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Traditional religion and political power: Examining the role of the church in Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine and Moldova

Edited by Adam Hug

The publication examines the political and social role of the Orthodox Churches in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova and of the Armenian Apostolic Church. It explores the ways in which the churches have contributed to the development of national identities since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the role they play in civil society. The publication looks at the nature of the relationship between church and state; how the churches influence, support and challenge the secular authorities in their hold on power and their response to 'traditional values' issues such as LGBTI and minority faith rights. The publication also looks at the ways in which the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Government have been looking to influence this debate in these countries.

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Excerpt from the publication, p.40

The Georgian Orthodox Church: National Identity and Political Influence

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The Georgian Orthodox Church in the Imperial and Soviet Past

In 1811, Russian Emperor Alexander I abolished the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church and placed it under the command of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) was deprived of its places of worship; eparchies² were abolished and the language of the liturgy became Russian. The links between Georgia and the West were intentionally cut off and the Georgian Church became a tool of Russification, promoting obedience among Georgians towards the Emperor.

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²Church provinces under the supervision of a metropolitan.

The Georgian clergy became actively involved in the fight against Russian colonial rule only during the second half of the nineteenth century with calls to regain autocephaly for the Church from Moscow. They also resumed close communication with the Catholic and Protestant circles in the West. It is notable, that the autocephalist movement converged with the formation of national identity - which is generally traced to the prominent Georgian writer and the leader of the national liberation movement, Ilia Chavchavadze. The nationalism he promoted was neither religious nor ethnic, but a civic nationalism formed around common history and territory.

Along with the upheaval of nationalism, the Georgian Church was one of the defenders of Georgia's national independence. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, the Georgian Church regained its autocephaly, and shortly afterwards, Georgia declared its political independence in 1918. Prior to the Soviet occupation, the Democratic Republic of Georgia promulgated its first constitution in 1921, which can be considered as one of the most progressive documents in any European country at that time. It stipulates, that: 1) the state and the Church are separate and independent from each other; 2) no faith should enjoy special privileges; 3) it is prohibited to allocate money from the state or local municipality budgets for religious purposes (16th chapter, articles 142-144)³. Therefore, according to the Constitution of 1921, the model of the State and Church relationship was defined through secular principles.

In February 1921, the Soviet army invaded Georgia and overthrew its democratically elected government. After the Soviet occupation, there was another turn in the history of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ambrosious (*Ambrosi*) Khelaia spearheaded a movement, strongly opposed the Communist government. In the spring of 1922, the Patriarch Ambrosious appealed to the Genoa Conference which included the delegation from the Soviet Russia, in the hope that the members of the League of Nations at the Conference would persuade Russia to restore Georgia's sovereignty. He urged that the Soviet troops should be immediately withdrawn from Georgia, and the Georgian nation should be given an opportunity to freely organize its life, and pursue it.⁴ After this appeal, Patriarch Ambrosious was arrested. Despite continuous persecution, the Georgian Orthodox Church resisted the Communist regime until the Patriarch's death in 1927. The Church fell under strong Soviet influence in the 1930-40s.

In 1943, Joseph Stalin changed the policy towards religious institutions. At first glance, the persecution stopped and the Church acquired formal institutional recognition, but in fact, Soviet totalitarianism permeated deeply into the religious system. Although Soviet Russia recognized the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church, new clergy were ordained, several temples (churches) were reopened and clerics received financial privileges, Stalin managed to infiltrate the Church with informers.⁵

In the wake of the 70-year-long Soviet rule, the role of religion in public life significantly declined.⁶ Some scholars argue that the phenomenon, today frequently referred to as religious nationalism,⁷ was conceived during Soviet times, and later emerged as an alternative to civic, anti-imperialistic nationalism.

³State Constitutional Commission, Constitution of Georgia 1921, <http://constcommission.ge/1921>

⁴St. Paul's Orthodox Christian Theology Centre, Appeal of the Patriarch Ambrosi Khelaia towards Genoa Conference, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1JrEnAd>

⁵Beka Mindiashvili, The Law of Russian-Georgian Eternity, Tabula, February 2013, <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/70787-the-law-of-russian-georgian-eternity>

⁶Silvia, Serrano. Church: Embodiment of National Unity or Oppositional Force. *Proet Contra* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) Vol 17, no. (5) 60 (September-October 2013): 66-79

⁷Giga, Zedania. „The Rise of the Religious Nationalism in Georgia. *Identity Studies* (Ilia State University) Vol 3 (2012): 124-127.

Acquiring Political Independence, Nationalism and Messianism

On 25th December 1977, Ilia II (Shiolashvili) became the new Catholicos-Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church. As a religious servant, he was born and raised in a system soaked with Soviet totalitarianism. The narrative of Georgian nationalism changed after the enthronement of Ilia II - by the 'sacralization of nationalism and nationalization of the sacred'⁸, the Georgian Orthodox Church laid the foundation for a new hybrid identity which later defined the role of the Church in public and political life. The formation of a new national identity was symbolically expressed in the term 'Heavenly Georgia'⁹ and in addition to the traditional Easter acclamation 'Christ is Risen', Ilia II added a new clause –'Georgia is risen!', which according to the Christian eschatology of the Middle Ages, identifies Georgia with the body of Christ.¹⁰ Hence, Perestroika was followed by the revitalization of the institutionalized religion in Georgia.

This period was also marked by the re-emergence of the national movement. The majority of the leaders of this movement had a messianic impression of themselves and about the political and religious importance of the Georgian nation. Thus, messianic narratives moved from Church to political discourse. Some of the leaders supported the establishment of an Orthodox monarchy in Georgia, while others were for establishing a theocracy. In public spaces communist symbols were gradually replaced with Orthodox Christian symbols. Politicians regularly used religious rhetoric in their public speeches. In 1990 several schools became the possession of the Georgian Orthodox Church.¹¹

In November 1990 the first parliamentary elections were held in Georgia; the Communists were defeated and the strongest group, the national movement, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia came to power. It should be noted, that two religious servants were elected as members of parliament, one from the national movement, the other from the Communist Party.

