



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

# POLICY BRIEF

May 2018 / Issue #14

## Church and Politics or Church in Politics: How does the Georgian Orthodox Church Impact Georgia's European Integration Policy?

Vladimer Narsia \*

### Executive Summary

This policy brief analyzes the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in Georgian society, particularly in the context of promoting the European integration process. The paper consists of three sections: sermons and preaching that influence European integration policy; the Church-State nexus as a non-secular alliance; and the weak international links of the GOC. All three sections look at the GOC from the perspective of its level of support for Georgia's European integration policy. While Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II can be considered an ecumenical and equivalently a European minded leader based on some of his statements, his position has not been shared by all Georgian primates<sup>1</sup> and, in this paper, this ambiguity is considered a threat for the state's European policy. Overall, the paper assumes that the GOC is in the primary stage of developing a clearer and more lucid positive role, which would allow it to avoid polarizing the society over the critical question of the European policy.

---

\* Vladimer Narsia - Canon Lawyer, Cardiff University, UK. Chairman of Religious Dialogue for Peace in Georgia.

<sup>1</sup> Primates are priests of very high rank in the Christian Church.

## Introduction

Georgia's European integration policy is more than a political agenda; it also impacts social and cultural issues in the country, areas that traditionally fall under the influence of the GOC. The position of the Church is widely acknowledged and accepted in public debates in Georgian society, which makes it an important factor in the European integration process, as voters<sup>2</sup> may be influenced by anti-Western primates' moods and their sermons against Europe.

This policy brief examines the GOC as a civil institution, which can serve the purpose of social consolidation or integration. That means that the Georgian government's policy toward the Church, as well as the role of the Church as a supporting institution in the country's European integration policy, are viewed as decisive in order to achieve the level of social harmony required to achieve the government's aspiration to join the European family. Any delayed response to these sensitive issues could lead to the grievous result of splitting and polarizing society.

## Sermons and Preaching

In Georgian society clerics carry considerable weight. Their commands are respected by thousands of believers and quite often are taken as "priestly" advice without question. This tendency has been warmly welcomed by government officials. In this context, it is necessary to pay special attention to the sermons<sup>3</sup> that cultivating fears in Georgian society and present Europe as a threat for Georgian spiritual traditions.<sup>4</sup> The Holy Synod does not refute these sermons or clerics, which gives critics a basis to claim that GOC officially supports this position. Patriarch Ilia II follows the ongoing discussion<sup>5</sup> concerning the European integration process and, at times, speaks in favor of Georgia's alignment with the EU. But not all of his statements support the integration process. In 2014 he strongly opposed the anti-discrimination law, which was viewed as a necessary step to secure the Association Agreement between EU and Georgia.<sup>6</sup> Primates are also concerned about the growing tendency of Georgians receiving their higher education in Europe. It was rather confusing when the Patriarch Ilia II expressed worries for young people receiving an education abroad. He called on Georgian parents to not send their children abroad by pointing to Canada, and implicitly Western culture, as a threat for Georgian

---

<sup>2</sup> National Democratic Institute's poll (2017, June). Available at:

[https://new.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll\\_June\\_2017\\_Political\\_ENG\\_final.pdf](https://new.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_June_2017_Political_ENG_final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> DFWatch. (2014, April 30). Orthodox Church against EU in Georgian parliament, Available at:

<http://dfwatch.net/orthodox-church-against-eu-in-georgian-parliament-57404-28332>

<sup>4</sup> (2018). მკუფე სპირიტუალური 17 მასობის შესახებ. [Online Video]. (2018, May 23). Available from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYcAd0AwOxQ>. (Accessed: 16 January 2018).;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21Kq0HypGX4>

<sup>5</sup> Patriarch's response to Mr. Stefan Fule: "...I want to tell you that I am convinced in that for a long time already.

