



## CAN THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS?

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia aspires to join the European Union and reclaim its place in the European family. To do so, however, the country is obligated to transition to a more democratic government, a process known as democratization. The process of democratization is not an easy one: the reforms force society to rethink long-held beliefs and traditions, and are often the subject of a public debate, which powerful groups seek to influence. The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) is one such group. Repeatedly named as the most trusted institution in the country, the GOC's stance on democracy-related issues and reforms has already impacted political decision-making on a number of occasions. There is little doubt that, if properly engaged, the GOC could become a significant asset for the democratization process due to its ability to influence Georgian society and impact the country's political agenda. This policy paper\* analyses the attitudes, values and behavior of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the context of democratization and explores potential ways to engage the GOC in the reform process, as well as include it in public and political debates.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE POWERFUL INFLUENCE OF THE GOC

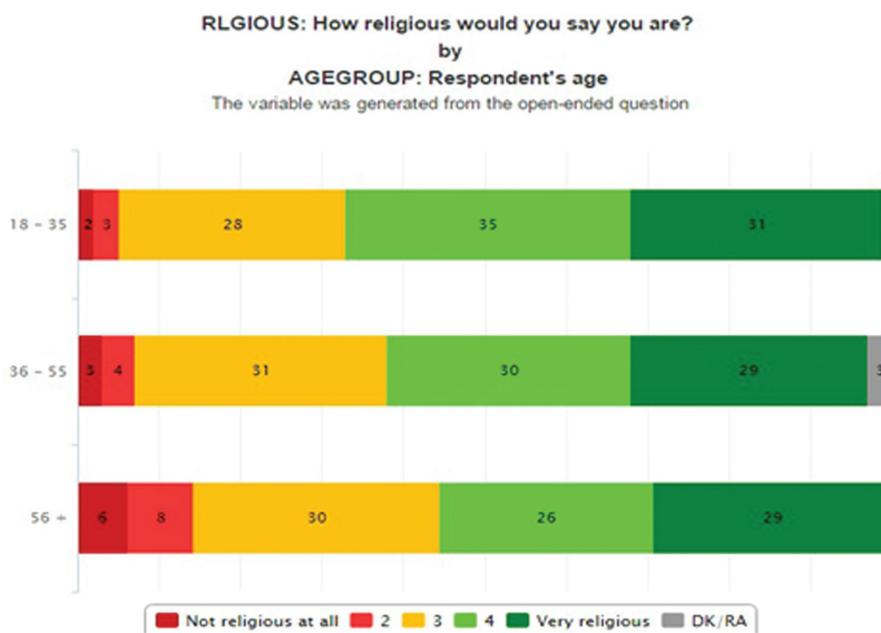
On December 5, 2015, the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ilia II, said that the patriarch should have a right to grant pardon to convicts. The initiative received warm support from some members of government, as well as MPs, despite the fact that, under the Georgian Constitution, only the president can issue pardons.<sup>1</sup> Other officials slammed the idea, however, and the patriarchy stepped back the following day, stating Ilia II had never intended his comments to be taken as a legal initiative. But the willingness some high-ranking officials displayed to act on the patriarch's words, notwithstanding the division of church and state in the Georgian Constitution, underscored the blurred lines between politics and religion in Georgia. The division of church and state is a fundamental element in democracy building, and a prerequisite for Georgia to reach its declared foreign policy goal of EU membership and the fulfillment of the Association Agreement.

Within Georgia's fragile division of church and state, the role of the influential Georgian Orthodox Church becomes all the more important for the country's democratization process. The GOC is capable of not only spreading its position in various areas of society, but also, to some extent, influencing the political agenda.

The GOC's authority is based on the Georgian public's increased religiosity. And with 81% of the Georgian population considering themselves to be members of Orthodox Church, according to the 2013 Caucasus Barometer survey, the latest data available, the country is one of the top five most religious nations<sup>2</sup> in the world.

Of those who view themselves as members of the GOC, 95% believe religion plays an important role in their lives.<sup>3</sup> Even more telling, the younger generation – aged 18-35 – tends to be more religious than people over 35 (graph).<sup>4</sup>

The GOC's special status in the Georgian Constitution adds to its role. In 2002, the Georgian Orthodox Church was granted multiple privileges, including exception from tax, under an agreement known as the Concordat. The deal extended to education and culture, and outlined the state and Church's obligation to 'jointly care' for the country's cultural heritage.<sup>5</sup> In addition, if schools or other educational institutions opt to teach Orthodoxy, it is the GOC's prerogative to set the agenda and select the teachers.<sup>6</sup> The GOC has signed subsequent agreements with the education and justice ministries to implement the powers set out in the Concordat.<sup>7</sup>



CRRC. (2013). Caucasus Barometer Georgia.

