

REGIONAL POLITICS

**THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
IN CURRENT GEORGIAN POLICY**

Beka CHEDIA

*Ph.D. (Political Science),
fellow at the Institute of Political Science of Georgia
(Tbilisi, Georgia)*

For historical reasons the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) has always been a subject of Georgian policy despite its separation from the state registered in the country's Constitution. At all times religion not only confirmed and preserved the nation's spiritual values—it served the national and state interests. Today, rapidly unfolding globalization has posed the question of the future role of the church and religious values in general. This is especially important in Georgia where the Christian faith has been and remains one

of the components of national self-awareness. "Language-Motherland-Religion" is the linchpin of the national ideology that was revived when the country restored its independence.

In the years of Soviet occupation, the Communists either destroyed churches or used them for different purposes (they were turned into clubs, theaters, or storage facilities). In the very early years of Soviet occupation, a Council of Militant Atheists was set up to carry out anti-religious propaganda based on Lenin's ideas.

**The Age of Catharsis:
from Atheism to Concordat**

The Church regained its former influence along with the national-liberation movement that gained momentum in the 1990s. When the communist regime began loosening its grip, the GOC came to the fore. Church attendance increased; old churches were restored and new ones built. While the commu-

nist regime persecuted all faiths, in the 1990s the leaders of the Georgian independence movement encouraged religion. When the national government headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia came to power, the GOC became an equal entity of the country's public life. Religious revival became irreversible to the extent that the Church preserved its role and even increased its influence under former communist Eduard Shevardnadze who replaced deposed Gamsakhurdia. During his years in power Shevardnadze openly demonstrated his religious feelings to push aside the earlier image of a communist. It was under him that many new churches were built. On the other hand, all sorts of religious sects, the relations of which with the GOC can be described as complicated, were mushrooming and consolidating their position at a catastrophic pace. The GOC never recognized them as religious minorities and accused them of blasphemy. This applied primarily to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the largest sect in Georgia. According to its ruling council, it has 16,900 followers in Georgia (a large figure for a country with a population of 4 million). In Russia, with a population of 145 million, there are 153 thousand Jehovah's Witnesses, in Armenia there are 10 thousand, in Azerbaijan, 799, and in Turkey, 1,000,¹ which means that in Georgia the situation is much more acute than in its neighbors. The GOC maintains positive relations with the traditional religions—Islam, Catholicism, and Gregorianism—with which it shares a common history. The oldest part of the Georgian capital is the best confirmation of this—1 sq km contains cultic buildings of all the traditional religions represented in the republic.

The general rejection of the Jehovah's Witnesses engaged in persistent proselytism took the form of fighting groups that physically attacked the unwelcome agitators, the scope of which aroused the concern of the U.S. Department of State. The country's pro-Western leaders brought to power by the Rose Revolution had to detain the priest who organized the fighters. Earlier, he was defrocked by the GOC for unsanctioned actions yet remained popular among the common people; for a long time after his arrest the opposition used this fact to accuse the government of fighting Christianity.

Significantly, under Shevardnadze, Georgian Orthodoxy acquired its legal status under Art 9 of the Georgian Constitution (1995), which said: "The state recognizes the special importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian history but simultaneously declares complete freedom in religious belief and the independence of the Church from the state." While some political forces insisted on an official status for the GOC, the fundamental law was amended to point to its important role in Georgian history. This was done to take account of the interests of all the religious minorities living in the country. On the other hand, the Church had no legal power to restore the rights lost under the communists, including the right of ownership to the land confiscated during Soviet occupation. For this reason, in 2002 the state and the GOC entered a Constitutional Agreement known as the Concordat, a product of long discussions; on 22 October, 2002 the document was approved by the parliament.

Orthodox Christians comprise a large majority of the republic's population—the main reason behind the Concordat, which gave the Church the status of an historical "entity of public law," a legal entity with full rights, functioning in accordance with the canonical legal norms.²

Under the new document, the state was duty bound to compensate the material losses the Church had sustained under Soviet occupation.³ Under the Concordat, the Church restored its right to the religious attire kept in the state museum and regarded as religious and historical exhibits; this and other basic postulates were never implemented.