On 9th April 1991 Georgia declared independence. On 7th June 1991 President Zviad Gamsakhurdia in his inauguration speech stated that 'together with the restoration of independence of the state, Orthodox Christianity should be declared as the state religion'.¹²

Gamsakhurdia was quite controversial whilst speaking about religious pluralism, on the one hand he stated that human rights must be protected and religions minorities must not be discriminated against, while on the other hand he gave superiority to Orthodox Christianity and called the representatives of other confessions heretics. According to Zviad Gamsakhurdia 'sectarianism' was incompatible with Georgian consciousness because of its 'heretic ideology and moral degradation'.¹³

At the same time, Gamsakhurdia opposed Ilia II and the Patriarchate, as he considered them 'the agents of Committee for State Security'. He blamed 'the red clergy' for dealing with the Soviet government and betraying the homeland.¹⁴

Finally, it can be said that, as a result of the religious-messianic rhetoric actively used by the representatives of the national movement and intervention of religion into politics, the Church gained mass ideological recognition. Besides, Gamsakhurdia created a political icon of a nation with a

⁸Andronikashvili Zaal, Maisuradze Giorgi. 'Secularization and Its Vicissitudes in Georgia'. *Identity Studies* (Ilia State University) Vol 2 (2012): 5-17.

⁹Speech of the Patriarch in Gelati Cathedral, www.orthodoxy.ge; September 21, 1988, http://www.orthodoxy.ge/patriarqi/qadagebebi/skhva/gvt_shoba.htm

¹⁰Andronikashvili Zaal, Maisuradze Giorgi. 'Secularization and Its Vicissitudes in Georgia'. *Identity Studies* (Ilia State University) Vol 2 (2012): 5-17

¹¹Liles Thomas, Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara. ECMI working paper #57, 2012, http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_lfpubdb/Working_Paper_57_En.pdf

¹²Beso Mikava, Orthodoxy should be the state religion of Georgia, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OK6Q2y-SHkA>

¹³Response to the Editor of Newspaper Samani, February 1993

¹⁴Gamsakhurdia, Zviad, 2004, KGB Was Looking Ahead When It was Forming Deceitful Clergy, Letters, Kutaisi, pg24-27

distinguished mission, which had to show the third, spiritual way to the world imbued with messianic rhetoric, not based on civic nationalism but also marginalising the formal institutions of the Georgian Patriarchate.¹⁵

The Church and the Government in 1992-2003

During the period of Shevardnadze's rule, against a backdrop of the destruction of state institutions, corruption, high crime rates, economic poverty and total social insecurity, the Orthodox Church managed to fill the social-political vacuum and turned out to be the only institution which created a sense of security.

The government, which came to power in 1992 as a result of revolution, needed political legitimacy. Shevardnadze used the Church for this purpose. During the period of the national movement and Gamsakhurdia's tenure, Orthodox Christianity became the main marker of Georgian identity, now it was necessary to build up trust in the religious institution.

In 1992 Ilia II baptized the atheist Eduard Shevardnadze in the Sioni Cathedral which served as the religious legitimization of the political government. The Patriarchate was openly involved in political processes: They never condemned the pursuit of Gamsakhurdia's supporters during the civil conflict and strongly supported Shevardnadze.

On 14th September 1993, some members of the Parliament of Georgia confronted Shevardnadze, the chairman of the Parliament, after he called for a state of emergency and a temporary suspension of Parliament. Shevardnadze threatened to resign and stated that he would not retreat. A group of citizens, blessed by the Catholicos-Patriarch, gathered to support Shevardnadze and asked him to stay in power. The Patriarch said: "The whole of Georgia is nervous. So, as the spiritual father of Georgia and personally your spiritual father, I have the right to give benediction to you to announce that you are the head of Georgia".¹⁶ In his response Shevardnadze expressed the 'marriage' of religious and civil authorities: "The voice of God, and the voice of the nation". This scene demonstrated the role and function of the Church in supporting Shevardnadze's reign; this support was duly appreciated in politics. Shevardnadze granted the church legal recognition, exclusivity in religious matters and in the media, privileges and financing from the state budget. After gaining considerable clout, the Patriarchate became the main source for forging identity, legitimizing political processes and the main power behind the consolidation of society. In 1995, Article 9 of the Constitution of Georgia was amended to recognize the special role of the Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia. However, the constitution simultaneously recognized freedom of religion and belief. This provision was corroborated in Article 19 of the Constitution of Georgia. On 14th October 2002 the Constitutional Agreement (Concordat) was signed between the State and the Patriarchate. Through this document, the Patriarchate was given autonomy, privileges and guarantees to solve the legal and estate problems relating to Communist confiscations of church property. Based on the Constitutional Agreement, the Orthodox Church was declared a Legal Entity of Public Law, whilst other religious unions had no right to register. It was written in the preamble of the Agreement that Orthodox Christianity is one of the traditional religions of Europe, which historically has been the state religion in Georgia and it has formed centuries-old Georgian culture, national ideology and values. This entry highlighted the exclusive role of Orthodox

¹⁵ In his writings Gamsakhurdia underscored that Georgia had special mission, and the Georgian language would be the language by which the God will judge after Second Coming. This literary theory belongs to John Zosimos 10th-century Georgian Christian monk, religious writer, and calligrapher known for his liturgical compilations and the hymns dedicated to the Georgian language. Gamsakhurdia frequently referred to Zosimos.

¹⁶ 14 September 1993 (uploaded August 2008), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzOF06WBvM>

Christianity and the role of other confessions in the historical-cultural development of Georgia were neglected.

The pro-Western foreign policy course became clear in the second part of the 1990s. Georgia became a member of the Council of Europe in 1999 and of the World Trade Organization (WTO) 2000, while in 2002 the President applied to join NATO. However, the Patriarchate chose a different way. Instead of striving to join the European family, the Church created a new ideological narrative, the counterpart to secular nationalism. Georgian nationalism was always characterized by anti-Russian and pro-Western discourse. However, this time the Patriarchate, under the influence of the Soviet experience, began demonizing the West and underlined the priority of having the same religion as Russia. It would not be quite right to call this phenomenon *nationalism*, which more resembles Russian imperial political orthodoxy, wrapped in nationalist rhetoric. The Patriarch's statements, like the statements of the majority of the clergy were mostly anti-Western and anti-liberal. According to him "The West is the world where everything is permitted and violence dominates. It is materially rich but spiritually poor", so it is strange and difficult for Georgians to accept."¹⁷ He also stated that if a country doesn't have the right religious and national ideology, liberalism will work in favour of the enemies and will totally destroy the country". Whilst Georgia was struggling to join NATO, the Patriarch called for foreign policy neutrality.¹⁸