### THE GOC: THE POWER TO ASSIST OR HINDER DEMOCRATIZATION

Due to the GOC's high degree of authority, it can either significantly contribute or hinder democratization, and therefore, the Europeanization process. The Church holds an ambivalent position on issues pertaining to democracy, however.

On the one hand, it has strongly opposed several attempts to include liberal democratic values in Georgian legislation. For example, in 2011, Patriarch Ilia II protested an amendment in the civil code that gave religious minority groups the right to be registered as legal entities of public law. The Church condemned the law, saying the amendment was at odds with the interests of both the state and the Church.<sup>8</sup>

A Church-led protest, largely stemming from the fear that the law would undermine the GOC's position over the ownership of several disputed churches – particularly those contested by the Armenian Church – preceded the amendment. Yet another example occurred in 2014, when the GOC actively opposed the adoption of the Anti-Discrimination Law. Members of the clergy even personally engaged in parliamentary plenary meetings, arguing that equal rights for sexual minorities and gender equality was contrary to moral principles.<sup>9</sup>

In both cases, the changes were eventually accepted by parliament and ultimately adopted. The final version of the anti-discrimination bill, however, was considerably changed before it was introduced. The final version removed the idea of establishing the inspector institution and made discrimination punishable only in circumstances when it did not conflict with public morality and the constitutional agreement with the GOC.<sup>10</sup> Civil society was outraged by the changes, as parliament appeared to be appeasing the Church at the expense of the country's democratization.

The legislative changes were linked to the country's choice of democracy, and were part of the EU's demands under the roadmap for the Association Agreement.

In the eyes of the GOC, however, these chang-

es undermine Georgian values –they are perceived as the 'impure values' of the West and part of a larger plot to rob Georgia of its sacred role as a protector of Orthodox traditions. At the meeting with the patriarch, EU commissioner Stefan Fule had to clarify that EU membership does not mean eroding Georgian traditions.<sup>11</sup>

The Church, however, has shied away from openly protesting Georgia's aim of Western integration.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, when it comes to specifically stating its position on integration, the official GOC discourse is rather ambivalent<sup>13</sup>. Despite publicly disapproving of some Western values, Patriarch Ilia II has stated that the Church will do everything it can to support Georgia's EU membership.<sup>14</sup>

The GOC's puzzling and ambiguous position raises an important question about its role in the democratization process: to what extent is its ideological stand compatible with the principles of liberal democracy? It opens up several questions: Can the GOC contribute or only inhibit democratization and the country's goal of Western integration? To what extent is it possible for the state and the Church to maintain a harmonious relationship? What measures should be considered to ensure the Church's positive inclusion in development processes?

### THE GOC COMPATIBILITY WITH LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The Georgian Orthodox Church primarily exercises influence through its discourse on national identity, which gives excessive emphasis on traditions and customs– within the confines of the Orthodox faith. For example, Patriarch Ilia II proposed that the national values defined by famous Georgian public figure Ilia Chavchavadze, motherland, language, religion, be reformulated as God, motherland and human,<sup>15</sup> changing the neutral 'religion' to the pro-Orthodox idea of God. Thus, the GOC's version of national ideology is rather exclusive. Although non-ethnic Georgians who suffered for Christianity in Georgia are also considered to be Georgian, "those Georgians who lead non-Christian way (lifestyle) cannot be part of the Georgian idea".<sup>16</sup> Correspondingly, the Church understands the

foundation of 'Georgianness' to be based on two pillars: spiritual values (Christianity and customs) and national-cultural values<sup>17</sup>.

