



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

POLICY BRIEF

May 2017 / Issue #8

The Georgian Orthodox Church as a Civil Actor: Challenges and Capabilities

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Abstract

Religious organizations as civil actors with social capital can play significant roles in social reform processes, examples of which being the African Church in South Africa and representatives of the Catholic Church in Latin America.** The Importance of churches as civil actors increases in those countries where the process of democratic transition is in progress and in which the civil sector is weak and disorganized. The church, in contrast to the civil sector, has surpluses of reputation, organizational skills, and autonomy. Those are precisely the qualities that characterize the Georgian Orthodox Church. It not only has a number of advantages compared to other civil sector actors but also actively takes part in ongoing processes in society and state. This policy brief overviews the activities of the Georgian Orthodox Church as a civil actor, its challenges and potential in the ongoing process of democratization, its role in the context of pluralistic civil sector and its relations with other public actors.

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**Samuel, R. (2007, June 26). *Religion: A Force for Social Change and Advocacy*. Oxford Center for Religion and Public Life. Available at: <http://www.ocrpl.org/2007/religion-a-force-for-social-change-and-advocacy/>

The Church as a Civil Actor and Its Role in Democratization

“Civil society” refers to self-organized groups of people who represent the interests of citizens and act independently from the private sector and government. The civil sector plays an especially important role in countries undergoing democratic transition.¹ Religious associations such as the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) which represent social groups united according to religious beliefs are examples of such actors.² However, the GOC is a significant civil actor not only because of its historical experience but because of its present status and influence. Despite being financed by the state, the GOC due to its high reputation retains autonomy and often positions itself separately from the government. One example includes foreign policy. The GOC’s relation with Russia differs from the official position of the government. Meetings of the Patriarch of Georgia with Russian officials are of an independent character and are not carried out in coordination with the Georgian government.³ Moreover, despite the fact that the GOC is financed by the state, it is not accountable to the state for presenting any official reports of its expenditures.⁴

Over the years, the GOC has enjoyed the status of the country’s most trusted institution. Most interestingly, in spite of the so-called⁵ “Cyanide case”, which pointed out that relationships inside the GOC are not always based on Christian principles, the GOC has managed to unchangeably maintain high level of public trust. According to a 2017 public opinion survey carried out by the International Republican Institute, the GOC is still ranked first among institutions with the trust of 88 percent of the population.⁶ The GOC is Georgia’s most powerful civil actor and therefore potentially the most influential organization in this area. Apart from the general public, the GOC maintains authority among the political establishment, as well. It often appears to be a source of legitimization for some politicians and political parties.⁷ All political actors avoid open confrontation with the GOC.⁸

¹Bernhard, M., Hicken A., Reenock C. and Lindberg S.I. (2015). *Institutional subsystems and the survival of democracy. Do political and civil society matter? The Varieties of Democracy Institute*. Series 2015:4. University of Gothenburg.

² According to 2015 poles - 82% of Georgian population belongs Georgian Orthodox Church. Available at: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2015ge/RELIGION/>

³ Interpressnews. (2011, November 28). Georgian Foreign Ministry cannot evaluate the visit of Catholicos-Patriarch in Moscow. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2pFjhUW>

⁴ Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center. (2015, February 18). Legislative assessment of financing practice of four religious organizations. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2dQNYGU>

⁵ News.on.ge. (2017, February 22). Cyanide case – in short. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2p4M2lp>

⁶ Center for Insights in Survey Research. (2017, February 22-March, 8). Survey of Public Opinion in Georgia. International Republican Institute. Available at:

http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation_georgia_2017.03-general.pdf

⁷Naskidashvili, M. (2013). *Orthodox politics: religious renaissance and its political implications in post-Soviet Georgia*. Master thesis. University of Oxford.

⁸ Netgazeti. (2017, April 25). Who is afraid to criticize the Church and traditions in Georgian politics. Available at: <http://netgazeti.ge/news/110105/>

The GOC not only holds means of influence but also attempts to participate in ongoing processes in the country, supporting or opposing specific causes and movements. Apart from being a traditional religious institution, the GOC defines society's values and principles and has on several occasions attempted to directly affect politics and legislation.

