

## RELIGIOUS FACTORS IN GEORGIAN POLITICS (THE 2008 GENERAL ELECTIONS)

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### *Introduction*

Georgia has always been, and remains, part of the Christian Orthodox world, which means that the use of religion as a political instrument should not shock anyone.

Indeed, in the context of the struggling economy, the civil institutions are unable to inculcate democratic consciousness, without which a sin-

gle civil expanse is impossible. The Church, sporadically aided by political actors, has shouldered the responsibility for performing at least some of the functions of these institutions.

In recent years, the Church's stronger role in the country's political, social, and spiritual life has been reflected in the results of the elections

at the local and national levels. The religious factor is rapidly gathering political hues, a fact clearly demonstrated by the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2008.

Below I shall rely on the returns of the March 2008 sociological poll to identify the

extent to which the religious factors affected the election results and the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country's social life.

My conclusions are based on scrupulous analysis of the poll's results.

## The 2008 Elections and General Political Priorities

Georgia's recent history is brimming with political, social, and economic events, however the year 2008, which brought the Russian-Georgian armed conflict in August and the presidential and parliamentary elections, will occupy a special place in the annals of history. The pre-term elections were spurred on by the well-known events of 7 November, 2007, after which the president set the date for an off-year presidential election, while the nation's majority voted for the early parliamentary elections.

The 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections gathered the largest number of candidates in the history of independent Georgia, therefore the outcome was anybody's guess. The large number of candidates and political entities involved and the relative balance of forces at the presidential (January 2008) and parliamentary (May 2008) elections created the illusion of stiff competition. All the political entities tried to capitalize on the fairly strenuous political situation created by the election campaign (not the easiest of periods at the best of times) and the legitimacy crisis of the government, which had lost the trust of a large part of the nation.

Here I shall discuss the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections as one process since their political vectors, all things considered, coincided.

Seven candidates ran for president; 12 political parties and alliances competed for seats in parliament. It should be said that the political vectors of all the candidates and parties involved were practically the same, even though some of the slogans of the presidential election were replaced with new ones. Mikhail Saakashvili, who in January ran for president under the slogan "Georgia without Poverty," in May offered the slogan "Less Words, More Deeds."

It should be said that Shalva Natelashvili's election program in January was absolutely identical to the program with which his Labor Party ran for parliament in May. David Gamkrelidze in January and the United Opposition in May offered almost identical election programs. The interval between the elections was too short for the political or socioeconomic problems, and hence their priorities, to change to any extent. This explains the positions from which the political priorities of the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns are discussed here.

In 2008, the political sphere was dominated by several issues which practically none of the candidates running for presidency and competing for parliamentary seats could avoid, even if their conclusions varied.

1. **The form of government:** both in January and May this issue remained the most debatable one: practically all the forces involved (with the exception of Mikhail Saakashvili and the ruling United National Movement, which supports the presidential form of government) touched upon it in one form or another.

It should be said that the issue drew much more controversy in January than in May: for the obvious reason that the issue lost its edge once Saakashvili had been reelected president.

2. *External priorities*: wider cooperation with NATO and settling relations with Russia, which became especially urgent after the 2008 August events.
3. *Restoration of territorial integrity* figured prominently in the election programs of all political entities involved; they were dead set against the use of force. The issue moved to the forefront after the Russian-Georgian war.
4. *Relations between the state and the Georgian Orthodox Church*. Practically all political entities touched upon this issue in their programs and during the election campaign.

## The 2008 Elections and Religion

Post-communist Georgia has already lived through several presidential and parliamentary campaigns and local elections, however, it was in 2008 that the presidential candidates and practically all the political parties and blocs addressed the relations between the state and the Georgian Orthodox Church.

An analysis of the election programs reveals several different approaches:

1. The political actors limited themselves to a demonstration of their more or less benevolent attitude toward religion and, by extension, toward the Orthodox Church.

The United National Movement's election program, for example, promised to help restore churches, protect national folklore, support museums, and allocate 100 million lari to these purposes. Its program said: "Our strength is in our diversity, which rests on Christianity."<sup>1</sup>

Even though the program speaks about libraries, folklore, and museums, it demonstrates its benevolent attitude toward the Church.

The program of the political bloc of the Traditionalists, Our Georgia, and the Party of Women said: "Despite the wide range of different confessions in Georgia, Orthodoxy has been and remains our cultural determinant, therefore the Georgian Orthodox Church needs state support in ensuring its organizational integrity."<sup>2</sup>

The program, however, failed to specify what was meant by "state support" and how the Church's "organizational integrity" could be ensured.

The election program of the Our Country Party was similarly worded. It said that the party respected and accepted national and religious tolerance and pointed out that Orthodoxy and the Georgian language were two of the most important concerns of the state: "We are a country of the Mother of God and this explains everything."<sup>3</sup>

Similar statements can be found in the program of the Georgian Politics Party.

