

GEORGIA AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF ORTHODOXY

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The period after the Cold War is marked by an upswing in geopolitical research. In this respect, researchers are particularly singling out the post-Soviet space, especially Russia, where geopolitics is enjoying immense popularity not only among scientists, but also among politicians.

New approaches and vectors have appeared in geopolitical research, which, although they do not fit into the framework of traditional geopolitics, significantly enhance the opportunity to engage in the global and spatial research of politics. One such vector is the geopolitics of religion which, in turn, is closely related to civilizational geopolitics, since religion is one of the most important components of civilization.

The main idea of the geopolitics of religion is taking into account and using the religious factor during the formation of political unions and blocs, and ultimately gaining or retaining control over a particular space. If we keep in mind the specifics of the Caucasian region, where several world religions come in direct contact with each other, the importance of the geopolitics of religion will become entirely obvious.

Relevancy of the Geopolitics of Orthodoxy

In the general geopolitics of religion, the geopolitics of Orthodoxy is particularly important for Georgia, since it helps the country to define its place in the Orthodox world and its correlation with the rest of the world. There are several reasons why the geopolitics of Orthodoxy is relevant:

- in most Orthodox states (Rumania, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, and Ukraine), two aspects coincide: elimination of the communist-atheist regime, under which the freedom of confession was repressed, and liberation of these countries from the dictates of Moscow, which made it possible for them to conduct an independent policy on the international arena. Consequently, identifying the role Orthodoxy could play in forming the policy of these states became relevant;
- several conceptions have already formed within the framework of the geopolitics of Orthodoxy (I am talking in particular about the Russian geopolitics of Orthodoxy). In these conceptions, plans related to Georgia occupy far from the last place. If we also keep in mind that geopolitics is not only a scientific discipline, but also carries a strong ideological charge, it becomes clear that we need good knowledge of the geopolitical conceptions being formed in the countries next door to us;
- the Orthodoxy factor is also actively used in Georgian politics for achieving various goals and, primarily, for justifying foreign policy orientation.

Interest in the geopolitics of Orthodoxy is not only growing in Orthodox states. For example, the possible changes the enlargement of the European Union and increase in the number of Orthodox countries among its members from one to four (Rumania, Bulgaria, and Cyprus have been added to Greece) will bring have become a topic of active discussion. It should be noted that in another five EU countries (Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Slovakia), the Orthodox diaspora represents a significant part of the population.

In the September issue (2004) of the Russian Orthodox Church publication *Tserkovny vestnik* (Ecclesiastical Bulletin), Bishop of Austria and Vienna Illarion (this bishopric belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate) brought up the question of the growing influence of Orthodoxy on the European countries. The bishop also talked about how the Patriarch of Russia could take advantage of this.

Well-known American political scientist Paul Goble, who published an article in America's *United Press International* with the memorable title of "Eye on Eurasia: An Orthodox Christian EU,"¹ im-

¹ For the Georgian translation of the article, see the newspaper *Rezonansi*, 8 October, 2004.

mediately responded to the issues addressed by Bishop Illarion. According to Goble, “the growing influence of Orthodoxy within the EU in turn will open the way for the Russian Orthodox Church to expand its role there as well, both on behalf of its own corporate interests and in order to advance the foreign policy interests of the Russian state.”

The Geopolitics of Russian Orthodoxy

The geopolitics of Orthodoxy primarily implies Russia, which is once more actively trying to use Orthodoxy for its own political ends. The geopolitics of Russian Orthodoxy can be judged from books published as learning tools on geopolitics and political science (for example, works by A. Dugin and A. Panarin). The attitude toward Orthodoxy is ambiguous in Russian geopolitics: on the one hand, Orthodoxy is considered a factor which can help to restore and maintain Russian’s foothold in certain regions, and on the other, people in Russia are worried that Orthodoxy will turn into a dominating factor in politics, and if this happens, the Russian Federation will have serious problems both within the country and, in particular, on the international arena.

A clear idea of Russian geopolitics can be formed on the basis of the above-mentioned textbooks. For example, in his main work *Osnovy geopolitiki* (The Fundamental Principles of Geopolitics),² A. Dugin devoted a separate chapter to the geopolitics of Orthodoxy, although it only sets forth the problems of geopolitics in the Balkan Orthodox states.