In 1997 by the decision of the Synod, the Georgian Orthodox Church defied the ecumenical movement, left the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches, which in fact, meant that the Georgian Church broke off its relationship with European Christian churches and organizations. This decision was preceded by strengthening the anti-ecumenical movement and isolationist groups within the church.¹⁹ It is interesting that only two theological issues became acute within the Church in that period. These were: what was the destiny of the dead unbaptized infants after their death²⁰ and whether Greek chants could be allowed to be heard in Georgian churches.²¹ It indicates that the church can not realize its theological tradition and is unable to meet the challenges of the modern life through the language of theology.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many religious entities, which had previously been persecuted, emerged into the public space. At the beginning of the 1990's Krishna followers, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Pentecostals and other religious groups came out of the underground and started practicing and sharing their beliefs. Despite the fact that the religious landscape became more pluralistic, radical groups emerged within the Patriarchate who considered people with different religious identities a threat and started persecuting them. The radical groups were supported by the statement of the Patriarch who spoke against religious expansion. According to the Patriarch "Jehovah's Witnesses, the followers of Krishna, Baptists and Catholics humiliate and offend the Georgian Church."²² He also stated that "every man who will support the spread of sectarian doctrines and different religions will be declared as the enemies of the Georgian nation."²³ In April 1999, at the special session of the

¹⁷The Catholicos - Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II, Christmas Epistle of 1994-1995, Epistles, Speeches, Teachings, Vol. I. Tbilisi, 1997,

<http://www.orthodoxy.ge/patriarqi/epistoleebi/sashobao1995.htm>

¹⁸The Catholicos - Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II, Easter Epistle, Church News, #16 (118), 2001, <http://www.orthodoxy.ge/patriarqi/epistoleebi/saagdromo2001.htm>

¹⁹Record of the proceedings of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate, Newspaper Madli, #6-7, page 2, 1 July 1997

²⁰Record of the proceedings of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate, 14.12.2000, available at: http://www.patriarchate.ge/?action=text/ogmi_14-12-00

²¹News of the Patriarchate, The Patriarch Ilia II's meeting with Greek musicologist Gregorios Stathis: Georgian People Should Chant According to Georgian Tradition, February 2003, <http://www.orthodoxy.ge/galoba/statisi-14-02-2003.htm>

²²The Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, Christmas Epistle of 1993-1994, Epistles, Speeches, Teachings, Vol. I. Tbilisi, 1997,

<http://www.orthodoxy.ge/patriarqi/epistoleebi/sashobao1994.htm>

²³The Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II. God curse ignorant people, July 1991, Epistles, Speeches, Teachings, Vol. II. Tbilisi, 1997, <http://www.orthodoxy.ge/patriarqi/qadagebebi/skhva/12motsiquili.htm>

Parliament, which was dedicated to Georgia's integration into the European Union, Ilia II demanded a restriction of these "sects".

Since 1999 the level of violence towards religious minorities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and Pentecostals has grown significantly. Basil Mkalavishvili, a former orthodox cleric, became notorious for his aggression and severity towards these groups. A group of Orthodox Christians, under his direction, destroyed and burnt the literature of other religious unions and prevented them from performing religious rituals. It should be noted that the police not only neglected to respond to these kinds of crime but also acted in compliance with the extremists.

Extremists also attacked the Liberty Institute (a non-governmental organization) and the independent media which reported on human rights violations. In the following years, the influence of Basil Mkalavishvili and the number of his followers increased due to the state's inadequate policy and the impunity perpetrators enjoyed. In 2000, Jehovah's Witnesses meetings were dispersed 38 times, and the police either did not respond, or took part in the raids. Mkalavishvili was arrested only in 2004, after the change in government.

It should be noted that Orthodox Christian clerics expressed intolerance not only towards recently established religious groups, but also towards the religions which they themselves recognized as traditional religions. For example, at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s the Orthodox Christian Church started active proselytism amongst Muslims living in the Adjara region. On 26th May 1989, Patriarch Ilia II, while visiting Adjara, called on Muslims to return to their roots and the belief of their ancestors (Orthodoxy), which helped Georgian people to survive all hardships.²⁴ The Orthodox Christian press became full of anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic and Armenophobic texts. As well as this, the Patriarchate impinged on freedom of expression more broadly. At the request of the Patriarchate and radical Orthodox Christian groups, several exhibitions and performances were cancelled, literary texts were censored and an exhibition of Georgian icons and historic artefacts in the USA was also cancelled. The Patriarchate was the initiator of meetings where participants stated that Americans would perform Satanic rituals in front of the icons, or that the grace of God would leave Georgia together with the icons.

In conclusion, the main characteristic feature of this period was on the one hand, the increasing authority of the Church, supported by the government; and on the other hand the persecution of religious minorities since the government did not take any measures to address the rise of extremism.

Church-State Relationship in 2003-2012

In 2003, after the Rose Revolution and the forced resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze, Mikheil Saakashvili and his political party, the United National Movement came to power. The GOC did not directly intervene in the political processes of November 2003, however, the absence of Patriarch Ilia II from the opening of the Parliamentary session called by Shevardnadze, to some extent defined the prospects of the Revolution. Later, President Saakashvili called this step by the Patriarch "civic heroism committed at the expense of distancing himself from politics."²⁵

²⁴The Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II will call to the Lord, in the parishes still open – May 1989, Epistles, Speeches, Teachings, Vol. II. Tbilisi, 1997
<http://www.orthodoxy.ge/patriarqi/qadagebebi/skhva/achara.htm>

²⁵Sapatriarkos Utskebani #7, February 2005

After coming to power, Saakashvili started implementing drastic economic and political reforms, liberalization of laws, promotion of human rights and fighting corruption. Religious extremists were prosecuted (the Police were finally able to detain Basil Mkalavishvili in 2004) and the protection of religious and ethnic minorities became one of the major issues on the political agenda. Furthermore, Saakashvili's government opposed the narrative of nationalism imbued with a religious and ethnic shroud and instead fostered the ideology of civic nationalism. However, along with pro-Western initiatives and the promotion of liberal democracy, Saakashvili embraced the GOC in symbolic acts, such as during his inauguration at the historic Holy Gelati monastery and where he received a blessing from Ilia II, as well as institutionally and financially strengthening the GOC by increasing annual subsidies from the State Budget. During Saakashvili's presidency, the funding of the GOC surged in accordance with the increase of the total state budget of Georgia. In 2007 the annual subsidy to the GOC amounted to 4.27 million Georgian Lari (GEL). In 2008 the funding drastically increased and the Patriarchate received 13 million GEL from the State Budget and in 2009 it doubled to 26.39 million GEL.²⁶ From 2010 onwards the annual funding stayed at this higher level, amounting to approximately 22-25 million GEL. In addition to money from the state budget the GOC receives around 3 million GEL from local municipalities and gains ownership of a significant amount of both movable and immovable property.²⁷ Additionally, the Orthodox clergy started driving luxurious cars, purchasing mansions and running prolific private businesses at taxpayers expense.