See: Civil Georgia. (2014, March 4). Patriarch: 'Church Will Do Everything to Make Georgia EU Member. Available at:

<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27008>

<sup>6</sup> Civil Georgia. (2014, April 28). Georgian Church Speaks Out Against Anti-Discrimination Bill. Available at:

<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27175>

traditions.<sup>7</sup> Metropolitan Ioane Gamrekeli echoed the same concerns in 2015: “Instead of the verbal promises Europe demands from us, morally unacceptable relationships are to be acknowledged as a legal norm.”<sup>8</sup> The effective EU and NATO introductory programs organized by the [Center for Development and Democracy](#) (CDD) can be considered as a successful policy in response to the Church’s antagonist position toward Europe, illustrated by the Primate’s sermons.<sup>9</sup> But the locum tenens for Patriarch Illia II, Metropolitan Shio Mujiri, is still vague about his position on European values, based on his sermon concerning post-modernism and the European scholarly tradition.<sup>10</sup> To sum up, Georgian primates appear to offer tepid support for the government’s Euro-integration policy. The Holy Synod has made dozens of offensive sermons about Europe,<sup>11</sup> however, which may negatively impact on the European Integration process rather than support it due to the Church influence over the Georgian society.

## Church-State Alliance

The concept of secularism demands the separation of church and state at the institutional level. Even though the Georgian constitution stresses the principle of separation, its practical implementation is problematic and such founding principles are often misinterpreted by the Georgian authorities. Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili criticized secularism in its classical sense in 2017: “We believe that our nation features a unique model [of church-state relations] in the world.”<sup>12</sup> The medieval model known as “Church-State Symphony” is still alive in the modern theo-political discourse in Georgia and is often used by religious and political leaders to strengthen their established power. Previously, the Patriarch of Georgia also emphasized the role of religion in Georgian politics as an immutable fact and important for democratic society.<sup>13</sup>

Since 1990s the stagnancy in Church-State relationships defends the status quo for GOC to become involved in the Georgian politics. For example, in 2017 the Patriarch’s proposal to discuss the idea of reinstating the constitutional monarchy was immediately endorsed by Georgian

---

<sup>7</sup> Civil Georgia. (2010, October 3). Patriarch: 'Refrain from Sending Kids Abroad for Education. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22722>

<sup>8</sup> Social Media: Facebook account- [The Georgian Way](#).

<sup>9</sup> [CDD](#). (2017). Georgian Orthodox Church visits in Brussels. [Online Video]. 2 January 2017. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btES1DiotG8&feature=youtu.be>. (Accessed: 16 January 2018); See also: “Georgia: Project Aims To Boost Orthodox Church’s Support For EU Integration”. Available at:

<http://gip.ge/georgia-project-aims-to-boost-orthodox-churchs-support-for-eu-integration/>

<sup>10</sup> Patriarch’s meeting with clergies and psychologists. 09 Mar 2018. See: <http://patriarchate.ge/geo/katolikos-patriarqis-shexvedra-samghvdeleobastan-da/> [Accessed: 11 March 2018]

<sup>11</sup> Lekso Gelashvili. (2018). About Anti-Discrimination Law. [Online Video]. 1 May 2014. Available from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxwDmzoWihU&t=1432s+&+https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv=diu\\_PDillvw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxwDmzoWihU&t=1432s+&+https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv=diu_PDillvw). [Accessed: 16 January 2018].

<sup>12</sup> Civil Georgia. (2017, July 26). CSOs: PM Kvirikashvili’s Church Statements ‘Irresponsible’, Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30295>

<sup>13</sup> “Kviris Palitra” N31 (224) 2-8 August 1999, p. 8.

authorities,<sup>14</sup> just as the debate over the decriminalization of drugs<sup>15</sup> was suspended following a proposal by the Church.<sup>16</sup> In both cases, the GOC has managed to exert influence on Georgian politics.