A. Panarin looks at the political potential of the “Greek-Orthodox idea” and the practicality of using it for “spiritual reintegration of Eastern Orthodox countries,” as well as the possibility of reviving the idea of a Third Rome.³

According to the author, Orthodoxy looks extremely promising as a unifying idea. What is more, revival of the idea of the “Byzantine heritage” will give Russia the opportunity to return to “its Europe” without the Westernization derogatory for a strong state, after solving the task of modernization by retaining its own historical value system.

A. Panarin notes that after declaring the Third Rome theory as its official ideology in the 16th century, Moscow made intensive use of Orthodoxy in its state goals. So in the eyes of the rest of the world, Orthodoxy is essentially not perceived as a world religion and is identified with Russia.

According to A. Panarin, in order to play the role of a unifying force, Orthodoxy must regain its status of a world religion and demarcate the political and religious centers of Orthodoxy. Intent on winning the Ukrainians’ sympathy, A. Panarin suggests giving Kiev the role of center of the Orthodox world; if Ukraine does not wish to reunite with Russia, the latter should at least “spiritually join Kiev.” Again, Moscow is implied as the political center of the Orthodox world.

The “Byzantine heritage” sets the goal of ensuring the unity of the Eastern Slavs and Orthodox nations in general. But Moscow also has the task of preserving the non-Christian peoples within the Russian Federation or of “reintegrating” the former Soviet republics. In order to solve these tasks, several Russian analysts have been turning with increasing frequency to the idea of “Eurasianism,” according to which the nations of the former U.S.S.R., that is, the population of the “Eurasian space,” have, due to their geographic location, common interests and a common geopolitical destiny. This makes their reintegration into a single federal or confederative state inevitable.

² See: A. Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki. Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii*, ARKTOGEIA-tsentr, Moscow, 1999.

³ See: A.S. Panarin, *Politologia. Textbook*, Proekt Publishers, Moscow, 1997, pp. 364-385.

The axis of “Eurasianism” is the idea of a union of Slavic and Turkic-speaking peoples. According to the Eurasians’ theory, the Russian nation is the “fruit of cooperation” of precisely these two ethnic groups. This thesis aroused the indignation of many Russian nationalists.

Russian analysts, including the same A. Panarin, note that Orthodoxy, which unites the Eastern Slavs, can become theocratic pan-Slavism without any ties with “Eurasianism,” thus setting the Russian Federation against both the West and the entire Muslim world, and in the event of Eurasian identification, Russia “will consolidate as a super state in its traditional civilizational area.”

The Kosovo crisis of 1999 and the bombing of Serbia by NATO forces became sort of touchstones for the geopolitics of Russian Orthodoxy. In the Russian mass media of that period, it was customary to hear the assertion that the Dayton Agreement of 1995 and the war on Yugoslavia in 1999 were the continuation under new historical conditions of many centuries of opposition between Western Christianity and Orthodoxy.

According to the proposal of Russian politicians and analysts, the conflict in Yugoslavia should have roused the Orthodox world and intensified the neo-Byzantine trends, that is, the unification of Orthodox countries around the Russian Federation and their dissociation from the West.

From this viewpoint, an article by S. Samuilov is worth noting, which analyzes in detail the reaction of the Orthodox states to the bombing of Serbia by NATO forces. The author (often without real reason) tries to show the solidarity of the population of the Orthodox countries with Serbia as opposed to their “pro-Western political elites.” “We are not the West,” according to S. Samuilov, that is the main thing the Orthodox nations understood during the bombing of Serbia. The war “enhanced the image of Russia in the mass consciousness.”⁴

Georgia in the Russian Geopolitics of Orthodoxy

It should be noted that Russian geopolitics has a negative attitude toward Georgia’s state independence and is making plans to reintegrate the republic with the Russian Federation in different forms. We do not know of one work by a Russian geopolitician that talks of a strategic partnership between Moscow and an independent Georgian state or about the importance of such a state for Moscow.

Neo-imperial strivings are particularly characteristic of contemporary Russian geopolitics. A. Dugin reflects on the restoration of the Russian empire, which in terms of dimensions and scope should be several times larger than the “previous version,” that is, the Soviet Union. This position will become even clearer if we keep in mind his statement that “the Russians’ battle for world supremacy is not over.”⁵

When discussing contemporary Caucasian geopolitics, A. Dugin notes: “Orthodox Georgia was more anti-Russian oriented, but even here religious-geopolitical reflection is slowly waking up, and the need for an alliance with Eurasia is becoming clear.”⁶

And now let’s take a look at how A. Dugin sees the future of a Georgia oriented toward Russia—the former is subjected to the fundamental principles of Dugin’s geopolitics of the Caucasus: “The structure of the periphery should be determined not by political, but by ethnocultural differenti-

⁴ S.M. Samuilov, “Posle Yugoslavskoi voiny: razmyshleniia o Rossii, SShA, Zapade v tselom,” *U.S., Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture*, No. 3, 2000, p. 80.

