

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**RELIGIOUS PARTIES IN GEORGIA:
POLITICAL PLATFORMS AND
IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

The Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church plays a significant role in the political and intellectual life of Georgian society. Religious parties are active in Georgia's political landscape. The ideologues and theorists of clerical parties are developing ideas and concepts of Georgian political nationalism and supporting the Georgian language and identity. The ideology of the

clerical parties in Georgia is of a mixed nature. The religious parties are developing ideas of political traditionalism. Georgian conservative theorists also support liberal theories in the economic sphere. Political instability is promoting an increase in the moral and political authority of the Church in Georgia. The prospects for the development and transformation of clerical parties are vague and still uncertain.

KEYWORDS: Georgia, Orthodoxy, the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church, nationalism, identity, political parties, conservatism, political Christianity.

The Church and Politics: A Brief Introduction into the Problem

The Church in present-day Georgia performs not only religious, but also important political functions, articulating and reflecting the moods of primarily the traditionalist or nationalist part of society. Several factors should be kept in mind when analyzing the political component of present-day Georgian Orthodoxy. For instance, despite the Church's influence, its role as a political actor and its participation in different kinds of political processes, state-building, and making and implementing political decisions are nevertheless limited: political activity is not the Church's main and dominating function as an institution, although present-day Georgian Orthodoxy has definite political content and a clear political orientation.

On the other hand, when analyzing the political importance of the Church and its active position in political life, we inevitably risk going to ideological extremes and taking cues from Soviet historiography, which made no qualms about accusing the Church of dancing to the political tune of the bourgeoisie and believed that it ideologically supported the interests of the ruling political circles. This kind of activity, of course, did take place or could have taken place, but it was never one of the Church's priority or central tasks, either in Catholic or in Orthodox countries. Political and largely secular functions were successfully performed with the help of a variety of secular institutions related in some way to the Church. For example, public organizations and intellectual communities associated with the Church were able to draw up an ideological agenda. Various kinds of higher educational institutions, whereby not always strictly religious, could have played an equally important role in articulating the political preferences of the clerical or traditionally oriented circles close to them.

However, the mentioned institutions played a secondary role in articulating the political views and preferences of the Church compared to another institution that had a distinct secular, political, and ideological nature. The matter concerns political parties, particularly Christian or those that constantly pointed out and emphasized if not their direct affiliation to church circles, at least their empathy toward the ideas of the Church or adherence to a major rightist trend or fundamentalist movement in political life. Religious parties are a very natural phenomenon and inevitable for most countries that used to or still have developed religious traditions.

The presence of religious parties in the political field or, on the contrary, their underdevelopment or complete absence does not have anything to do with the country's affiliation to the Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant world. Clerical political parties in contemporary society, which has been significantly changed by secularization and the general decline in the authority of the Church and religion, belong to those phenomena that are just as natural and inevitable as parties that diverge on the grounds of political and ideological (rightist or leftist, liberal, communist, socialist, or socio-democratic) sympathies, interests, and preferences.

Georgia's Clerical Political Parties

Present-day Georgia is an exception among other European states. The Church plays a predominant role in Georgia's political life, while religious parties are very active in politics. This article

concentrates on those conservative and national parties¹ that actively use religious and national rhetoric, in particular, the Conservative Party of Georgia² and the Christian-Democratic Movement.³

Georgian Nationalism: The Religious Version

The Conservative Party of Georgia is largely performing a dual function at present: on the one hand, the conservatives continue to develop the political tradition of Georgian nationalism, or to be more precise, the trend of it that is related to the activity of the first leader of independent Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia; while on the other, the party's role as a retransmitter of the ideas of the supreme church hierarchies is just as important in its activity. In particular, the sermons of Patriarch Ilia II can be found on the official website of the Conservative Party, including those texts that concern not only religious, but also primarily secular and political problems. Such texts emphasize not only the unity of the Orthodox world, but also address political problems relating, for example, to Georgia's territorial integrity. Theorists of the Conservative Party have been focusing particular attention on a sermon in which Ilia II declared: "The territorial integrity of our country has been violated, while Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region are bleeding wounds on the body of our Homeland."⁴

The Christian Democrats have been more consistent in expressing religious narrative, emphasizing not only the Church's independence from the state,⁵ but also the "need to strengthen the Church's role in public life," as well as the church's presence in the Armed Forces and in education.⁶ The Conservative Party is not only relaying the ideas of Ilia II to its supporters, but is also essentially helping to distribute them, striving in so doing to emphasize its connection with the Church as one of the most influential and respected institutions in contemporary Georgian society.

