the theory of secularization, which was particularly popular in the 1950s[16].

The proponents of the 'disappearing religion' thesis had serious arguments on their side in the 20th century[17]. Today, the situation is considerably different from what Berger predicted[18]—ascendance of religions has a global character. Barker suggests that it is important to switch the emphasis from the increasing role of religion to the nature of change; he brings in Toft, Philpott, and Shah to support his argument[19]. The influence of religious actors on politics is stronger today than in any other period of contemporary history[20].

The shift is acknowledged even by those who used to deny the rising role of religion[21]. In the opinion of Jurgen Habermas, *"religious traditions and religious societies acquired a new, unexpected political significance"* and *"the importance of religion for attaining political goals increased on a global scale"* [22]. As Barker notes, Peter Berger offered his opinion on secularization during the last years of his life. In Berger's words, *"the main difference … is the abandonment of secularization theory, but … not because of any philosophical or theological changes, but because this theory can no longer explain the empirical facts observed throughout the world"* [23].

Indeed, modernization theory has numerous critics today, partially due to rising religious fundamentalism in the past years[24]. Some experts argue that the role of religion in society and politics changed as a result of modernization, but its influence on society is still remarkable[25]. Moreover, there are scholars who believe that modernization contributed to the revival, and not the demise, of religion[26]. In many developing countries with radical religious beliefs modernization is a painful process, causing disappointment and distrust not only towards local governments, but also towards Western values—Western countries are often perceived as the supporters of local regimes[27].

The foremost goal of the Rose Revolution (2003) government was to modernize and democratize the country. Success of this mission is widely disputed today, but it is hard to deny that Georgia made a huge leap after the revolution[28]. This leap includes an attempt to create an efficient governing body where employees work for salaries and not for bribes; spread of meritocracy, where individuals are evaluated based on their skills and work and not their bloodline; development of civil society, where representatives of different ethnicities and religious are equally accepted; economic liberalism and so on[29]. Simultaneously, Saakashvili's opponents believe that democratization was sacrificed in the process of modernization[30]. This argument is also controversial, especially since a new government was democratically elected in 2012. It is hard to evaluate the influence of Saakashvili's reforms because of

the religious radicalization of society. However, as we will discuss later, it is obvious that the role of the Church has gradually enhanced.

Historical Overview

The battle for the independence of the Georgian Church lasted from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of 20th century[31]. Natural development of the Georgian Church and society came to a halt in 1811, when the Russian Emperor unlawfully abolished the autocephaly of the Church, annihilated the Patriarchate and subordinated the Church to the Russian Ecclesiastical Synod with the status of exarchy[32]. Even though the Georgian Church revived its autocephaly and Patriarchate in 1917, Russia's political course radically affected its development. After the occupation, the Patriarch Ambrosi Khelaia confronted the Communist regime and led a worthy fight for the independence of the Church. However, he was defeated by the so-called Innovation and Reformation Movement within the Church. The movement aspired to collaborate with the Communist regime, and accordingly, tolerated the persecution of deviant religious figures[33].

The Georgian Church deteriorated under the Russian bureaucratic regime. In addition to massive robberies and stealing of valuables, Russian human resource reforms negatively affected the clergy. As noted in the work of a Russian historian Nikoloz Durnov, "The Fate of the Georgian Church", *"the position of Russian Exarch in Georgia was part of bureaucracy, and naturally, he could not introduce any positive changes that could satisfy spiritual needs of the Georgian Church. The free Georgian Church was not used to having its fate decided by indifferent individuals, such as Russian Exarchs who were antagonistically disposed towards the Holy Church and Georgian people. For almost 100 years, Georgian Exarchs were not involved in anything outstanding, except bureaucracy and clerical matters of the Church…"*[34] The Russian human resource reforms had a negative impact on Georgian clergy – *"Georgian students… were not familiar with theological terms even after graduating from seminary… since theology was taught in Russian. The uneducated seminary graduates could not teach their parish, who, owing to Russian Exarchs, were already educated by socialists and revolutionaries. His Holiness Kirion acknowledged on a church committee that he did not know some theological terms upon his graduation… Even subjects like catechism and holy history of Georgia were not taught in Georgian"*[35]. Owing to Russian politics and years spent in a totalitarian system, the Georgian Church was unprepared for the country's independence when thousands of people turned to it for ideological guidance. The Soviet regime changed its policy towards