⁵ A. Dugin, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 808.

ation. Any latitudinal delimitation of the ethnic regions of the Southern Caucasus should be encouraged, while longitudinal integration, on the contrary, reinforced.” As a result, according to A. Dugin, “it is important to tie Abkhazia directly to Russia;” a “united Ossetia” is also being created. In exchange, the remaining part of Orthodox Georgia will gain control over the “Caucasian home.” According to A. Dugin, “Orthodox Georgia could also govern Chechnia, which is in a geopolitical siege;” and what is more, “Daghestan and Ingushetia should also be partially adjoined to Georgia, which could lead to the creation of an autonomous North Caucasian zone, economically developed, but strategically fully under Russian control.” A. Dugin also thinks it possible to create a “Caucasian Federation,” which would include “the three Caucasian CIS republics and internal Russian autonomous formations.”⁷

Nor did A. Panarin like Georgia’s policy with respect to GUAM. He writes: “The designated Kiev-Tashkent-Baku-Tbilisi axis is primarily dangerous for Tbilisi. Should Georgia be deprived of its Russian guarantees by going too far along the path of blocs and politics, its position in the South Caucasian region will immediately become seriously aggravated. And taking into account the logic of Muslim radicalization of the regimes moving away from Russia, it can be said that in the next political generation (in 15-20 years), the non-Muslim states neighboring on Muslim countries will have to deal with regimes that conduct an aggressive policy.”⁸

When reviewing the facts of solidarity between the Orthodox countries and Serbia, S. Samuilov noted that in Georgia “no mass protests took place.” In his words, the Georgian press was anti-Russian and pro-Western. It is difficult to understand the “political weight of the pro-Russian forces.”⁹

According to S. Samuilov, “Russia should place its priorities in its foreign policy on relations with the Orthodox states. After strengthening the Russian-Belorussian alliance, Moscow should strive to establish close ties with Armenia and Serbia.”¹⁰

Samuilov notes that “as history would have it, Russia does not have a common border with these countries,” and so in its relations with them it needs “transit territories”—Georgia and Bulgaria. Today, the leadership of these Orthodox countries is unequivocally oriented toward the West, and so policy regarding them should be built in such a way that they remain “transit territories” for the Russian Federation for the time being. As Russia becomes stronger and the political elites of Georgia and Bulgaria become disillusioned in the efficiency of the “Western formulas,” it can begin moving from partnership to alliance relations with them.

Not all Russian geopoliticians support the idea of bringing religion into the foreground. For example, V. Ilyin believes that all-Russian theocracy with Orthodoxy is a “fanciful utopia,”¹¹ while the Empire in its previous form is out of the question. So he believes its restoration is impossible.¹² Nevertheless, this does not change anything in the Russian Caucasian policy he sets forth. V. Ilyin ironically notes that the Russian Federation should give Armenia and Azerbaijan the opportunity to clarify their relations with each other and enjoy national freedom to their hearts’ content. In his opinion, Russia should equally support both sides. But in V. Ilyin’s words, this tactic is not being successfully carried out with respect to Georgia. “The fight for Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and possibly Ajaria, in which both Georgia and Russia are interested, defines the rates and intervals of Russian-Georgian opposition.” V. Ilyin offers the following solution to the situation: “A solution prompted by my intuition consists in creating dual subordination protectorates.”¹³

⁷ A. Dugin, op. cit., p. 352.

⁸ A.S. Panarin, *Revansh istorii: rossiiskaia strategicheskaia initsiativa v XXI veke*, Logos, Moscow, 1998, p. 382.

⁹ S.M. Samuilov, op. cit., p. 77.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 82-83.

¹¹ V. Ilyin, *Politologiya: Uchebnik dlia vuzov*, University Book House Publishers, Moscow, 1999, p. 398.

¹² See: Ibid., p. 403.

¹³ Ibid., p. 407.