Politicization of Christianity or Christianization of Politics?

The ideology of the Conservative Party is based on principles of Georgian civil nationalism, while the Christian-Democrats are largely oriented toward the political participation of believers. The

¹ There has been very little study of the problems relating to the history and present-day ideology of Georgian parties in Russian political science, while the number of publications on this theme is very small. The cycle of articles by N. Devdariani and G. Vekua on parties is largely of an introductory and informative nature (see: N. Devdariani, "Edinoe natsionalnoe dvizhenie Gruzii," available at [http://georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=189&sphrase_id=570446], 21 March, 2014; idem, "Republikanskaia partiia Gruzii," available at [http://georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=233&sphrase_id=570446], 21 March, 2014; G. Vekua, "Politicheskoe ob'edinenie 'Natsionalnyy forum,'" available at [http://georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=190&sphrase_id=570446], 21 March, 2014; idem, "Leiboristskaia partiia Gruzii," available at [http://georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=201&sphrase_id=570446], 21 March, 2014; idem, "Khristiansko-demokraticheskaia partiia Gruzii," available at [http://georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=223&sphrase_id=570446], 21 mapra 2014).

² The Conservative Party was originally called The Union of National Forces—Conservatives. In 2002, the party joined a coalition with the United National Movement. In 2004, the party participated in the elections as part of the National Movement—Democrats bloc, and in 2012 supported The Georgian Dream (for more details on the history of the Conservative Party, see: [<http://conservatives.ge>]). The party leader is Zviad Dzidziguri.

³ The Christian-Democratic Movement was founded in 2008 by Giorgi Targamadze. It came third in the 2012 elections.

⁴ "Patriarch Ilia Speaks in Istanbul on the Preservation of Territorial Integrity," available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

⁵ See: "Why I am a Christian-Democrat," available at [<http://cdm.ge/index.php/ka/2013-10-01-13-53-53/2013-10-01-13-58-32>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

⁶ See: "Mission of the Christian-Democratic Movement, 2009-2013," available at [<http://cdm.ge/index.php/ka/2013-10-01-13-53-34/2013-10-01-13-56-46>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

theorists of the Conservative Party believe that the party's goal should be "to create a united and democratic Georgian state and encourage national patriotism, national ideology, and ideals, as well as ethnic, religious, and cultural personality-forming traditions."⁷ The Christian-Democrats insist on the need to introduce principles of Christian morals into political life, defining Christian democracy as "the political lifestyle of the 21st century" and the only real alternative to globalization challenges, making it possible to "preserve national and cultural identity."⁸ In so doing, the Conservatives claim that they also share such traditional values of civil society as self-government, respect of the rights of minorities, protection of private property and business, and human rights and freedoms.

Moreover, the Conservative Party emphasizes the need for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation and integration into the EU and NATO.⁹ The Christian-Democratic movement largely shares such ideas, believing that building a democratic society based on respect of rights and freedoms, an independent judicial system, and division of power is a vitally important task.¹⁰

Political Traditionalism

Today's Georgian Conservatives are striving to follow in the footsteps of earlier rightist movements and trends that took place in Georgia, positioning themselves as heirs of the first contemporary Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia.¹¹ The very ideas of Georgian statehood and conservative ideology, as the theorists of the present-day Conservative Party believe, are closely intertwined. The Georgian Conservatives are also inclined to juxtapose the traditional values of "land, language, and religion" to different kinds of globalization and liberal challenges. It is worth noting that when discussing international problems, the Georgian Conservatives act as supporters of the territorial integrity of other countries and recognize their right to develop as national states. In particular, in January-March 2014, the Conservatives repeatedly supported Ukraine, commenting either neutrally or sympathetically on the actions of the opposition¹² and very negatively evaluating Russian policy, perceiving it as occupation.¹³

The Christian-Democrats, like the Conservatives, are insistently giving voice to the views on territorial integrity.¹⁴ The national state is a key concept in the political imagination of contemporary Georgian nationalism. The Conservatives have a very negative view of alternative political projects: in particular, Georgia's presence in the Soviet Union is perceived as "Soviet occupation."¹⁵ The idea

⁷ *Charter of the Georgian Conservative Party*, available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

⁸ "Why I am a Christian-Democrat."