Based on the idea of Orthodoxy as the unique civilization and privilege, the GOC seeks a privileged status on the religious market. As the patriarch stated in 1997, "only the Orthodox Church maintains the true and original teaching of Christianity"<sup>18</sup>. In this context, even though the GOC acts in the name of the Georgian people, it represents the majority, but just one religious group. In the cases of religious conflict with local Muslims, for example in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro in Autumn 2012, the Church not only monopolized the situation, but the agreements it initiated breached the rights of religious minorities, according to the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC).<sup>19</sup>

In general, the GOC claims that it does not oppose democracy as such. But it maintains there is an ambivalent linkage between the notions of liberalism and democracy: according to the Patriarch, "liberalism without the right religious and national ideology" is considered as a bearer of "pseudo-democracy" and a threat to the country.<sup>20</sup> In the Georgian context, the GOC believes that some pro-Western politicians are acting against the unique essence of the Georgian nation in the name of democracy.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the GOC promotes religious nationalism,<sup>22</sup> which is seen as the only path for the survival of the Georgian nation. That means the rule of law is considered important only in so far as the law is based on a moral agenda. As the patriarch stated, "the rule of law is particularly underlined nowadays in Georgia. Therefore the types of adopted laws largely define economic and social circumstances, as well as the spiritual condition of the people. [...] The government should bear in mind that adopted state laws should not oppose the sacred laws".<sup>23</sup>

In general, the idea of liberalism is looked upon rather critically by the Church<sup>24</sup>. Also known as postmodernism, the GOC defines this concept as total freedom, i.e. allowing any type of action, an idea that is unacceptable for Christianity. The patriarch has frequently stressed that the two ideas are essentially in conflict: "freedom of choice in pseudo-liberalism implies that

all values are equally good. On the other hand, Christianity teaches us the difference between good and bad, although it allows us to choose between them. I respect your choice but not any choice. Everything is allowed in Christianity, but not everything is good".<sup>25</sup>

This position provides the foundation for the GOC's attitudes and the values it promotes, including intolerance for sexual minorities and gender equality. On May 17, 2013 there was a violent attack against fifty activists who had gathered to rally in support of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. An angry mob was led by clergymen in the name of protecting the nation and religiosity. The mob's actions were widely criticized, but Patriarch Ilia II's decision to mark the day as the 'day of strength of family and respect of parents',<sup>26</sup> instead of honoring the international day for sexual minorities, was accepted. The rights of minorities are viewed as a threat in parts of Georgian society: in 2014 the patriarch gave voice to their fears when he said "we are told that minority rights should be protected, but who will protect majority, who will protect Georgian people?".<sup>27</sup>

The GOC sees its role as the protector of the Georgian nation as a whole, under the umbrella of Orthodox Christianity. That means the Church's main responsibility encompasses all of society and supersedes the idea of individual salvation. That is exemplified by the frequent use of collective concepts in the Church's preaching. For example, the idea that the notion of family is the basis for the Georgian nation, means that concepts like gender equality and equality for sexual minorities are a threat that could potentially undermine the nation.<sup>28</sup> The Georgian public has repeatedly expressed a high level of trust in the Church, which empowers its narrative as an institute that can dictate<sup>29</sup> moral standards and customs in society. The GOC's power to mobilize people was evident during clergy-led demonstrations in 2011 and 2013 - and the impression was strengthened when the patriarch's appeal for calm was enough to send the protesters home. At times of societal conflict, the Georgian people side with the Church. Surveys conducted after the 2011 protests show that after the clergy-led demonstrations, 80% of the

population that was aware of the amendment supported the idea that the Parliament should have consulted the Church before adopting the law.<sup>30</sup> This trend indicates that the Georgian public is torn between the notions of democracy and tradition, which are presented in religious discourse as being in opposition to each other. Whereas Georgians widely support the notion of democracy, at the same time democracy is not unconditional: CRRC surveys have found that when democracy-linked values clash with traditions, respondents expect the government to prioritize traditions at the expense of freedom.<sup>31</sup> For example, a larger number of voters supported the idea that the government should restrict the publishing of any information that contradicts traditions. Fewer voters believed that the decision to publish any information is the publisher's sole responsibility and the government should not be involved.

On the other hand, two points should be noted. First, the Church is anything but a homogeneous institution. Even though the majority of the clergy echo the positions defined by the patriarch and wider Church leadership, there are individuals whose views diverge from the dominant group and are closer to the liberal ideas. It is worth noting that the GOC leadership itself also preaches about some political and civic values that could be linked to democratization, including the appeal that each citizen should participate in the law-making<sup>32</sup> process, as well as the patriarch's emphasis on the importance of hard work and education, respect for the state and public order, and care for public property.