It should be noted that in comparison to other civil actors, the GOC has number of advantages that augment its importance. Apart from high levels of public trust in comparison to other groups, its membership is long lasting and loyal. In contrast, people often enter other public organizations and associations only when it fits their personal interests. To be a member of a religious organization means to share and unite around mutual values and beliefs. This is the prerequisite for high interpersonal trust among members of the GOC. While members of other civil organizations are united around particular indicators such as social or financial status or level of education, members of the GOC represent all social strata. Therefore, a high degree of trust not only toward the GOC's leaders but also toward other members of the organization and diversity of parish creates a strong base for social capital. Moreover, the Patriarchate of Georgia has owned a television channel since 2008 that allows it to exclusively express and disseminate its own views, a capability not enjoyed by any other civil actors or confession. Finally, due to its high level of authority, the organizational ability of the GOC puts it in a unique position to encourage social activity. This is indicated by the large number of protests organized by its representatives.

The potential of the GOC as a civil actor is significant and is to be taken into account. Nevertheless, it is worth analyzing how the GOC's civic activism is expressed and its implications from the democratization perspective.

Church as a Civil Actor and Its Activities in the Context of Democratization

Officially, the Georgian Orthodox Church represents a legal entity of public law, which makes it a civil actor. However, because of the advantages listed above it is not an ordinary representative of such. Whether the GOC considers itself to be a civil actor is another question, what is included in its public activities and how these activities can be assessed from the democratization perspective is a matter of consideration below.

The GOC's influence reaches across multiple spheres of public life: education, healthcare, and agriculture, among others. We can thus highlight certain civil activities of the GOC. According to Transparency International, the GOC within the limits of its noncommercial activities owns four universities, five theological seminaries, 25 schools, eight social institutions, 18 charity and development funds, and 16 cultural and spiritual development centers, and roughly 90 schools, kindergartens, seminaries and orphanages are under its supervision. Most of these schools were founded by the Patriarchate and run by bishops and high-ranking clergymen. For example, the Patriarchate's centers include a canteen serving free meals, a home for the elderly, a drug

rehabilitation center, and a kindergarten for hearing-impaired children.⁹ Moreover, the Patriarchate owns professional development centers where students are taught iconography, wood crafts, and knitting.

In addition to the activities mentioned above, the GOC has on several occasions attempted to exert influence over the state's legislative and executive activities. Such examples include campaigns against legislative initiatives in 2011 and 2013, in the former case involving changes to the civil code regarding the status of religious minorities and in the latter, adoption of an antidiscrimination law. There are other such cases as well. In 2015, a campaign was launched concerning the issue of defining marriage in the constitution as a unity of a male and a female. Signatures were collected demanding a referendum on the issue and a draft bill was prepared. One of the leaders of the campaign was Zviad Tomaradze, (head of the Foundation of *Demographic Revival*) who was lobbying for the "interests of the Patriarchate".¹⁰ Ultimately, the president of Georgia vetoed the referendum and the constitutional changes are currently under consideration by the Constitutional Reform Commission.¹¹ The GOC has also actively interfered the discussions on the school subject "I and society" initiated by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. Representatives of the Patriarchate's educational center took part in discussions expressing the view that some of the concepts and definitions in the school subject stood against traditional family values.¹² In the end, the subject was adopted by the school program but due to above mentioned lobbying, with some corrections and after exempting some terms from the texts.¹³

Due to the nature of its activity, the GOC is an actor with considerable influence. However, it is questionable whether the GOC, given the nature of its goals, activities, and structure, meets the criteria of a democratic civil actor. The positive involvement of a civil actor in the process of democratization and performing educational and pluralistic functions of a public actor implies internal democracy, diversity, and the principle of equality among its members.¹⁴ At the same time, a democratic civil actor must participate in public discourse and "not allow violence to happen".¹⁵ The GOC, however, is an internally nondemocratic institution due to it being based on a hierarchical

⁹ Transparency International - Georgia. (2014, September 5). Business companies and other organizations related to Georgian Patriarchate. Available at: <http://www.transparency.ge/blog/sakartvelos-sapatriarkostan-dakavshirebuli-bizneskompaniebi-da-skhva-organizaciebi?page=1>

¹⁰ Eka Chitanava. Personal interview. Tolerance and Diversity Institute. March 2017.