Nevertheless, the GOC acquired even more political clout and authority in public under Saakashvili's government because of its pro-Western discourse, and association with a 'fight against national values and religion'. Some opposition parties also aligned with the clergy, blaming the government for having an anti-GOC policy.

State Policy and Practice Regarding Freedom of Religion

During Mikheil Saakashvili's tenure, a number of discriminatory legislative norms were abolished, hence, the legal framework was improved and religious minorities were provided with some official credibility they did not previously have. In 2005 the Tolerance Center and the Council of Religions was founded under the auspices of the Ombudsman's Office of Georgia which contributed to the protection of religious minority rights and strengthened the advocacy capacity and anti-discrimination work of minority organizations.

In this regard, the amendment to the Civil Legal Code on 5 July 2011 with the incorporation of the new article 1509¹ was a positive step.²⁸ Following the legislative changes, religious minorities were able to register as legal entities under public law²⁹, a status which previously only the GOC was granted due to the privileges emanating from the Constitutional Agreement. Prior to 2005 religious organizations, other than the GOC, were not able to register at all³⁰; in 2005 they were granted the entitlement to register as 'legal persons' under private law (associations and foundations, and later, non-profit legal persons).

²⁶ An overview of Public Financing Provided to the Georgian Patriarchate, Transparency International Georgia, 4 July 2013;

<http://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/overview-public-financing-provided-georgian-patriarchate>

²⁷ By way of comparison in 2002 after signing the Constitutional Agreement between GOC and the State, the Ministry of Finance of Georgia allocated GEL 857,600 Georgian Lari (GEL) to the GOC. Tolerance and Diversity Institute, The Practice of the Funding of Religious Organizations by the Central and Local Government, 2014, http://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/funding_of_religious_organizations_by_the_central_and_local_government_tdi_emc_2014.pdf

²⁸ Tolerance and Diversity Institute, Study of Religious Discrimination and Constitutional Secularism in Georgia, 2014, http://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/study_of_religious_discrimination_and_constitutional_secularism_tdi.pdf

²⁹ However, religious organizations registered as legal entities under public law remained in the domain of private law. The status grants them the acknowledgment on a par with the Georgian Orthodox Church which pursuant to the Constitutional Agreement was declared a historically formed legal entity under public law. In other words, the goal of the amendment was to equalize religious entities in terms of official recognition, but at the same time, in order to distinguish religious entities from other legal entities under public law (institutions accountable to the State. i.e. ministries, public schools etc.) functionally they remained within the frame of non-profit organizations, independent from the State.

³⁰ In 2001 Supreme Court of Georgia revoked the registration of the Christian Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses.

However, this status was not satisfactory for a number of religious minority organizations as it continued to underline the inequality in terms of official recognition and hierarchical divide between the dominant religious organization (the GOC) and minority entities. Hence, in the wake of the 2011 amendments, religious organizations were given a choice to register themselves either as legal entities under public law, legal persons under private law or to stay unregistered.

The GOC strongly denounced this change³¹, Patriarch Ilia II called the law "dangerous" and condemned the hasty adoption of the amendments by the Parliament.³² This statement struck a chord with the parishioners, who led by priests, thronged to streets, flaring out Armenophobic and xenophobic speeches.³³ On the whole, the 2011 legislative changes became a subject of severe confrontation between the GOC and President Saakashvili's administration.

Another major legal change in the field of freedom of religion was exempting believers, on the grounds of conscientious objection from mandatory military service. Until 2011 believers could not even request an alternative to military service. This rule was declared unconstitutional in 2011 by the Constitutional Court of Georgia based on a claim submitted by the Ombudsman's Office. Since 2011 representatives of minority religious organizations were given the right to visit their parishioners in prison, a right previously granted exclusively to the GOC clergy.

There were also improvements in Georgian Law on General Education in 2005. The law buttressed the autonomy of educational institutions and safeguarded them from the intervention of religious institutions. Religion as a mandatory subject was removed from the curriculum and public schools were recognized as a neutral space, forbidding the religious indoctrination of students. However, despite the legislative changes, in practice, religious inculcation and the obstruction of religious neutrality at public schools continued to be problematic.

Despite the positive changes, some major problems for religious organizations remained unsolved - among them, the discriminatory tax regime and return of the property confiscated during Soviet times. In the twentieth century the Soviet government confiscated the property of all religious organizations in Georgia. After the demise of the Soviet Union, only the GOC managed to fully receive the return of its property. Pursuant to the 2002 Constitutional Agreement 'Orthodox churches, monasteries (functional or not), their remnants and the land on which they are located' were transferred to the ownership of the Patriarchate. However, the State has not concluded such an agreement or has taken any steps in regard to other religious organizations. Therefore, the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church in Georgia, the Caucasus Apostolic Administration of Latin Rite Catholics, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Georgia, Muslim and Jewish communities have been requesting the restitution of their property for years.

It is notable that during the second term of Saakashvili's presidency religious extremism still permeated deeply within the Orthodox Church. One of the notorious organizations in this regard was the Union of Orthodox Parents, founded by a representative of Patriarchate Deacon David Isakadze. This organization and its supporters have been involved in assaults on religious minorities, opposition to the construction of places of worship of different religious communities, raiding Halloween celebrations³⁴ and naming globalization and liberal values as major threats to national identity³⁵.