the Georgian Orthodox Church during the last decades — it acknowledged its existence, but subordinated it to state control[36]. Georgian clergy went through stages of unrestrained confrontation, political tolerance and collaboration with the Soviet anti-religious politics. This happened during the ideological monopoly of scientific atheism, a value system equal to religious belief for some scientists[37]. After the declaration of independence, the Georgian Church did not have any experience in tolerance since it did not properly transition from a totalitarian to a post-totalitarian system. The Church became a leading religious confession, a status that was reinforced in 2002 through a constitutional agreement between the Church and state[38]. Starting from the 1990's, certain church representatives have been trying to legitimize the special role of the Church by relying on religious-nationalist ideas. They emphasize the dangers behind Western moral values (human rights, minority rights, etc.). In these risky circumstances, the Church emerged as the protector and sustainer of Georgian independence[39]. It also needs to be noted that 19th century Georgian nationalism developed in a different secular context[40]. As suggested by Giga Zedania, religious topics are weakly represented in 1950-60's publications, which primarily emphasize Georgian nationalism project. In the 19th century, Georgian nationalism ideologists did not stress the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the formation of a Georgian identity. As Ghia Nodia points out, „highlighting Orthodox Christianity did not work well in a specific practical sense[41]. For the 19th nationalism secular history played a far more important role than religion, blood connection or even common language. It would be impossible to culturally integrate different religious groups living on the territory of Georgia, such as the Muslim majority in Adjara region[42], without secular nationalism. In 1987 the Georgian Orthodox Church canonized Ilia Chavchavadze. This event was presented as a logical continuation of the 19th century nationalism, which reemerged in the last years of the Soviet Union[43]. Giga Zedania believes that canonization of Ilia Chavchavadze marks the emergence of religious nationalism in Georgia, which radically differs from the 19th century secular nationalism, where the Georgian Orthodox Church and religion did not play a major part [44].

Political Culture in Post-Soviet Georgia

Totalitarian system, with its lack of political choice and limited right of self-expression, exerted a heavy blow on civil society in Georgia. An important sign of political incapacity is weakness of political parties, which partly

stems from the lack of political education among Georgian population. As a result, the electorate supports not a specific ideology, but a certain leader[45].

Overall, post-Soviet party system stands out with its low sustainability and adaptability, which in turn is determined by such structural factors as absence of stable political belonging[46]. Politicians do not maintain their loyalty to a given party for a long period of time due to fickle, changing and unstable electorate and weak party traditions[47]. Lack of loyalty is especially evident when a weakened party is easily abandoned for a more advantageous political establishment. The fragmented nature of post-Soviet political system is especially obvious in countries like Georgia where bipolar political system is at its early stage of development—a condition typical to Eastern Europe years ago[48]. For example, 20 years ago, a Polish political coalition consisted of 30 parties and different organizations[49]. A more refined institutional mindset and electoral experience slowly diminished the number of political parties[50].

Ideologies of Georgian political parties are often inconsistent[51]. Left-wing politics is often represented by anti-capitalist parties that easily adapt to nationalist and religious rhetoric. A good example of this phenomenon is the Georgian Laborist Party. The study shows that local political parties often experience ideological contamination. Instead of following one ideology, they adopt ideas that are popular. For instance, the Georgian Laborist Party considers itself an active defender of the Orthodox Church and Georgian traditions. Moreover, representatives of the party believe that Orthodox Christianity should become a state religion and constitutional monarchy should be resuscitated[52]. In these circumstances, it is hard to distinguish between the ideology of the Laborist Party and right-wing politicians or the Christian-Democrats. It is also interesting to compare right-wing political parties with their counterparts in the West. One major difference is that Georgian right-wing parties stress national values and religion over economic challenges (a topic of political debate in the West).