¹¹ Jumpstart Georgia. (2017). Definition of Marriage. Available at: <https://marriage.jumpstart.ge/ka#!61>

¹² Liberali. (2015, October 21). Patriarchate Center: "I and Society" will make youngsters lose respect for their parents. Available at: <http://liberali.ge/news/view/18788/sapatriarqos-tsentri-me-da-sazogadoeba-mozards-mshoblebis-pativistsemas-daakargvinebs>

¹³ Netgazeti.ge. (2016, May 30). The Subject „I and Society“ has been included in new national educational plans. Available at: <http://netgazeti.ge/news/119177/>

¹⁴ Gathuo, A. (2003). Democracy Through an Undemocratic Institution? The Church as Part of Civil Society. Religion and Civil Society. *Trotter Review*15(1).

¹⁵ Anonymous. Personal interview. Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center. March 2017.

structure and membership. The GOC is an ideologically nationalistic organization with its primary goal being the spiritual salvation of Georgians. It therefore fails to keep up with ongoing social trends and does not respond to current challenges and problems.¹⁶ One reason for that is its doctrine, which is primarily focused on spiritual salvation and conservatively approaches current challenges. For example, the gender equality issue should be considered. The GOC is not only unable to respond to social trends but, on the contrary, opposes them outright. For instance, during a sermon, Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II made the following statement: “Nowadays it is an accepted term that man and woman are equal. Lord’s writing says that the head of the family is man. The family is one whole body and the body cannot have two heads.”¹⁷ Therefore, the GOC’s activities have a resistant character focusing on combatting rather than spurring change. All above mentioned outcomes from conservative values that does not give chance to reinterpretation of Christian values in accordance with modern challenges.¹⁸

However, some of the problems related to the GOC’s role as a civil actor can also characterize Georgia’s civil sector in general. One of the main problems facing the country is the existing gap between the GOC and the wider society. Georgian organizations in general tend not to be “grassroots” as they are mainly represented by elites and led by top-down approaches.¹⁹ The financing of such organizations often depends on donors, and their activities are thus driven by the preferences of donors. This is one reason why civil organizations fail to respond to pressing social problems. This logic applies to the GOC.

Despite the fact that the GOC enjoys many privileges and its representatives actively communicate with the population in a face-to-face manner, the top-down approach is evident in its relationships with the wider society, due to the types of its activities it pursues. The GOC’s representatives dictate public rules of conduct and values without taking into account existing social problems. For example, while giving a sermon in 2015 Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II referred to the practice of Georgian women traveling and working abroad as “fallacious” and invoked them to return and work in Georgia.²⁰ His comment did not take into account that money sent from overseas is the primary source of income for many Georgian families.

Relationship between the GOC and other Public Sector Actors

The GOC as a civil actor, its role and contribution also depends on the type of its relationship with the other groups of this sector: what is its attitude towards them; is there any kind of cooperation

¹⁶ Anonymous. Personal interview. State Agency of Religious Issues. March 2017.

¹⁷ Tabula. (2012, April 9). Ilia II: husband is the head of a family. Available at: <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/59228-ilia-meore-ojaxshi-mtavari-aris-qmari>

¹⁸ Anonymous. Personal interview. Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center. March 2017.

¹⁹ Puig, J.P. (2016). Situational report of Georgian civil society. European Fund. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2oSAJrU>

²⁰ Netgazeti.ge. (2015, October 18). Ilia II: women leaving to work abroad is a fallacious habit. Available at: <http://netgazeti.ge/news/72458/>

between the GOC and the other public organizations; does the GOC help or hamper the activities of other public actors.

The attitude of the GOC toward representatives of other civil organizations differs. Attitudes are based on the GOC's perception concerning the significance and usefulness of a particular organization. Due to its priorities—including elevating spiritual salvation over everyday problems—the GOC supports and cooperates mainly with those groups with which its goals coincide.²¹ As for other groups, the relationships vary but tend to be limited or short-term in nature. The GOC may be indifferent or aggressive towards them, and it is worth discussing different types of actors separately.