³¹ Patriarchate of Georgia, Statement by Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, July 2011, http://www.patriarchate.ge/en/?action=news_show&mode=news&id=225

³² Civil Georgia, Patriarch: Legislative Amendment on Religious Groups' Status 'Dangerous', July 2011, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23716>

³³ Civil Georgia, Thousands Protest Law on Religious Minorities Legal Status, July 2011, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23728>

³⁴ Mirian Jugheli (Blog), Georgia's Halloween War, October 2010, <http://mirianjugheli.com/2010/10/30/georgias-halloween-war/>

³⁵ Natalia Antelava, Georgia: Orthodoxy in the classroom, BBC, May 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32595514>

In May 2010, some members of this group and another organization, the People's Orthodox Movement, stormed the Kavkasia TV station and physically abused a number of employees, guests, as well as the head of the TV company.³⁶ The TV program on air at the time of the assault was dedicated to a book 'Holy Crap' (Saidumlo Siroba in Georgian) by a young Georgian writer Erekle Deisadze, the content of which was considered as obscene by the extremists.³⁷ The police arrested the perpetrators. However, their detention was referred to as a 'persecution of the Orthodox Christians' by some opposition parties and their supporters. The GOC called on the Georgian government to promptly adopt a law which would protect religious feelings of believers.³⁸ It is notable that the Patriarch publicly never condemned the extremists, in fact, two days after the incident, Ilia II awarded David Isakadze with an embellished cross and the right to wear a mitre. In 2010 in an interview with the BBC, to the question, "why he did not condemn the extremists", the Patriarch answered: "Because their goals are kind".³⁹

Criticism against the GOC and Media Censorship

In the early 2000s, along with the rising authority and influence of the GOC, criticism against the Orthodox clergy's reclusive nature and corruption started simmering within the progressive circles of young theologians, students and civic activists.

In 2004, 23 students of the Tbilisi Theological Academy and Seminary of the Orthodox Church, published an open letter in the 24 Hours newspaper slamming the GOC for its secrecy, increasingly fundamentalist discourse, flaws in the educational system, incompetent clergy and corrupt practices. The GOC furiously responded to the students' rebellion - most of them were expelled from the seminary; the Patriarchate also barred Deacon Basil Kobakhidze from performing religious services.⁴⁰ Initially, public discussions about the wrongdoings of the Patriarchate came forth, but were soon curtailed due to the President's involvement and his influence over TV channels encouraging them to avoid causing problems for the GOC. The media was silenced and the protest was thwarted.

Later criticism of the GOC or almost any initiative disapproved of by the Patriarchate, became a taboo in traditional media outlets. For instance, in 2009 because of the GOC's discontent, the Public Broadcaster's board suspended a TV programme called 'Great Ten', designed to identify the 'greatest Georgians' through polling of the public. The GOC considered that the format in which spiritual figures were contesting with secular figures was 'unacceptable'. The board of the Public Broadcaster decided to compromise with the Church - one of the board members said: "The opinion of the Patriarch is more important for me than the law".⁴¹ It demonstrated the GOC prevailed over the law and the freedom of speech in Georgia.

As traditional media failed to create a platform for open discussion about Church-State relationships and protected itself from possible denouncement from the Patriarchate, social networks emerged as tools to disseminate information in an alternative space and foster public debate. In 2009 protest against the Patriarchate burst out again. Video clips posted on Facebook featuring the Patriarch fuelled debates about the boundaries of freedom of expression and the limitless authority of the Church. A video called 'Mama Buasili' mocked the Patriarch for saying the 2008 Russian-Georgian war was a mistake and could

³⁶ Civil Georgia, Radical Orthodox Christian Group Stirs Fistfight in TV Station, May 2010, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22278>

³⁷ The Georgian Patriarchate also said that the publication of the controversial book was "an attempt to provoke the faithful and diminish the Church's authority". Salome Modebadze, Patriarchate comments on Holy Crap, The Messenger, May 2011, http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/2107_may_17_2010/2107_salome.html

³⁸ Civil Georgia, Church Calls for 'Law Against Indecency', May 2010, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22303>

³⁹ Heart and Soul, Rise and Rise of the Georgian Orthodox Church, September 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/player/p009hrwz#>

⁴⁰ Jean-Christophe Peuch, Georgia: Reformist Priest Blasts Church Leaders Over Intolerance, Corruption, RFE/RL, December 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1056547.html>

⁴¹ Civil Georgia, Public TV Show in Limbo after Church Meddling, January 2009, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20281>

have been avoided. Consequently, after huge public discontent, the Prosecutor's Office launched an official investigation into the creation and distribution of the clip. This investigation was assessed by civil society as a serious blow against freedom of expression in Georgia⁴².

In December 2009 a societal group composed of 235 prominent persons addressed the Government and the GOC with open questions. They enquired about the GOC's alliance with the KGB, its relationship with Russia, xenophobic statements made by the clergy and other challenging questions⁴³. The Patriarchate ignored the group and did not respond.

Confrontation between the GOC and the State

Despite the fact that Saakashvili's government embraced the GOC in symbolic acts, and used it as a source of political legitimacy. The ideological rift between the Church and the ruling party was apparent and revealed itself in a number of open confrontations.

For instance, in 2007, with the support of the local government, St. Gabriel's Church in Batumi, capital of the autonomous Adjara region, was demolished. As was later revealed, the church was being constructed without permission and despite the local government's warnings the Church Eparchy did not suspend the construction. Demolition of the church led to a huge public outcry and opposition parties slammed the government for pursuing an anti-GOC policy. After this incident, the number of politicians using the GOC as a means of denouncing Saakashvili's government surged. In 2008, the newly established Christian-Democratic Party called for Orthodox Christianity to be granted the status of state religion. The Patriarch Ilia II hosted the leaders of this political party at the Patriarchate and blessed them, however, the GOC later expressed its opposition towards the idea of adopting Orthodox Christianity as the formal state religion⁴⁴.

In 2008 the Patriarch Ilia II challenged the idea of the republic and proposed restoring the monarchy, which was dissolved in the 19th century, stating that the future monarch should be raised in the Patriarchate. After a year, with the Patriarch's blessing, two descendants of the Georgian royal family were married in Tbilisi Holy Trinity Cathedral.⁴⁵ Ultimately the plan proved unaccomplished, as the couple separated shortly after.

After the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the hostility between the GOC and state authorities unfolded around the Church's clear pro-Russian policy. The Patriarch publicly criticized the President for failing to avoid the war - "The captain of a ship must lead his vessel, being able to manoeuvre and escape reefs." Ilia II said.⁴⁶ The Patriarchate was the first to have official contact with the Russian authorities shortly after the war. In November 2008, the GOC delegation visited Moscow and met with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigory Karasin. The following month, during a 45-minute meeting with Russia's president Dmitri Medvedev, the Patriarch made it clear that politicians would not be able to undermine the unity of Georgia and Russia, two "brethren" countries. "Georgia needs a strong Russia,

⁴² Georgia: Free-Speech Debate Swirls in Tbilisi over Patriarch Parody, Molly Corso, November 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav110209a.shtml>

⁴³ Questions to the Patriarchate and the Government, newspaper "the 24 Hours" 04 December, 2009

⁴⁴ Patriarchate of Georgia, Statement by Patriarchate of Georgia, July 2008, http://www.patriarchate.ge/en/?action=news_show&mode=news&id=227