Interviews with political party representatives revealed an interesting picture. According to the study, some members of the "Georgian Dream" have more in common with the "National Movement" than with other members of their own party. The United National Movement, the Free Democrats and the Republicans are distinctly liberal in their ideology. All three parties support a clear separation between church and state, oppose Orthodox Christianity as a state religion, object to the revival of monarchy, and believe that adoption of Western standards is crucial for building brighter future. The Christian Democrats and the New Rights advocate a special status for Orthodox Christianity, while the Christian Democrats and the National Forum actively support the revival of monarchy. With the exception of the United

National Party and the Republican Party, Georgian politicians believe that the Georgian Patriarchate plays a special role in the regulation of Russian-Georgian relations. The Patriarch's contribution to post 2008 War events was more than once emphasized – especially, the transfer of Georgian deceased soldiers from South Ossetia to Georgia. The National Forum, the Laborist Party and the Christian-Democrats emphasize the urgency of 'moral censure', which basically implies refraining from negative observations about the Patriarch and the Church. Representatives of the National Forum believe that *"… there has to be a non-state moral censure on literature. If it was my decision, I would establish censure or even legally persecute those people who say and write things about the Patriarch. But unfortunately, we cannot do that"*[53]. Members of the Laborist Party state that there is *"turmoil in contemporary Georgia… Yes, there needs to be a censure, but not a censure of thought, but of the ways in which those thoughts are expressed"*[54].

Another interesting aspect of the study is the image of an ideal Georgian politician as determined by interviews with them. When asked—"Do you think a Georgian politician needs to be Orthodox Christian?", more than half of the respondents answered affirmatively; and the majority responded with a "yes" to—"Do you think that a politician needs to be an Orthodox believer?"[55] The majority of politicians distinguish between "traditional" and "new" religious minorities. "Traditional" groups include religious minorities that have lived in Georgia for several centuries, such as Muslims, representatives of the Armenian Church, Jews and Catholics. It needs to be noted that a similar disposition exists in Russia—there have even been talks about introducing a new legislation that would be less liberal towards 'non-traditional' religious minorities than the legislation of Yeltsin's era[56].

The majority of interviewed politicians publicly discuss their own religious background. In most cases, Georgian politicians are members of the Georgian Orthodox Church. It is worth noting that from the recognizable political figures many have graduated from seminaries. This tendency might have been determined the religious awakening of the 1990's, when active young intellectuals became interested in religion.

Georgian Orthodox Church and State Policy towards Religious Minorities

When discussing the Orthodox Church policies, it is crucial to touch upon the Patriarch's decision to leave the World Church Council in 1997[57]. Until 1997, Georgia was an active member of the Council, and at some point,

Ilia II even co-presided the organization[58]. At the same time, the Georgian Orthodox Church participated in the European Church Conference, which was also abandoned by the Patriarch in 1997[59]. Today, only a few people remember joint prayers and liturgies conducted by the Patriarch and a Catholic cardinal. An ambassador of the Holy Church from 2001 to 2011, Claudio Gugerotti reminisces about the late 1980's when he was welcomed by the Patriarch during his visits and conducted liturgies with him[60]. Joint sermons were held at the Sioni Cathedral. Claudio Gugerotti and His Holiness have held a sermon and a communion together, which was a unique episode in the history of Christian Orthodox and Catholic churches[61]. During that period His Holiness would remark that just like Peter and Paul, Catholic and Christian Orthodox churches were brothers despite certain obstacles and they would gradually become one again[62].

Today, the Patriarchate no longer recognizes any partnership with the Catholic Church. Petre Mamradze, head of the State Chancellery from 1995 to 2005 notes: "I brought the topic up once or twice, but I was told in a low voice that 'His Holiness repented'".