¹ News program of the Ertulovneba TV Channel run by the Georgian Patriarchate, 12 March, 2009.

² Constitutional Agreement between the State and the Georgian Orthodox Church, 2002, Art 1.3.

³ *Ibid.*, Art 11.1.

The Age of Cosmopolitanism: the “Five-Cross Flag” Against the Church

The GOC lost some of its influence after the Rose Revolution: the ideologists of the “revolutionary” government were determined to breed new thinkers from the country’s population able to easily blend into the globalized world. They also shouldered the task of confirming the Christian symbols: in the 1990s independent Georgia restored the state symbols of the so-called First Republic of 1918. On 25 January, 2004 the new people at the helm hastened to replace the old symbols with new ones.

With their first decision they devised a new flag with five red crosses that came to be known as the “Five-Cross Flag;” the state symbol represents St. George, the patron saint of Georgia and the most popular among the Georgian saints. The fact that the Rose Revolution took place on 23 November, the Giorgoba (St. George) Day, supplied it with religious overtones. The event was commemorated by a statue of St. George erected in the very center of Tbilisi (against the GOC canons which ban statues of saints).

For political rather than religious reasons, the new government encouraged the use of religious symbols; the new state symbol was seen as a promotional banner of sorts to prove the country’s European provenance. As distinct from the previous regime, the new Georgian rulers moved away from the Church for reasons of their own.

The new people wanted all the power they could get: while they succeeded in controlling the media, NGOs, all the other institutions of civil society, the Church escaped their clutches. The fact that according to all the opinion polls the Church enjoyed more trust among the people than any of the state and non-governmental structures explains why the powers that be wanted to lay their hands on it. The Patriarchate did its best to avoid confrontation and went on with its traditional role of mediator during all sorts of crises. In the post-revolutionary period the tension between the Church and the government became tangible, which gave the opposition a chance to use religious rhetoric against the authorities.

Political-Religious Speculations

Under the previous president, religion and religious subjects were absent from political discussions; after the Rose Revolution, however, the situation radically changed. The opposition went to all lengths to exploit what it described as the new government’s anti-Christian nature. Its members organized a demonstrative collective prayer in a hospital (a former church) in Tbilisi’s center earmarked for an auction. None of the political forces are alien to religious speculations with political overtones. Indeed, there are at least two other churches, which have been turned into apartment blocks, in the capital’s center, however any commotion around them would not have brought political dividends. On the other hand, the intention to sell a hospital that was once a church under Soviet occupation is an opportunity not to be missed.

After several years in power the new leaders, after looking into the reasons for their plummeting rating, decided to put an end to their “anti-Christian” image. This became especially evident after the crisis of 7 November, 2007 when the government began encouraging the Church by distributing land, paying for a TV studio for the Patriarchate out of the state budget, etc.

These efforts notwithstanding, the opposition refused to remove the “anti-Christian” tag from the country’s authorities. It remained one of the most popular political topics; those politicians who in the past had not been known for their religiosity moved forward to defend religious values. Some of them even revived the previously buried fact that they had clergymen among their ancestors.

Two political entities—the Christian Democratic Alliance and the Christian-Democratic Movement—were set up for the latest parliamentary elections. The election campaign brimmed with religious rhetoric. The Christian-Democratic Movement built its platform on the demand to make Orthodoxy an official religion; it even gathered half a million signatures in support of its central election plank.⁴ Today, the Movement is classified as the official opposition; at the last parliamentary elections it scored 8.66 percent of the votes. Local experts, however, are convinced that it is a satellite of the government; in these conditions its demand cannot be described as utopian. The officials, however, while demonstrating their support of the Church, are not hastening to fulfill this demand. This is explained, to a certain extent, by the discrepancy between the positions of the political groups, the government, and the Church.

The GOC never actively supported the initiative; the Patriarchate limited itself to a single comment saying that it saw no reason to make Orthodoxy an official religion. The initiative looks more like a political speculation than anything else.

The Patriarch as a Charismatic Leader. Restoration of the Monarchy as One of the Ideas

The GOC’s influence on Georgian politics has recently become obvious. It was the Patriarch’s personal interference that ended the hunger strike of the opposition leaders during the political crisis that followed the events of 7 November, 2007. The opposition remained under the strong influence of the Church to the extent that the government was not loath to capitalize on it. The opposition leaders hurled accusations at the country’s leaders: “They are using the Patriarch’s authority to persuade the opposition to join the parliament”⁵ elected in 2008.