⁴⁵ Patriarchate of Georgia, The Wedding Ceremony of the Bagratons' Eighth Generation Held at Holy Trinity Cathedral, February 2008, http://www.patriarchate.ge/en/?action=news_show&mode=news&id=66

⁴⁶ RFE/RL, Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch Criticizes Saakashvili For War, October 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Georgian_Orthodox_Church_Patriarch_Criticizes_Saakashvili_For_War_/1853790.html

like Russia needs united and friendly Georgia. I think we will achieve this with the help of God," - he commented in remarks aired on Moscow radio station Echo Moskvyy.⁴⁷

To conclude, Saakashvili's tenure can be divided into two stages – the first stage, when the government to some extent tried to distance itself from the Patriarchate and responded adequately to offences committed on the grounds of religious intolerance, and the second stage when the government was attempting to express its loyalty as much as possibly towards the GOC because of the fragility of the political situation, the 2008 war with Russia, the crisis in the ruling party and charges of authoritarianism. This loyalty was shown through granting of financial preferences to the GOC, as well as during the later years of Saakashvili's tenure paying less attention to the offences committed on the grounds of religious intolerance.⁴⁸

State-Church relationship in 2012-2015

In 2012 the Orthodox clergy directly intervened in the parliamentary pre-election campaign and consequently, their support significantly contributed to the victory of the Georgian Dream coalition, and its leader Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Despite the fact that in 2012 the Holy Synod made a resolution obliging the clergy to uphold political neutrality, the GOC representatives and supporters of the opposition Georgian Dream Coalition did not obey the decision of the Synod and held a protest rally, claiming that if it was necessary they would even "take off their cassocks".⁴⁹ Afterwards, Orthodox priests continued attending pre-election demonstrations, preaching to the congregation not to vote for the United National Movement. Notably, the Holy Synod has not punished any cleric for violating its ruling. After Georgian Dream's victory in the October 2012 parliamentary elections, the representative of the GOC, Deacon Taniel Sikinchilashvili, raised a flag of the winning political party at the fence of the monastery and hailed the victory of Bidzina Ivanishvili's party as God's miracle.⁵⁰

During the pre-election campaign politicians also used religious symbols and demonstrated their allegiance to the GOC to increase their ratings. For instance, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who previously did not have the image of a devout believer, calling himself a "materialist" and one "having doubts"⁵¹ regarding his faith in God, illustrated this change in answer to a journalist's question about whether he carried a cross - he showed that he was wearing one around his neck.⁵²

Apart from declarations of commitment to the GOC, the pre-election campaign included xenophobic, Turkophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric employed by members of the Georgian Dream Coalition and their supporters. For instance, in Adjara region, that has a significant Muslim population, at a demonstration held in support of Georgian Dream, one of the speakers, the painter Kako Dzneladze, stated: "Batumi, I miss your boulevard, not that boulevard which is permeated with the smell of chorba and doner kebab".⁵³ Furthermore, Murman Dumbadze, the Georgian Dream single-seat candidate for the Batumi constituency, launched an anti-Turkey campaign protesting the building of a mosque in Batumi, and talked about an imminent threat coming from Turkey "which would claim the whole Georgia."⁵⁴ In this regard, one of the main messages sent by the oppositional party members to the

⁴⁷ Sarah Marcus, Georgian Patriarch Ilia II meets Dmitri Medvedev in Moscow, December 2008, http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/sarahmarcus/5946643/Georgian_Patriarch_Ilia_II_meets_Dmitri_Medvedev_in_Moscow/

⁴⁸ Annual Report of the Public Defender of Georgia, 2010 <http://www.ombudsman.ge/uploads/other/1/1351.pdf>

⁴⁹ 16 July 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rH_GT-I-DUc&feature=plcp

⁵⁰ Maka Dekanosidz, Father Taniel "Nationals" sign of the Lord's defeat, For.ge, http://for.ge/view.php?for_id=17453&cat=9

⁵¹ Civil Georgia, Ivanishvili: 'I Came into Politics Unprepared', <http://www.civil.ge/eng/print.php?id=24070>

⁵² Konstantine Ladarua, The Church, Ivanishvili and authority, Tabula, March 2014, <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/81550-the-church-ivanishvili-and-authority>

⁵³ Turkish foods

⁵⁴ Beka Mindiasvili, Pre-election Turkophobia, Tabula, September 2012, <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/70462-pre-election-turkophobia>

electorate was that, if the government would not change, Georgians would lose their national identity.⁵⁵ In spite of such statements, after the emergence of Bidzina Ivanishvili, some liberals expressed the hope that the new government would no longer use the GOC as a tool for political legitimacy, and finally the Georgian Dream would achieve the state-church separation.

It is notable, that in the wake of 2010 Constitutional changes, Georgia transitioned to the mixed parliamentary system in which much power shifted from the president to the office of Prime Minister. After 2012 parliamentary elections, this shift in power did not change the pattern of the relationship between the GOC and the State, however, a Prime Minister became a key political figure dividing the power and influence with the GOC.

After coming to power Ivanishvili made bold statements about the importance of the protection of minorities. He was the first senior politician to speak publically about the importance of LGBTI rights in Georgia. On 14 May 2013 he said "sexual minorities are equal citizens of this country and the society will gradually get used to it" when commenting on the upcoming rally in Tbilisi to mark the International Day Against Homophobia on May 17.⁵⁶ After several days, a huge crowd led by the Orthodox clergy, cracked down on a few dozen gay rights activists, violently dispersed the rally and physically abused them.⁵⁷ Ivanishvili in a written statement condemned the violence and said the perpetrators "will be dealt with according to the law." Over the subsequent two years, hundreds of witnesses were questioned by law enforcement bodies and the case was taken to the Tbilisi City Court, however, the Orthodox priest, Father Iotam (Irakli) Basilaia and his three supporters were acquitted in 2015.

In terms of upholding certain values, there is no coherent ideological line in Ivanishvili's statements. Along with the verbal approval of minority rights, he declared Asaval-Dasavali, the most homophobic tabloid breeding fascist ideas in Georgia, his favourite newspaper. At the same time, Ivanishvili stated that criticism of the Church should not be a taboo. After standing down as Prime Minister and becoming the unofficial ruler of the country, at the launch of his non-governmental organization 'Citizen', Ivanishvili pointed out that "problems exist" within the GOC.⁵⁸ The Patriarchate did not respond immediately, but finally after several days it published an official statement saying that "building a church does not mean being a son of the Church" (referring to Ivanishvili's funding of the construction of the Holy Trinity Church in Tbilisi). Such spats ultimately did not have any effect on the courtship of the State and Church. The government continued to give financial support to the GOC and the amount of immovable property transferred to the Patriarchate actually surged. Furthermore, the GOC attempted to establish itself as a fully-fledged political player by using its authority to oppose Georgia embracing the principles of liberal democracy.