Since 2012 clerical interference in political affairs has become increasingly obvious. Clergies expect the authorities to make decisions in accordance with their confessional viewpoints, mainly anti-Western, arguing that: EU is an attack against Orthodoxy; if we are Orthodox, we should be aligned with Russia, not Europe, etc.<sup>17</sup> Even the Patriarch himself has praised the Russian President Vladimir Putin by saying that “Putin is a wise man who will remedy the situation in Georgia.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in 2014 the Georgian government created the precedent of restoring a soviet-like institution, the State Agency for Religious Issues. The institution is keen to conduct oversight on religions, mainly minorities – an approach, which has been repeatedly criticized by religious communities and civil society<sup>19</sup>.

To summarize, the Church-State relationship in Georgia is closer to the medieval concept of partnership than the secular principles of institutional separation. Political and religious thought is of a particular concern of Church-State overlap. The Georgian government still lacks the readiness to exercise decision-making freedom, especially on issues where religion has a place but not legitimate power. In democratic states government officials separate their personal opinions about religious leaders from public policy. Their viewpoint can be taken along with others or simply rejected.

## Weak international links

For the GOC, international links are essential to escape from Russian isolationism. Furthermore, it will be helpful for the Georgian government as well if the GOC makes supportive statements in various international religious forums regarding the state’s European integration policy. However, on May 20, 1997 GOC left the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Conference of European Churches (CEC), two of the leading European church forums and subsequently became a victim of Russian propaganda.<sup>20</sup> Today the GOC is reluctant to actively participate in any ecumenical or inter-faith dialogue formats. For instance, primates from the GOC are taking

---

<sup>14</sup> Jam News, (2017, June 19) Long live the king! Possible restoration of monarchy considered in Georgia! Available at: <https://jam-news.net/?p=44987>

<sup>15</sup> First Channel. (2018, January 12). Patriarchate believes that discussion on drug decriminalization should be suspended. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/patriarchate-believes-discussion-drug-decriminalization-suspended/>

<sup>16</sup> First Channel. (2018, January 12). Irakli Kobakhidze - Discussion on drug policy should be continued with everyone, including the Patriarchate. Available, at: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/irakli-kobakhidze-discussion-drug-policy-continued-everyone-including-patriarchate/>

<sup>17</sup> MDF Georgia. See: Ant-Western Propaganda: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/Antidasavluri-ENG-web.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Zviadauri Iliia, (2013, April 15). The Georgian Orthodox Church: Some Aspects of Its Rhetoric and Practice. Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 10 Issue: 70 Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-georgian-orthodox-church-some-aspects-of-its-rhetoric-and-practice/>

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) Review: Available at : [https://emc.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/February\\_July\\_2016.pdf](https://emc.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/February_July_2016.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> World Council of Church. (2004, January 1). Country Profile: Georgia. Available at: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/justice-diakonia-and-responsibility-for-creation/ecumenical-solidarity/country-profile-georgia>

part in the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue, as one of the ecumenical forums today. This commission issues official theological documents, which have been signed by all its participants including the GOC<sup>21</sup>, but the documents are never easily accessible if at all on the Church official web-pages and the events are not publicized. Furthermore, the Patriarch of Georgia has issued an extraordinary supportive call for Georgian Catholics living in the southern part of Georgia, stating: “Don’t forget that we are the same as we believe in one God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,”<sup>22</sup> but this position has not been supported by the official position of the GOC. For example, when fundamentalist GOC groups accused the Roman Catholic Pope of being a heretic during his 2016<sup>23</sup> visit to Tbilisi, the Church did not punish any member of the group.

The pan-Orthodox relationship is one of the main concerns of the GOC. In 2016 the GOC suddenly refused to participate in the Crete Council without providing a real explanation.<sup>24</sup> This came as a surprise to many Orthodox leaders and the Constantinople Patriarchate,<sup>25</sup> because the inter-faith and even pan-Orthodox relationships are assumed as a way of separating from Russian isolationism in which the GOC has been living for centuries.