During the anti-government demonstration that took place in April 2009, more attempts were made to draw the Patriarchate into politics. On 8 April, 2009 the Patriarch issued a statement to the nation, which immediately stirred up political speculations. The opponents went out of their way to interpret it in their favor. “April 9 is a day that has been forever registered in our memory as the day of struggle for freedom and restored independence. Twenty years have passed. Times have changed and we are now facing different problems, but the danger remains. It is our duty to avert it. According to official statements, the government and opposition rule out violence: they are convinced that peaceful methods are their main weapon, however provocation should not be ruled out. I ask the powers once more to do everything to prevent the use of force against your people. I ask the opposition to keep within peaceful forms in your actions. I ask the law enforcers and the military—please bear in mind that you will stand opposed to your own flesh and blood.”⁶

⁴ Information supplied by Giorgi Targamadze on 22 May, 2008 during the Prime Time program of the Rustavi-2 TV Company.

⁵ Statement by David Gamkrelidze made on 25 May, 2008 in a program of the Rustavi-2 Company.

⁶ [<http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/ 2009>].

This raised another wave of accusations: the opposition based them on the fact that the major power-controlled TV channels cut the Patriarch's address (they never broadcasted the parts in which the Patriarch addressed the law enforcers and the military with a request to avoid the use of force). These omissions were interpreted as a lack of respect toward the GOC and preparation to use force to resolve the crisis.

Significantly, another historic statement was made in small hours of 9 April, 1989. Speaking to the rally that demanded that Georgia should separate from the Soviet Union, the Patriarch said: "The danger is very real." Several minutes later Soviet troops launched an operation in which they used toxic gases and sapper shovels. When readying for the anti-government rally of 9 April, 2009, the opposition tried to attach sacral importance to the warning made twenty years ago.

On 19 April, 2009 the Patriarchate became actively involved in the political process with the Easter message of the Patriarch, which said in part: "For obvious reasons the government carries much more responsibility; it should ensure the country's territorial safety and protect and develop spiritual and national values. It should concern itself with the nation's material well-being, which means that it should address the social and economic problems. To a great extent, the country's prosperity depends on its relations with its neighboring state. We should develop our contacts with it by launching a dialog between cultures. The state should develop, while its ideology should be determined not by external geopolitical factors but by national interests. The government, political parties, NGOs, and the media should treat these interests as their priorities. We should protect our identity so as not to be turned into a blind weapon in alien hands. This is what guarantees the continued existence and development of any state."⁷ Significantly, the message, a product of consultations with corresponding experts, was presented as a document of fundamental importance for the state's development in the near future. This was not the first time that the Patriarchate, acting in ideologically deficient conditions, had offered its conceptual approach to the most urgent political issues.

At the very height of the political crisis, the Patriarch suggested that the Royal House, in the form of a constitutional monarchy, be restored in Georgia. This was expected to put an end to the prolonged discussions about the best state order. There is a gradually spreading consensus in the Georgian political community that the presidential form of government has proven deficient (the fact amply illustrated by the state's post-Soviet existence). The Patriarchate believed that the monarch could have shouldered the duty of mediator between the opposing sides. The idea was long discussed by the academic community and was dismissed as hardly viable for want of a suitable candidate. In February 2009, the Georgian media tagged the marriage between members of two branches of the House of Bagrationi "the marriage of the century."

The Georgian Patriarchate actively encouraged the marriage; according to Georgian historians, it put an end to the long squabble over the right to the Georgian throne among several branches of the Royal House of Bagrationi. There was a lot of talk in the Georgian expert community that a male offspring of the marriage would be the heir to the Georgian throne. Two months later that marriage was dissolved very much to the disappointment of the romantically-minded Georgian monarchists.

Significantly, the Patriarchate was convinced that the future monarch should be raised and educated in Georgia under the Church's patronage. The marriage triggered talks about an approximate date for establishing a constitutional monarch in Georgia: it was expected that after 20 years Georgia might become a monarchy, an event unprecedented in post-Soviet history. The Patriarchate did not limit its interests to Georgian politics: it also looked into social, economic, and demographic problems. The Patriarch promised to personally baptize each of the third and following children in every family.