In the beginning of the 90's, Claudio Gugerotti brought St. Andreas' relics to Georgia as a gift from Pope John Paul. This was a gesture of great significance for a country with an Apostolic Church. This act of benevolence on behalf of John Paul symbolized improved relations between the Catholic and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Later in 2005 Gugerotti showed his regret that he, who conducted liturgies with His Holiness and brought St. Andreas' relics to Georgia, was no longer allowed near the relics[63].

After mass protests of September 22, 2003 and persistent demands from the representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Eduard Shevardnadze refused to sign an agreement with Vatican, officially ascribing his decision to a misunderstanding[64]. Archiepiscopus Jean-Louis Tauran, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, came to Georgia to sign the agreement, but had to leave empty-handed on September 21. It is worth noting that the agreement was being developed for a long period of time — the idea came into existence in 1999 during the visit of the Pope to Georgia. The agreement between the Vatican and Georgia addressed state issues. A statement from the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II preceded the mass protests: *"an inter-state agreement between Orthodox Georgia and the Vatican is unwelcome"* [65]. The protests were fostered by several high-ranking clergy. Bishop Zenon publicly thanked participants of the demonstration and emphasized that they elevated Georgian soul. He added that *"despite freedom of religion in Georgia, the constitution prioritizes the Georgian*

Orthodox Church, and this preference is reinforced via an agreement between the state and the Church" [66].

The refusal to sign the agreement was fairly predictable because of the upcoming parliamentary elections. The government in power would not take any steps to cause indignance among the population. Mamradze remembers Shevardnadze's words regarding the incident: *"it is obvious that the agreement will no longer be signed. Now, we need to understand that our state no longer exists. Now everything can be expected"* [67]. Indeed, the Rose Revolution started only in a few months, in November, 2003.

Constitutional agreement between the Georgian government and the Orthodox Church was reinforced in 2002, granting 'a special status' to the latter. The document is often mistakenly referred to as the Concordat — name of a treaty between the Vatican and Mussolini's Italy marking the former's independence[68]. It needs to be mentioned that the Constitution of Georgia states that the Church is independent from the state and that every religion is equal despite the special role of the Orthodox Church in Georgian history[69]. During the decision-making a small section of Georgian society expressed its negative stance towards the resolution. These people argued that constitutional change would establish the Church's monopoly, which would be detrimental for the Church in the first place. Almost 200 parliament members attended the ballot — an unprecedented turnout for the time. The constitutional agreement was approved by 199 votes; only one member, Mikheil Naneishvili, refrained[70].

The constitutional agreement determines the status of the Georgian Orthodox Church in legal and judicial matters, as well as its relationship with the state and other social institutions[71]. The special status of the Georgian Orthodox Church and simultaneous freedom of religious faith and practice are listed as the major merits of the constitutional agreement. Archpriest Rostom Lortkipanize believes that the agreement does not grant any privileges to the Church. Accordingly, the Church does not receive any special rights from the treaty. The archpriest suggests that when a concordat is signed between two parties, interests of both sides need to be clearly outlined, which did not happen in case of the constitutional agreement. *"The Concordat needs to define not only how prayers and liturgies are conducted, but also the Patriarchate's duties as a social institution and a national centre, which would subordinate all religions to the Mother Church… The Concordat, however, does not grant any privileges to Orthodox Christianity… It only affirms that the Georgian state acknowledges the merits of the Georgian Church. It does not grant any tangible rights to the Church"*[72]. Archpriest Rostom Lortkipanize believes that it is important that the legislation proclaims the Georgian Orthodox Church as the Moth-