Actors with a Religious Agenda

The GOC and its representatives are linked directly or indirectly to groups that have a religious agenda and work to protect traditional values. Some of these groups were founded by the Patriarchate itself or by other representatives of the GOC. One such group is the *Alliance of Orthodox Parents*, one of the leaders of which is Archpriest David Isakadze. The group aims to protect national ideology and traditional moral principles and strives to enforce these principles among the population. It also aims at impacting state legislation in accordance with those principles.²² Other such organizations include: *Saint David the Builder's Union of Orthodox Parish*²³ and *The Cross of the Queen Tamar*.²⁴

Representatives of the GOC cooperate with and are actively involved in the activities of groups that claim to defend and support traditional values. These groups tend to be nationalistic. The *Foundation of Demographic Revival* is an example. The organization was founded in 2013 with the blessing of Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II and supported by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the former prime minister of Georgia. Levan Vasadze, an active lobbyist for nationalistic and traditional views, is the *Foundation's* head.²⁵ *People's Orthodox Movement* is one organization that deals with social as well as religious problems, including the restoration of Georgian values. Clergymen are actively involved in its activities.²⁶

²¹ Beka Mindiashvili. Personal interview. Theologist. March 2017.

²² St. King Davit Aghmashenebeli Union of Orthodox Parish. Available at: http://www.religia.ge/about_MShK.html

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Beka Mindiashvili. Personal interview. Theologist. March 2017.

²⁵ Netgazeti.ge. (2013, July 16). Levan Vasadze will be the head of council of "Foundation of Demographic Revival". Available at: <http://netgazeti.ge/news/23752/>

²⁶ Radio Liberty. (2019, March 25). "People's Orthodox Movement" is being founded in Tbilisi. Available at: <http://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1993772.html>

In addition to organizations that aim at defending traditional and religious values, representatives of the GOC are connected to some organizations working on foreign policy issues. Such organizations include the *Alliance of Eurasia*, the *Institute of Eurasia* and the *Erekle II Society*. The leaders of these respective organizations admit to cooperating with clergymen and some representatives of the GOC are actively involved in their activities.²⁷

The Church and Non-Governmental Organizations

The GOC's relations with non-governmental organizations are ambivalent. Those non-governmental organizations that work on human rights issues and focus on defending the rights of minorities are unacceptable to the GOC; on the level of discourse, it even perceives them as enemies promoting Western liberal values.²⁸ Such groups are referred to by the GOC as "pseudo-liberals" and are often accused of ignoring national traditions. In 2014, Patriarch Ilia II stated in his Christmas Epistle that some of the NGOs that defend minority groups and are critical of the GOC exist to attack the institution of the family.²⁹ The NGOs, on their part, are in open confrontation with the GOC and blame it for promoting ideological "darkness".³⁰

Nevertheless, there are examples of positive cooperation between the GOC and NGOs. Most interestingly, these organizations are devoted to issues lying outside the interests of GOC, e.g. Euro-Atlantic integration. And this takes place while the GOC is often accused for its anti-western views.³¹ For example, in November 2016 a delegation of Georgian clergymen attended a meeting at NATO Headquarters organized by the *Centre for Development and Democracy* and the *EU and NATO Information Center*.³² Later, the GOC issued a statement that said "officials in NATO and EU have been misinformed about Georgia and the GOC was also mistaken on some of the issues related with their politics."³³ Moreover, in 2015-2016 *The Center of Development and Democracy* implemented a project together with *St. David the Builder's Educational Centre of Patriarchy*. In the framework of the

²⁷ Gulbaat Rtskhaladze. Personal interview. Eurasian Institute. 2015. Archil Chkoidze. Personal interview. Eurasian Choice. 2015.

²⁸ Eka Chitanava. Personal interview. Tolerance and Diversity Institute. March 2017.

²⁹ Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center. (2014, February 17). Analysis of epistles of the Available at: Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia. <https://emcrights.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/danarti.pdf>

³⁰ Anonymous. Personal interview. Human Rights Monitoring and Education Center. March 2017.

³¹ Netgazeti.ge. (2016, May 9). Plans of organizations united against Russian propaganda in Georgia. Available at: <http://netgazeti.ge/news/113152/>

³² Liberali. (2016, October 28). A delegation of clergy went to the European Union and NATO from Georgia. Available at: <http://liberali.ge/news/view/25552/evrokavshirsa-da-NATOshi-saqartvelodan-sasuliero-pirebis-delegatsia-gaemgzavreba>

³³ Georgian Patriarchate. (2016, November 15). Statement of Georgian Patriarchate about the visit in Brussels. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2oVzHMP>

project they organized seminars on Euro-Atlantic integration issues³⁴ for representatives of schools connected to different eparchies and churches.