As Basily Kobakhidze notes, Russia is trying to use Orthodoxy for its political ends. In his words, as early as Soviet times, there was a special analytical base in Moscow that worked on the geopolitical use of the Orthodoxy factor. The Orthodox ideology developed by this structure was used with respect to the Balkans. Today, Russia is striving to make use of this scheme in Georgia. The Patriarchy disseminated a conception in Moscow according to which there are two poles of civilization in the modern world—Muslim and Western. Both are doomed to perish, and so a third (Orthodox) civilization should be created with its center in Russia. It is the Russian Federation that should rally all the Orthodox states around it and govern them. These countries include Georgia, Bulgaria, and Rumania.¹⁴

The conclusion can be drawn from the above-mentioned that Russian geopolitics of Orthodoxy serves the cause of restoring a single nation in the post-Soviet expanse, and, consequently, contradicts Georgia's national-state interests.

Prospects for the Georgian Geopolitics of Orthodoxy

Russian geopolitics does not only operate with Orthodox categories, but uses the religious factor for purely pragmatic purposes—restoring the position of the Russian Federation on the international arena. We should remember this, especially since clear attempts have been seen recently to introduce Russian geopolitical conceptions into mass Georgian consciousness. A. Dugin's book *Osnovy geopolitiki*, dedicated "to all Georgian geopoliticians," was translated into Georgian and published.¹⁵ Acquaintance with this publication is unlikely to convince Georgian readers of the author's good intentions, but, on the other hand, it should help them to understand that the West is the same enemy or friend as Russia.

On Alexander Dugin's Internet site Arktogeia, which presents political studies and information, a special Georgian site has appeared called Arktogeia—Tbilisi, on which members of an ethnopolitical alliance called "Crusaders" functioning in Georgia place their information. The goal of this organization is to promulgate Eurasianism and the struggle against Atlanticism, that is the West.

Certain forces are endowing Orthodoxy with a particular political significance and see it as the main argument in favor of Georgia's "northern orientation." The position of these forces boils down to several theses: Orthodoxy is the foundation of faith in Georgia, the West requires us to reject this faith (sect activity), and the existing power supports them in this. The only salvation is through Georgia's closest alliance with Russia, and this, essentially, means Georgia's rejection of its independence.

The geopolitics of Orthodoxy has not yet become a topic of special scientific research in Georgia, although its problems are attracting the society's attention. On the one hand, certain forces are trying to spread the leading conception of the Russian geopolitics of Orthodoxy, according to which the Russian Federation is the leader of the Orthodox world, and the latter is viewed as the force opposing the West. The Georgian mass media often cite a phrase attributed to well-known American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski: "After eradicating communism, Orthodoxy will be the main danger for the West." It should be noted that during Mr. Brzezinski's visit to Tbilisi in September 1999, he was asked whether he had really made such a statement. The political scientist categorically denied it and called it an "idiotic fabrication."¹⁶ But even after publication of the Tbilisi interview with Mr. Brzezinski, some people are stubbornly repeating this "statement by Brzezinski" and commenting on it. This should give toward thoughts on the threat of Georgian independence coming from the West greater plausibility. On the other hand, many are irritated by the fact that "Orthodox solidarity" is being turned into a political argument. They immediately remind everyone of Russia's

¹⁴ See: *Alia*, 7-9 August, 2004.

¹⁵ See: A. Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, Tbilisi, 1999, 448 pp.

¹⁶ See: *Kviris Palitra*, 20-26 September, 2004.

two-century aggression, as well as the deliberate damage to Shota Rustaveli's fresco in the Cross Monastery, which belongs to the Greek clergy.¹⁷

Attempts to implant conceptions of the Russian geopolitics of Orthodoxy are arousing a radical response, which is expressed in a critical attitude toward Orthodoxy. The striving for complete identification with the West is arousing the desire in some cases to reform Orthodoxy, which in the form it exists at present is declared to be an obstacle on the path to democracy and Western orientation.

Today, when Georgia is under Russia's powerful pressure, the country's interests can only be ensured by taking the path of so-called Western orientation. But when talking about Orthodoxy, we can take the example of Bulgaria or Rumania. In this way, the vector of Orthodoxy in politics points not only to the north.

Nor should we forget the experience of the past. At one time, Georgia was able to protect its own interests in relations with Orthodox Byzantium, so why can the same thing not be achieved at the beginning of the 21st century? Orthodoxy has always acted as protector of Georgian statehood.

Under these circumstances, we believe it expedient both to study foreign conceptions of geopolitics of Orthodoxy and reflect on this problem in compliance with Georgia's national interests. Otherwise, important political decisions might be based on either foreign interests, or on naïve ideas that inadequately reflect reality. Both alternatives are extremely dangerous for a country faced with the tasks of strengthening its independence and defining its own place in the system of international relations.

¹⁷ See, for example: *Mtavari gazeti*, 15 July, 2004.