2. The entities involved in the election process clearly stated their intention to extend state aid (financial aid included) to the Church and remain loyal to the Constitutional Agreement with the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The election program of the Republican Party, which ran for parliament, said in so many words: "We believe it our immutable duty to follow to the full extent the Constitu-

<sup>1</sup> [<http://www.cec.gov.ge>].

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

tional Agreement between the Autocephalous Apostolic Orthodox Church and the Georgian state.”<sup>4</sup>

The party believed legal and financial guarantees of compensation for the damages the Communist regime had inflicted on the Church to be one of its priorities: the state, the present owner of the lands which had belonged to the Church, should restore them to their rightful owner. The remaining part of the damages should be repaid in money: “This means that every year the Church will receive budget money (we reckon from 15 to 20 million lari). This should be treated as repayment of damages, not a subsidy; neither should this be treated as discrimination for religious reasons.”<sup>5</sup>

In January and May, Shalva Natelashvili of the Labor Party, likewise, promised to adhere to the Constitutional Agreement; he said in his election program: “The present destructive practice of razing churches and monasteries to the ground and destroying national and historical values and traditions has ended. I believe it my historic duty to remain loyal, without objections, to the Constitutional Agreement between the state and the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church. Not a single village or a community will be left without a church; the Church is the cornerstone of our spiritual strength.”<sup>6</sup>

The election program of presidential candidate Levan Gachechiladze (the so-called Saguramo Manifesto) also spoke about the need to observe the Constitutional Agreement between the state and the Orthodox Church: “Involvement of the state and political institutions in ecclesiastical affairs shall be forbidden. The state shall observe all obligations under the constitutional agreements with the Georgian Orthodox Church.”<sup>7</sup>

From the point of view of the relations between the Church and the state, the election program of presidential candidate David Gamkrelidze is especially interesting: it offers clear ideas about the future relations between the state and the Orthodox Church of Georgia. He ran for president under the slogan “We have faith in God and we are able,” which put in a nutshell his attitude toward religion and toward Orthodoxy. He formulated his main aim and the means of its attainment as: “We have faith in God and we are able to transform Georgia into a democratic and free State.”

His program touched upon the most important issues of the country’s life. It said, in part:

- “The damage inflicted by Bolshevism on the Georgian Orthodox Church will be compensated; for this purpose 33 million GEL will be allocated immediately (1 million GEL per eparchy);
- “Important state programs, including demographic and anti-drug programs, will be carried out jointly with the Church;
- “Georgian Orthodox churches will be established in foreign cities to serve the Georgian communities abroad.”

Two other points set David Gamkrelidze’s program apart from the other election programs:

- (a) “We support the idea of the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia about reestablishing a Constitutional Monarchy in Georgia.” The members of the New Right were the most

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<sup>4</sup> [<http://www.ccc.gov.ge>].

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> [<http://labor.ge/>].

<sup>7</sup> [<http://conservatives.ge/en/?p=159>].

active supporters of this idea. Significantly, the party was not so much campaigning for the idea as siding with it because it had been put on the table by Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II. Their program confirms this and says: "In the event of a Constitutional Monarchy, the regent should assume the responsibility of the monarch for the first years to come. We regard Ilia II Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia as the only possible regent."<sup>8</sup>

- (b) This was the only election program which suggested that the Georgian Orthodox Church should be involved in dealing with demographic problems.

It should be said that the United Opposition and the New Right, which ran for parliament as a bloc, preserved all the religion-related priorities of the New Right in their common program.

3. Election programs of some of the political actors—the All Georgia National Party of the Radical-Democrats and the Christian-Democratic Party of Gia Targamadze—promised to make Christian Orthodoxy an official religion and amend the Constitution accordingly.

Their programs suggested that the head of the Georgian Autocephalous Church should be granted immunity, while the state and the Church should become two mutually independent entities.<sup>9</sup>

Two of the political entities involved in the election process (the Georgian Sportsmen's Union and the bloc of the Rightist Alliance-Topadze-Industrialists) ignored relations between the state and the Church.

An analysis of the election programs testified that the Orthodox Church/the state issue figured prominently in almost all of them.

The fairly important role the religious factor plays in Georgia (which has barely embarked on the road of independent development, if we ignore the previous experience of 1918-1921) should not baffle anyone: this can be seen in Eastern Europe and in some of the post-Soviet countries (Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states); today the impact of the Church on democratization is even more pronounced than before.

## Election Results, Religion, and Public Opinion

The heightened attention toward religion all presidential candidates displayed during the campaign prompted an initiative group headed by the present author to carry out a public opinion poll in March 2008 (after the presidential and before the parliamentary elections). The 300-strong sampling covered ages between 18 and 25; it was similar to those conducted earlier in Poland and some other East European countries.

We wanted to find out the attitude toward religion and its role in the political and other spheres of life.

The results do not merely reveal the extent to which the Church is trusted, but also the level of trust in other institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> [<http://www.nrp.ge>].

<sup>9</sup> [<http://cdm.ge>].

The answers to the question “Do you consider yourself a believer?” drew 84 percent of positive and 3 percent of negative answers (13 percent fell into the undecided category). The results are eloquent enough: the majority of the polled posed themselves as believers.