In 2013, the government's loyalty towards the dominant religious group became obvious with respect to the approval of the Code of Self-Government. Initially, the bill proposed establishing a newly decentralized local and regional government and increasing the number of self-governing cities in Georgia. The Patriarch responded to the initiative and said it would "drive the country to destruction". Due to his criticism, hearings in the Parliament were postponed and hence the government promised to present an amended draft. The chairperson of the Committee on Protection of Human Rights and Civil Integration, Eka Beselia, noted that the "position of his Holiness is important." The bill proposed introducing the direct election of mayors of at least 17 towns, as well as heads of all municipalities.

⁵⁵ Mindaivshvili, *ibid*

⁵⁶ RFE/RL, Georgian Prime Minister Says Sexual Minorities Have Equal Rights, May 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/georgia-lgbt-equal-rights/24986492.html>

⁵⁷ Civil Georgia, Violence Against Anti-Homophobia Rally, May 2013, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26073>

⁵⁸ Civil Georgia, Ivanishvili on Georgian Orthodox Church, April 2013, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25938>

Following consultations with the GOC, the legislators finally amended some parts of the law which the GOC considered to be problematic, with regional clusters of municipalities existing in the Code being transformed into regional advisory boards.⁵⁹

In 2014, a year after these amendments, the GOC experienced something of a defeat when it challenged the adoption of the Law On Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination. The readings of the bill in the Parliament of Georgia were attended by the Orthodox clergy who vocally opposed the law which would protect minorities, respect LGBTI rights, and recognize gender equality. Archpriest David Isakadze threatened the MPs supporting the bill with anathema (expulsion from the church). Regarding the discussions over the law, the deputy Chair of the Committee on the Protection of Human Rights and Civil Integration, speaking on the Focus program on Tabula TV Gedevan Popkhadze stated that for him his religious identity was more important than his mandate as an MP. The Anti-discrimination Law was adopted despite the GOC's resistance, however the final draft included amendments which took into account some claims of the GOC. The document states that "no provision of the law can be construed to contradict the constitutional agreement between the State of Georgia and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia". Georgian non-governmental organizations criticized this step, in a joint statement they said: "We find it especially irrelevant [...] because the Constitution itself recognizes the primacy of universal principles and norms of international law over the constitutional agreement in the area of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The scope of the constitutional agreement does not transcend the relationship between its immediate signatories. Should this agreement be used for unequal treatment of other persons, this will amount to discrimination."⁶⁰

It is notable that along with the growing allegiance of state officials to the GOC since 2012, civil society became very active in protecting minority rights, especially religious minorities and the right to freedom of religion in Georgia compared to previous years. Precisely thanks to the joint efforts of local non-governmental and international organizations, the GOC's initiative to introduce a new law imposing administrative liabilities for hurting religious sentiments was finally thwarted⁶¹. In 2013 the Parliament of Georgia reviewed a bill limiting the public expression of hatred towards religious organizations, clergymen or worshippers by an individual aiming to hurt religious sentiments, by making it an administrative offence and envisaging a subsequent administrative penalty. The bill was rejected and the GOC was unable to push the law which was similar to one that was adopted in Russia.⁶²

Finally, despite some victories of civil society over the anti-liberal discourse of the GOC, 2012-2015 saw intense loyalty of state officials towards the dominant religious group which was expressed through gross violations of religious minority rights and impunity for the perpetrators.

Persecution of Religious Minorities

Since 2012 persecution, obstruction of religious services and discriminatory treatment of religious minorities became one of the main challenges in the field of freedom of religion in Georgia - especially towards Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses. Due to the State's inadequate and ineffective policy towards the hate crimes, the number of offences committed on the grounds of religious intolerance drastically increased and become widespread. In 2012-2014 six cases of violations of Muslims' rights took place in

⁵⁹ Civil Georgia, Govt Called 'Not to Yield to Attempts of Discrediting' Local Governance Reform, December 2013, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26763>

⁶⁰ Tolerance and Diversity Institute, A Joint Statement of Representatives of Civil Society and Religious Organizations Regarding the Draft Law on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, April 2015, <http://tdi.ge/en/statement/joint-statement-representatives-civil-society-and-religious-organizations-regarding-draft>

⁶¹ Civil Society Organizations Urge the Parliament against Adopting the Law that Imposes Administrative Liability for Hurting Religious Sentiments, <http://tdi.ge/en/statement/civil-society-organizations-urge-parliament-against-adopting-law-imposes-administrative>

⁶² Christopher Stroop, In Russia It Is Now a Crime to Insult Someone's Religious Feelings, September 2013, <http://religiondispatches.org/in-russia-it-is-now-a-crime-to-insult-someones-religious-feelings/>

different regions of Georgia. In Nigvziani, Tsinstkaro and Samtatskaro villages, Muslim believers were persecuted by the local Orthodox congregation. For instance in 2012, in Nigvziani in the Dedoflistkaro municipality, a group of Christian protesters gathered around the houses of Muslim residents where prayer meetings were taking place, verbally assaulted the believers and threatened to evict them from the village if they continued carrying out prayers.⁶³ In 2012 in Tsintskaro village, a group of local Orthodox Christians threatened the local Imam saying that unless he stopped his prayers, they would burn down his house and expel him from the village. After a year, in the village of Samtatskaro in Dedoplistskaro municipality, local Christians trespassed into the prayer house of Muslims, obstructed religious rituals, and threatened to burn down the Imam's house if he continued. Later, the Imam was forced to leave the village. None of these cases were properly investigated by the police giving a green light to further persecutions of the same character.

In 2013, in Chela village in the Adigeni municipality the violation of Muslim rights was even more flagrant, as the perpetrators were police officers themselves. On 26 August, by the order of the Revenue Service of Georgia, the minaret of a local mosque was dismantled without the legal basis.⁶⁴ At the same time, officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs physically abused Muslims trying to protest against the dismantling of the minaret.⁶⁵ The case was not investigated by the Prosecutor's office in Georgia. Because of the impunity of the perpetrators, persecution of Muslims continued in this municipality. In October 2014, local Muslims in Mokhe village were allegedly physically abused by the police officers whilst protesting the demolition of a half-ruined mosque. Muslim communities also reported abuse when establishing religious schools. For instance, in September 2014 in Kobuleti in the Adjara region, local Orthodox Christians slaughtered a pig and nailed its head to the front door of a Muslim boarding school to protest its opening. An investigation was launched into these cases however it has not yielded any legal results as of October 2015.