### GOC SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

The GOC is active in a wide variety of social issues, especially in terms of education, charities and social funds. The Church is also involved in business. The patriarchate had founded at least 84 non-commercial legal entities, including four universities, five seminaries, 25 schools, eight social institutions, 16 charity and development funds and 16 cultural and spiritual institutions, according to 2014 data, the latest information available. These include about ten shelters,

which serve an estimated 1000-1500 children, as well as charity centers for elderly people, like shelters and soup kitchens.<sup>33</sup> The patriarchate also has a center dedicated to social issues, such as a rehabilitation for drug addicts, as well as a center for deaf children. In addition, the GOC has an agreement with the Ministry of Justice to work with people on probation and released prisoners,<sup>34</sup> who the Church employs in activities like constructing churches.<sup>35</sup>

The lack of information and budget transparency make it difficult to assess the extent of the Church's charitable works. For the past three years, the Church has received 25 million GEL from the annual state budget. One of the few reports available, from 2013, indicates that 75% of the budgetary transfer is spent on religious education. However, the report is not detailed or well documented. On the other hand, out of the municipal funding that the Church also receives, only 1% is spent on social projects, 19% on construction and decorating of churches and 8% on purchase of religious objects. The rest is not documented.<sup>36</sup>

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is apparent that some aspects of the GOC's ideology ostensibly contradict, rather than encourage, liberal democracy principles. The Church's high level of authority and strong position in Georgian society, however, mean it is imperative to engage it in democratization, as well as Europeanization, processes. The GOC should not be isolated from the development processes and the country's advancement toward the Western integration. Rather, the Church must be included in a way that yields a positive contribution to the process. The Church has tremendous power to shape people's opinion, as well as to organize their collective action, which results in community-level changes. There are multiple ways different groups of the society and the government could put this to good use. However, considering the pitfalls in the Church's stance in terms of liberal democracy, engagement with the patriarchy should be transparent and open. Ideally, cooperation would take place within a forum organized by the government or civil so-

ciety, which engages open-minded groups from the GOC and other religious organizations.

In addition, it is essential to maintain open lines of communication with the Church and its leadership, principally in order to inform and engage them in discussions that foster a mutual understanding about the importance of democratic values.

In fact, some institutionalized relations between the government and the Orthodox Church exist, although they do not entirely meet the objectives laid out in this report. A commission on “Matters Considered by the Constitutional Agreement,” which is overseen by the prime minister, and includes members of the clergy and the government, was created in 2012. But its working groups focus on issues like establishing the status of churches abroad and investigating the origins of cultural monuments, among other matters.<sup>37</sup> Another institution is the State Agency for Religious Issues, which was established in 2014 with the goal of recommending religious policies to the prime minister. Its projects have not been defined yet and, although the agency includes meetings with the Church leadership, it is unknown to what extent these meetings are informative for the Church – particularly concerning democratic values and foreign policy choices. It is also unclear what forms the meetings take, and if they occur regularly<sup>38</sup>.

Therefore, there are several additional ways the Georgian state and civil society could engage the Georgian Orthodox Church:

1. Engage Georgian state and Georgian Orthodox Church in an institutionalized dialogue to inform the church on the state’s vision and goals:

- The president’s administration should arrange annual meetings with the Church leadership to discuss church-state relations or other relevant issues under consideration in public;

- The Georgian Foreign Ministry and Office of the State Minister of Georgia on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration should initiate meetings with the Church leadership to share attitudes/opinions about Georgia’s European

course and exchange information.

2. Engage the EU representatives in Georgia and Georgian Orthodox Church in a dialogue to inform the Church about Georgia’s anticipated path of development and intended changes:

- The EU representatives in Georgia should invite and engage Church officials to meetings regarding religious and other values in order to avoid alienating the GOC. This would also provide damage control for the image of Europe and demystify EU values.

- EU representatives, when visiting Georgia, should engage in a dialogue with the Patriarch in the same manner they engage with officials from the Georgian government so Church remains informed.

3. Establishing a dialogue between the Georgian Orthodox Church and civil society on community and public service issues to increase effectiveness:

- CSOs can organize joint activities with the Church over issues of public concern (sanitation, taking care of greenery, other common neighborhood concerns), health and developmental fund-raising;

- CSOs can organize common activities with the church to provide public training in transferable skills, as well as vocational training, as the Church already provides such trainings, including handcraft courses.

4. The Public Defender’s Office should initiate a dialogue between the GOC and representatives of other denominations in Georgian order to increase communication between them and decrease antagonism.

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