er Church[73]. Until 2011 the status of religious minorities was determined by 2006 legislation, according to which religious groups, excluding the Georgian Orthodox Church, could register as non-commercial organizations (as unions or funds) in order to receive full legal status and tax benefits. During the July 12, 2011 Parliamentary Assembly, which discussed changes in the civic code pertaining to the status of religious organizations, chairman of the Georgian parliament Davit Bakradze noted that Georgia is a tolerant country with the Georgian Orthodox Church holding a special status[74]. In his words, granting the status of a legal entity of public law to religious minorities does not restrict the special standing of the Orthodox Church since many legal entities in Georgia are considered as legal entities of public law, but only the Georgian Orthodox Church enjoys a constitutional status[75]. Despite this, amendment of the civic law on religious minorities triggered mass protests. Unlike Shevardnadze's era, when state refused to sign a treaty with the Vatican in order to please the public, the amendment regarding religious minorities was approved in conjunction with street protests.

Another wave of protests against the new law in 2011 once again demonstrated that public disposition towards religious minorities in Georgia is inconsistent. A large section of the population perceived the instituted changes as dangerous since several religious unions in Georgia would be proclaimed as legal entities of public law. Public disposition was the Patriarch's commentary, suggesting that the legislation was alarming and dangerous since it could be abused in the future[76]. The Patriarch urged the president and the government to bring the decision to a standstill, and organize discussions about the issue with scientists, clergy and experts[77]. Year 2011 witnessed another interesting event when Saakashvili's government attempted to complete an agreement with Turkey, which would ensure the rehabilitation of Georgian churches located on the territory of Turkey. The agreement was ready to be signed in 2007, but the government halted the process due to negative outcry from the Church[78]. The treaty also entailed reconstruction of Azizei mosque in Batumi burnt down in 1930's, a plan which was criticized by the Patriarchate[79]. Archpriest Davit Sharashenidze argued that according to international law, protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage was the obligation of Turkish state[80]. The Patriarchate also expressed its disapprobation for being excluded from the dialogue[81]. The treaty still has not been signed[82].

The majority of interviewed politicians feel that constitutional changes in regard to religious minorities were rushed and that the issue requires more discussion and consultations with the Patriarchate[83]. This standpoint echoes the Patriarch's statement mentioned above, suggesting that politicians take the Patriarch's opinion into account when considering matters of public rel-

evance. When discussing politics and public relations, it is interesting to look at the 2012 parliamentary elections since some experts believe that this is when the public witnessed active advocacy of certain political parties by the clergy[84]. Before the parliamentary elections of 2012 there were rumors that some clergy urged their parish to vote for the Georgian Dream. As one researcher noted in a private conversation, *"our priest incited us to vote for the Georgian Dream… Naturally, I voted for them"*[85].

Conclusion

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union Georgian society was given a chance to successfully transition to democracy and build a contemporary European nation-state. Simultaneously, as a result of the Soviet Union's fall, the country witnessed religious ascendancy since Soviet anti-religious policies were no longer reinforced, and every religious organization in post-Soviet bloc acquired absolute freedom of action[86]. The Georgian Orthodox Church rapidly turned from a subordinate institution to a spiritual and cultural leader of the nation[87].

Interviews with politicians conducted in the framework of this research have demonstrated that on the one hand, the majority of political elite recognizes democratic principles and believes that Georgia needs to develop in a democratic manner, which implies respect for diverse opinions, protection of minority rights and acknowledgement of religious pluralism. On the other hand, many politicians endorse increased status of Orthodox Christianity, while the majority considers that the Orthodox Church is not sufficiently protected[88].

Since the 90's the Georgian Orthodox Church was the only organization that to some extent unified the nation. Today, the Church is an institute most trusted by Georgian society[89]. As this research has demonstrated, the Church has an enduring influence on public opinion, which was revealed both in consequence to the failed agreement with the Vatican during Shevardnadze's leadership, and Saakashvili's government, when Georgian public took to the streets in order to protect the Church's stance regarding the mosque renovation or constitutional changes for religious unions. The government elected in 2012 largely consists of the political powers discussed in this article. Therefore, it is interesting whether new political elite and Georgian civil society will be able to contribute to the establishment of European democracy in the country, which among other issues implies strict separation of state and church.

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