Apart from Muslims, other minorities also experienced harassment on religious grounds: the number of offenses against Jehovah's Witnesses in the first five months of 2014, almost equalled the total number of offences occurring in 2013, a year which itself had a fourfold increase compared to 2012. Also, the Pentecostal Church of Georgia was unable to celebrate the Festival of Hope in an open public space⁶⁶ and Hanukkah Celebrations were marked by an anti-Semitic demonstration by the Orthodox clergy and its supporters.⁶⁷

Another notable issue regarding freedom of religion included obstacles to securing construction permits from local municipalities for houses of worship - such permits either are not issued at all or are illegally suspended or terminated. These cases usually follow a similar pattern: Initially the local Orthodox congregation and representatives of Orthodox Christian clergy oppose the construction of houses of worship of different religious groups. Later, it appears that local municipality representatives take into consideration the claims of the Orthodox believers and, by using artificially created barriers, discriminate against minorities on religious grounds. Such discrimination is usually not identified by State bodies or the courts.

⁶³ Georgian Journal, Confrontation in Nigvziani between locals and Muslim community, November 2012, http://www.georgianjournal.ge/news/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20934:confrontation-in-nigvziani-between-locals-and-muslim-community&catid=13:society&Itemid=75

⁶⁴ Civil Georgia, Authorities Remove Minaret Forcibly, Sparking Muslim Community's Protest, August 2013, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26386>

⁶⁵ Tolerance and Diversity Institute, The study of Religious Discrimination and Constitutional Secularism in Georgia, 2014, http://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/study_of_religious_discrimination_and_constitutional_secularism_tdi.pdf

⁶⁶ Tolerance and Diversity Institute, Statement of NGO-s Regarding the Hope Festival, June 2014, <http://tdi.ge/en/statement/statement-ngo-s-regarding-hope-festival>

⁶⁷ Tolerance and Diversity Institute, The study of Religious Discrimination and Constitutional Secularism in Georgia, 2014, Ibid, (see Incident at Hanukkah Holiday p77)

Due to the State's reluctance to recognize Muslims presence in the public space, Muslims in 2015 were denied permission to construct a second mosque in Batumi, the capital of Adjara region. Furthermore, in 2014 the State Agency for Religious Issues was established under the office of the Prime Minister. The analyses of the practice of the Agency shows that the religious policy of the state is oriented not at a solution for the persistent and acute problems for religious minorities in Georgia, but at strengthening control over religious entities and curtailing their functions. By establishing this body, the State declared that up to now religious policy was focused "only on the protection of religious minorities, while along with the protection of interests of religious groups it is necessary to include the discourse of internal and external security." The strategy of the Agency aims at adopting a special law on religious organizations, establishing hierarchical differences between them and imposing new regulations in different fields.⁶⁸ It is notable that this Soviet-like state structure, dedicated exclusively to religious affairs, was established without consulting a wide range of religious entities, the Ombudsman's office and non-governmental organizations working in this field.

Additionally, instead of deconstructing the discriminatory practice of state funding of the GOC, the government initiated a new rule for the state funding of four additional religious organizations, called the "partial compensation of the damages inflicted on religious organizations during the Soviet times". However, the four religious groups (Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholics, Muslims and Jewish communities) were chosen arbitrarily, and other entities which also experienced damages during the Soviet repressions were omitted from the list. It creates the impression, that the government's initiative to allocate state subsidies for the additional four religious organizations aims at legitimizing the long-established practice of subsidizing the Patriarchate, impinging on the autonomy of religious minorities and by bribing them, to silence them about the acute problems regarding freedom of religion.

Additionally, it can be said, that unlike with the Saakashvili years, the period of the Georgian Dream's tenure is not marked by an ideological confrontation between the GOC and the government. Along with the softening of the government's pro-Western discourse and finding ways to establish friendly relationship with Russia, pro-Russian sentiments are heavily emanating from the GOC. The narrative of two countries 'having the same-faith' was always prevailing inside the GOC, however, it became promoted by the Orthodox clergy even more actively. In 2013 during his visit to Moscow, at the meeting with Vladimir Putin, Patriarch Ilia II asserted that the war in 2008 was a "mistake" and it was neither the fault of Russia, nor Georgia, but of "particular persons" (implying President Saakashvili). "The love between Georgia and Russian will be eternal" -said Ilia II and called Putin a "wise person."⁶⁹ Considering the Patriarch's attitudes towards Russia and his favoritism of totalitarian leaders, this statement should not sound surprising. In 2013 in an interview with *Caucasian Politics* he even praised Josef Stalin, saying that he "was an outstanding person, such people are rarely born. He was realizing the world importance of Russia [...] He was religious person, especially in his late years, I think so."⁷⁰

To conclude, the current government has a clear position towards the GOC - one the one hand, it pursues the previous tendency of granting privileges to the GOC, and on the other hand, it turns a blind eye to the violence committed by the majority. It has a clear position towards minorities as well. By establishing the State Agency for Religious Affairs, it tries to control religious minority

⁶⁸ Tolerance and Diversity Institute, The Assessment of the Strategy for the Development of Religious Policy of the State of Georgia, July 2015, <http://tdi.ge/en/news/216-assessment-strategy-development-religious-policy-state-georgia>

⁶⁹ Tabula, Ilia II: Putin Will Do Everything For Us to Remain Friends, January 2013, <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/63727-ilia-meore-putini-kvelafers-gaaketebs-imisatvis-rom-dzmebad-davrchet>

⁷⁰ Netgazeti, Ilia II: I Love Russia Very Much, Stalin Was A Believer, July 2013, <http://www.netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/22214/>

organizations and its policy focuses on this issue from the perspective of security, rather than protecting their rights.

Overall, what the GOC is striving for today is a political recognition of its function and role. This aim and desire led the Orthodox clergy to the streets on May 17th 2013 to disperse human rights activists and to demonstrate its political power. Currently there is no other political group capable of mobilizing so many people as the GOC. In this regard, it will be interesting to observe the 2016 parliamentary elections as those political groups who pursue a pro-Russian policy openly demonstrate their allegiance to the GOC.