⁹ See: *Charter of the Georgian Conservative Party*, available at [<http://conservatives.ge/პარტიოს-წესდგმა/>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

¹⁰ See: *Charter of the Political Citizen Union "Christian-Democratic Movement"*, Tbilisi, 2008, available at [<http://cdm.ge/index.php/ka/2013-10-01-13-53-34/2013-10-01-13-56-02>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

¹¹ See: "Twenty Years since the Death to Zviad Gamsakhurdia," available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

¹² See: *Statement by David Usupashvili on the Situation in Ukraine*, available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

¹³ See: "Plenum Resolution on the Current Events in Ukraine," available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian); "The Georgian Parliament Adopts a Resolution in Support of Ukraine," available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

¹⁴ See: "Mission of the Christian-Democratic Movement, 2009-2013."

¹⁵ "Exhibition Devoted to the Soviet Occupation of Georgia," available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

of Russian occupation, the victims of whom are Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region, is related to the concept of Soviet occupation in the political imagination of contemporary Georgian nationalism.¹⁶

The Conservatives insist that Georgia should develop precisely as a national Georgian state, emphasizing the need for government participation in maintaining and preserving the Georgian language, culture, and identity, as well as stimulating ties with the Georgian diaspora.¹⁷

Christian Parties as Liberal

The Conservatives and Christian-Democrats are also amenable to liberal values, pointing to the importance of human rights and freedoms, respect of the rights of minorities, division of power, the supremacy of international law, and the priority of the market economy.

The Christian-Democrats insist that, in the economic sphere, the state should focus on “building a fair state based on humanness and solidarity, individual freedoms, and spiritual and material wellbeing.”¹⁸ The fewer in number, but more radical supporters of a synthesis of Christianity and politics promote ideas of Christian socialism.¹⁹

The Conservatives are also paying keen attention to economic issues, but do not share the paternalistic moods of the Christian Democrats. The Conservatives believe that Georgia coming closer to European legislative standards will stimulate an inflow of foreign investments into the republic’s economy. However, the Conservatives are very skeptical about the state’s participation in the economy, believing that this could lead to the creation of unequal conditions in competition and promote monopolization of the economy.²⁰ The Christian-Democrats, in turn, insist on making the Georgian economy investment-attractive.²¹ On the other hand, the Conservatives are promoting the initiatives of European economic players, in particular the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, believing that its activity will have a positive impact on development of the business environment in Georgia.²² In contrast to the liberal-minded conservatives in the economic sphere, the Christian-Democrats insist on Georgia developing within the framework of a “social market economy.”²³

The Conservatives’ assessments of the EU Association Agreement vary from neutral to positive,²⁴ while attention is focused specifically on Georgia’s European choice and the development of Georgia’s relations with the European Union member states.²⁵ The Christian-Democrats, like the

¹⁶ See: “The Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has Come forward with a Statement,” available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

¹⁷ See: “Our Values Approved by the Political Party Council in May 2005,” available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

¹⁸ “Mission of the Christian-Democratic Movement, 2009-2013.”

¹⁹ See: “Christian Socialism,” available at [http://christiansocialistge.blogspot.ru/p/blog-page_3749.html], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

²⁰ See: “Information from the Committee on the Economy and Economic Policy,” available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

²¹ See: *Charter of the Political Citizen Union “Christian-Democratic Movement.”*

²² See: *Statement by David Usupashvili on the Situation in Ukraine.*

²³ “Mission of the Christian-Democratic Movement, 2009-2013.”

²⁴ See: “Georgian Products in the EU Markets Will Be Exempt from Customs Fees,” available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

²⁵ See: “The Rumanian Senate Adopts a Resolution in Support of Georgia,” available at [<http://conservatives.ge>], 21 March, 2014 (in Georgian).

Conservatives, also believe that the Euro-Atlantic vector should be a priority in Georgia's foreign policy,²⁶ emphasizing how much Georgia's party structure has in common with Western societies. This similarity is manifested, as the ideologues of the Christian-Democrats believe, in the fact that both Georgia and the West European countries have Christian-Democratic parties.²⁷

The Georgian Conservatives are in favor of developing local self-government, but in so doing insist that Georgia should evolve as a single and unitary state and the local government bodies should resolve socioeconomic problems and be engaged in regional development, while not striving to become institutionalized as independent power entities. The Christian-Democrats are also in favor of increasing the economic powers of the regions,²⁸ while preserving Georgia's overall unity.