Besides, the GOC does not promote Western theological studies. Those who receive diplomas from leading Western theological universities are denied positions in the GOC.

In brief, interfaith dialogue promotes the European values of mutual cooperation to come together across lines of faith and culture. This is a courageous call for religions in 21<sup>st</sup> century, which breaks isolation and creates opportunities to learn how to coexistence. If it does not accept this dialogue, the GOC would be isolated from rest of the Christendom and abandoned only to the Russian Theo-imperialistic ideology, that employs the eschatological concept of the Russian state featuring as the “third (and the last) Rome”.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ecupatria. (2016, October 16). International Commission for Anglican–Orthodox Theo-logical Dialogue Communiqué. Available at: <https://www.ecupatria.org/2016/10/06/international-commission-for-anglican-orthodox-theological-dialogue-communique/>

<sup>22</sup> Journal *Jvari Vazisa*. Ed. 1998 (1). p.4. (Sermons taken in the villages, called: Ude and Araly)

<sup>23</sup> Euronews. (2016). Pope Francis takes first trip to Georgia, but not everyone is happy. [Online Video]. 16 January 2018. Available from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iX\\_GPNKsV0o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iX_GPNKsV0o). [Accessed: 16 January 2018].

<sup>24</sup> Holy Council. 2016. Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. Available at: <https://www.holycouncil.org/>

<sup>25</sup> Interview of the Constantinople Patriarchate on TV Imedi. (2017, December 17) Available at: <https://www.imedi.ge/ge/video/18694/konstantinopolis-patriarqis-bartlome-pirvelis-eqskluziuri-interviu-imedis-kvirashi>

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This policy brief presents a bird-eye view of the main problems on a specific set of issues. Based on this analysis, several conclusions can be drawn. First, GOC does not have a well-structured position toward the country's Europeanisation process. This may negatively impact public opinion about the State's euro-integration policy. Second, the modern practice of church-state relations in Georgia does not follow the principles of the separation of church and state that are guaranteed by the Georgian Constitution. These principles are abrogated by government officials who accept the Church's position as "priestly" advice. Finally, the Georgian Orthodox Church's isolationist, inter-faith policy negatively affects the European integration process, inter alia promoting western values in the Georgian society.

➤ **Recommendations for the GOC:**

- The Holy Synod should respond to inappropriate sermons.
- Ecumenical cooperation of the GOC should be publicly reported.
- Cooperation with advanced European universities should be improved.
- A social doctrine, created in cooperation with the public sector, should be considered a high priority.

➤ **Recommendations for the government:**

- The "awkward marriage" between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the government should be modified according to secular principles.
- The Soviet policy regarding religious control, which is conducted by the State Agency for Religious Issues, must end. The State Agency must only function as a promoter of inter-religious activity and a facilitator of state-religion affairs.
- The government needs to take steps to make sure that inter-religious study is taken seriously at schools and universities to promote the cultural and religious mediation process and support tolerance in Georgia's multi-religious society.

➤ **Recommendation for civil society:**

- The social doctrine, a manual for the GOC that outlines its relation with the "outer realm," (the state and civil society) should be written in cooperation with the public sector. The document should cover the following issues: Church-State relationships; Church and Nationality; Christian Ethics and Human Rights; Church and Secular Education; Christian Family and Morality; Church and Culture; Church and Inter-Faith/Inter-Religious Dialogue; Church and Bioethics and etc.

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Institute of Politics.

**HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:**

Vladimer Narsia. "Church and Politics or Church in Politics: How does the Georgian Orthodox Church Impact Georgia's European Integration Policy?", Policy Brief No. 14, Georgian Institute of Politics, May 2018.

© Georgian Institute of Politics, 2018

Tel: +995 599 99 02 12

Email: [info@gip.ge](mailto:info@gip.ge)

[www.gip.ge](http://www.gip.ge)