Table 1

Which of the State Institutions Listed Below Do You Trust More? (%)				
	More or less	Fairly well	Very much	Absolutely not
The parliament	63	10	0	22
The government	59	15	0.7	22
The court	40	11	2.3	41.5
The Armed Forces	28	43	23	6
The police	39	35	8	14
The educational system	31	43	13	11
The president	39	25	10	10
The Church	6.3	15	78	0.7
The press	41	40	10	10
TV	42	44	6	9

The above shows that despite the certain amount of progress made in recent decades toward a democratic state, people have not yet learned to trust some of the political institutions.

Indeed, 1.22 percent of the respondents completely distrust the parliament and executive power; 41.5 percent have similar feelings about the judiciary; and 14 percent about the police.

The armed forces enjoy the highest level of trust among the other state structures: 6 percent absolutely distrust them, while 94 percent trust them “more or less, fairly well, and very much.” The state has been concentrating recently on building a strong and well-disciplined army that would meet the Western (NATO) standards, hence the high level of trust.<sup>10</sup>

The level of trust (“fairly well” and “very much”) in the Orthodox Church is extremely high (99.3 percent); the level of distrust, for this reason, is very low (0.7 percent).<sup>11</sup>

The question “What issues belong to the Church’s competence?” was asked to find out what the respondents thought about the Church as a state institution.

<sup>10</sup> The 2008 August events corrected the situation to a certain extent, but even after the war the level of trust in the armed forces is still high (especially when compared with the very low trust in the other state institutions). According to the public opinion poll the IRI conducted in March 2009, 79 percent of the polled trusted the armed forces, which came second after the Church (91 percent) in this respect (see: [http://www.iri.org.ge. Polling Data]).

<sup>11</sup> Nowhere in Eastern Europe, even in Poland, which traditionally has the highest, 82 percent, level of trust in the Church among the European countries, is the level this high (see: D. Hulmand, *European Values Study: The 3 Wave*, Tielburg University, 2001, p. 35).

Table 2

What Issues Belong to the Church's Competence? (%)		
Issue	Yes	No
Social problems	78	22
Unemployment	28	58
Abortions	88	12
Religious tolerance	91.5	8.5
Disarmament	39	41
Environment	30	66
Drug addiction	91.5	8.5
Government policies	25	72
Demography	44	50
Homosexuality	57	39

According to Table 2 the respondents are most concerned about drug addiction (91 percent), abortions (88 percent), and social problems (78 percent), while 72 percent of the polled are convinced that the Georgian Orthodox Church should avoid political issues.<sup>12</sup>

Strange as it may seem, even though the absolute majority describe themselves as believers they remain convinced that their religion has little effect on their political priorities.

This adds special interest to the question: "Does the Georgian Orthodox Church interfere in politics?"

Table 3

Does the Georgian Orthodox Church Interfere in Politics? (%)	
To a great extent	0.7
Sufficiently	7
To the extent it should	56
Not so much	28
Never	7

<sup>12</sup> A more or less similar question "Should the Church be involved in politics?" was asked in Eastern and Central Europe. In Poland, 81.8 percent of the respondents have negative answers. In this respect, Poland was ahead of Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and other European countries, which have a much lower level of religious feelings. In Germany, for example, 47 percent gave a negative answer to the same question; in the Czech Republic, 73 percent; in Hungary, 63 percent, in Slovakia, 76 percent; in Croatia, 78.7 percent (see: S. Flere, "The Impact of Religiosity upon Political Stances: Survey Findings from Seven Central European Countries," in: *Religion and Social Change in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. by I. Borowik, M. Tomka, Zakland Wydawnicy Nomos, Krakow, 2001).

The absolute majority (84 percent) believe that the Church interferes in politics to the extent it should (sufficiently or even less).

This creates the truest picture of Georgian reality: even though political leaders and parties of all convictions very frequently appeal to the Georgian Orthodox Church, an institution which enjoys high respect in society, it practically never takes sides or shows its attitude toward any of the political actors.

### *C o n c l u s i o n*

The level of popular trust in the Orthodox Church and the fact that almost all the political actors appeal to it, coupled with the weak state institutions, suggest that the Church is the most respected and influential force in Georgia. This explains why so much is said about religion during election campaigns.

The results of the poll show that the absolute majority of the respondents believe that the Church's authority will allow it to address the most burning social issues, the demographic crisis, and the efforts to uproot drug addiction.

In his election program, David Gamkrelidze moved closer to public opinion than his rivals: if elected, he promised to encourage closer cooperation between the state and the Church in social programs.

Georgia is a multiethnic country in which followers of different confessions have been living side by side for many centuries. Will the Georgian Orthodox Church, if more actively involved in the country's life, play an integration role in politics and will it bring people of different religious convictions closer? Will its social and political involvement be conducive to a single political and civil expanse, or will it cause alienation and disintegration among different ethnic groups? Will the Georgian Orthodox Church manage to use its authority to promote genuine democratic values in Georgia? These questions call for special investigation. We all know, however, that today the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the few consolidating factors in the country.