In the concept of contemporary Georgian conservatism, the state loses its central meaning, being perceived and imagined as a collective manager hired by citizens to defend national interests and human rights and freedoms. In this respect, the political program of contemporary Georgian nationalism is synthetic in nature, a blend of both conservative and liberal moods.²⁹

Research Results and Prospects

So several factors must be kept in mind relating to the ideology of Georgia's clerical political parties and those parties in whose ideological and political preferences the religious factor plays a special role.

The genesis of religious political parties in Georgia is one of the problems being discussed. On the one hand, their appearance is related to the role that the Church has played and continues to play in the life of Georgian society, the former not being hesitant to adopt political roles that are not inherent in it. In this respect, the activity of clerical political parties is an entirely natural, inevitable, and quite normal continuation of the Church's social activity. However, on the other hand, there are essentially no strictly religious parties in Georgia that have arisen as the result of the direct interference of the Church in politics.

Most of the political parties in present-day Georgia that can very provisionally be defined as clerical are essentially secular political parties, that is, ideological movements or groups united by common political interests or ideological preferences, sympathies, or antipathies toward political opponents and adversaries.

In this respect, formally religious parties can most likely be perceived and viewed as the consequence of adaptation or ideological transformation, mimicry of essentially secular parties and movements. Such parties, which have a clear understanding of the political situation and external situation, recognize that the authority of secular parties and movements has largely been undermined by the negligent and inconsistent policy of the ruling elites during the 1990s-2010s and that today the Church is one of the real consolidated political, social, and cultural institutions, have changed the appearance of secular movements to become parties that reflect traditional values and religious principles in their ideological programs.

²⁶ See: "Mission of the Christian-Democratic Movement, 2009-2013."

²⁷ See: "Why I am a Christian-Democrat."

²⁸ See: "Mission of the Christian-Democratic Movement, 2009-2013."

²⁹ See: "Our Values Approved by the Political Party Council in May 2005."

What is more, when analyzing such political parties in contemporary Georgia, nationalism factors must be kept in mind, as well as the fact that Georgia is a country where political, cultural, and social organization has been progressing at a slower pace and not as actively as in other European states. The link between clerical parties and Georgian nationalism appears obvious and quite natural. A political doctrine is essentially presented in the ideological programs of such movements with the variations characteristic of it, although implemented in a primarily religious system of coordinates. The theorists of the clerical parties, like the secular nationalists, suggest advancing and developing their versions and forms of Georgian identity with the only formal and external difference that greater emphasis is placed on the traditional and religious in these national identity projects than secular nationalistic precepts.

Such political preferences in Georgia's contemporary party life could be dressed in different ideological clothing, but a set of nationalistic narratives developed and advanced by entirely secular political parties and movements will inevitably lurk behind outer religiosity. Moreover, religion can be a way to advance essentially liberal values and ideas. This is mainly manifested in the economic programs of clerical parties. This means that clerical parties should be described not as an entirely independent political phenomenon, but as a specific form of development and transformation of the ideology of Georgian political civil nationalism.

The existence of clerical parties in contemporary Georgia can likely also be linked to the specifics of modernization processes in this peripheral European country. As we know, political and social modernization processes that ended in the emergence of a modern civil Georgian political nation began later in Georgia than in other European countries. Being on the periphery of the European world, Georgia has historically been under the control of states of other cultures and other religions that did not belong to the European world, or whose affiliation with which was disputable (the Russian, Ottoman, and Persian empires).

The final stages in Georgia's nationalistic modernization and formation as a contemporary nation most likely came during the Soviet period, which led to certain deformations in the development of the Georgian identity. Compulsory modernization under the Soviet model not only led to the nation becoming a universal political institution, but was also manifested in the striving of the elites to eliminate traditional and archaic institutions, one of which was the Church. So it was very natural that the Church became much more popular during the post-Soviet period, this being perceived as the defense reaction of a society in which the political and social modernization processes were still incomplete. It was precisely the incomplete and indefinite nature of the main trajectories of development and possible subsequent transformations in society associated with this that is the reason for the noticeable ideological diversity and heterogeneity characteristic of the program precepts of the clerical and traditionalist political parties in present-day Georgia.

In this situation, in conditions of general uncertainty about the further development of the political field and real party and ideological pluralism and diversity relating to the systemic characteristics of the Georgian political space, analyzing the clerical parties and their intellectual preferences and ideological programs is one of the most significant and pertinent tasks in the comprehensive study of Georgia.