⁷ [<http://www.patriarchate.ge> 2009].

This boosted the birth rate and revealed the extent of the Patriarch's charisma. On the other hand, some experts pointed to the danger of a theocratic state.

Theocracy or Secularism?

According to some Georgian experts, the Patriarchate is seeking stronger influence on society and even practices censorship. To prove this they point to the scandal caused by the TV show Ten Great Georgians run by the first channel of Georgian TV in which the audience was invited to identify ten Georgians who had played the greatest role in the country's history. Many of the potential candidates were religious figures, which gave rise to the Patriarchate's objections to the "rivalry of saints" as blasphemous.

This fact shed light on several problems: first, the disparity between the laws and the moral and religious values. The law on broadcasting bans any outside interference in editorial activities, yet the Patriarchate is duty bound to protect religious values. The Patriarch's Easter Message of 19 April, 2009 quoted above also said: "It is necessary to expand the Georgian business sector and set up a middle class. For objective and subjective reasons, the nation's absolute majority lives below the subsistence and poverty level. Meanwhile, Georgia's economic potential is great, especially for medium and small businesses. The global crisis has hit Georgian business and the people, which makes urgent efforts to stem redundancies an imperative. The state acted wisely in cutting down taxes in 2009, but it would be even better to announce tax amnesty for all physical and legal entities. Foodstuffs produced from environmentally sound agricultural products will bring in money—today the state should extend its assistance to their production in the form of subsidies and long-term loans."⁸

On 24 April, 2009 the government and the GOC drew up an unprecedented memorandum under which prisoners who had served half of their terms and who presented no danger to society would serve the rest of their terms in monasteries.

The Religious Factor in the Foreign Policy Context

In the post-Soviet period Russia has been actively exploiting Orthodox rhetoric to promote its geopolitical interests in Georgia: while referring to common Slavic roots when dealing with Ukraine and Belarus, Russia placed its stakes on their common religion when dealing with Georgia. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has become part and parcel of Russia's foreign policy. After the Russian-Georgian war the ROC did not follow in the Kremlin's footsteps and reconfirmed the GOC's jurisdiction in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This allowed the Georgian Patriarchate to communicate with the ROC while Russian bombers delivered strikes on Georgian cities and villages in August 2008. The Russian Patriarchate, in turn, declared that the religious and fraternal kinship of both peoples was all-important. The Russian political leaders consistently refused to talk to the Georgian leaders, which made the Georgian Patriarch the only person able to visit Moscow after the war and meet the Russian leaders. After these meetings the Russian troops left one of the occupied Georgian villages only to return the following day for unknown reasons. The very fact of acceptance of the GOC by Russia's religious and political leaders speaks volumes.

⁸ [<http://www.patriarchate.ge> 2009].

It is the close relations between the two churches that give certain Georgian observers the chance to accuse the GOC of pro-Russian orientation. “The Patriarchate has always objected to the state’s pro-Western course. In its time it was dead set against a Papal visit to Georgia,”⁹ was how Georgian theologians commented on the close relations between the two churches. The war supplied them with additional arguments. On the one hand, “the Georgian state is seeking integration into Western society, while on the other, the Georgian Church still looks toward Russia.” This can be frequently heard in certain quarters.

Conclusion

The GOC is gradually developing into an actor in the current political processes in Georgia: it is a mediator on the domestic scene and a distributor of political ideas and ideologies, conceptions and doctrines, while outside the country it has occupied the niche of people’s diplomacy. Society’s unbounded trust and support constitutes its main political capital and accounts for its strength. This allows it to show initiative and forces other political actors to take it and its interests into account. Politicians lend their ear to what the Patriarch has to say. On the other hand, Georgia’s ill-wishers beyond its borders know that there is a lever that can be used to put a pressure on Georgia’s policy, which threatens the country’s national security and demands the Church’s vigilance.

⁹ Comment offered by Beka Mindiashvili at the conference on Secular Society and Religious Nationalism organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, quoted by Iveria TV company on 12 April, 2008.