An additional example of such cooperation is support for the GOC provided by the *Open Society Georgia Foundation* (OSGF), which has implemented a number of projects in cooperation with the Patriarchate.³⁵ Those projects include: photo-fixation of wall paintings for monuments, including Kintsvisi; financial support for the Patriarchate's anti-narcotic Centre of Patriarchy; and support for charity projects.³⁶ Nevertheless, some representatives of the GOC criticize the activities of the OSGF, accusing it of anti-Georgian activities.³⁷ The abovementioned examples of cooperation, however, demonstrate that the GOC is ready in some cases to make concessions and cooperate on the basis of mutual interests.

The GOC and Other Religious Congregations

The GOC's relationships with other religious organizations is hierarchical. According to the ideology of the GOC, there is only one true faith and that is Orthodoxy. Religious pluralism and the equality of confessions is viewed as "religious indifferentism."³⁸ The GOC strives for a monopoly on the religious market. The Constitutional Agreement³⁹ signed in 2002 that stresses this privileged status is an example of success. In some cases when the GOC feels its monopoly to be under threat it actively expresses resistance; for instance, the protest expressed by the GOC against changes to the civil code initiated in 2011, according to which religious minorities were given the right to register as legal entities of public law. According to the GOC's arguments against the initiative, the changes would have allowed the Armenian and Roman Catholic Churches to claim the right to possess disputed churches.

The GOC recognizes only traditional religions such as Roman Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, and the Armenian Apostolic Church. It refers to other confessions as sects and does not recognize them. The GOC cooperates only with the abovementioned traditional religions and only in a format that supports its own privileged status.⁴⁰

³⁴ Center for Development and Democracy. (2015). Georgia and European Union – 2015. Available at: <http://cdd.ge/300-saqarthvelo-da-evrokavshiri.html>

³⁵ Anonymous. Personal interview. State Agency of Religious Issues. March 2017.

³⁶ Open Society Foundation Georgia. Projects. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2oxpZki>

³⁷ Guria News. (2016, September 26). Myths about George Soros. Available at: <http://www.gurianews.com/article/mtavari/sazogadoeba/42612>

³⁸ Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center. (2014, February 17). Analysis of epistles of the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2oXouPe>

³⁹ Orthodoxy.ge. Constitutional Agreement between Georgian state and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia. Available at: http://www.orthodoxy.ge/samartali/konstitutsiuri_shetankhmeba.htm

⁴⁰ Beka Mindiashvili. Personal interview. Theologist. March 2017.

Such format for cooperation functions in the frame of the State Agency for Religious Issues, within which the “Interreligious Body” was established in 2015. The body provides a forum for discussing religious topics and issues initiated by the Agency.⁴¹ However, according to analyses provided by the *Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center*, in reality it strengthens hierarchy by granting privileges to the GOC.⁴² Cooperation of the GOC with the other congregations outside the Agency is scant.⁴³ For example, the GOC has refused to participate in the activities of the Council of Religions under the Ombudsman of Georgia due to its format, which places each congregation on an equal footing, there is no hierarchy or granting a dominant role to any congregation.⁴⁴ However, there are several formats for collaboration: The GOC cooperates with the Roman Catholic Church organizing conferences on issues of family, abortion, and bioethics. In general, however, cooperation is minimal.⁴⁵

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the above analysis, it is clear that the Georgian Orthodox Church is more than a civil sector actor. The GOC has the ambition to be actively involved in ongoing processes of state and society. It is also worth noting that the strivings, values, and activities of the GOC do not always align with the principles of pluralistic democracy. That being said, isolating and ignoring the GOC would create more problems than it would solve. Due to its high credibility compared to other actors, the GOC has the potential to positively contribute to democratization processes. However, it is crucial that the GOC participates in civil sector activities in a careful, expedient, and meaningful manner that takes into consideration its unique political and social role. For this purpose, it is important for other civil society groups to actively communicate with the GOC to challenge it as one of the pluralistic civil actors and to challenge the Church to realize the responsibility endowed to it.

- A comprehensive research should be carried out to obtain the views of GOC representatives from the perspective of such characteristics as their age, education, origin, and other factors. It is important to realize that the members of the clergy hold stereotypes concerning liberalism and the West in the same proportion as the whole society, mostly due to a lack

⁴¹ State Agency of Religious Issues. (2015). Annual report. Available at: <http://religion.geo.gov.ge/geo/document/reports/religiis-sakitxta-saxelmtsifo-saagentos-tliuri>

⁴² Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center. (2016, December 14). Critical analysis of activities of State Agency of Religious Issues. Available at: <https://emc.org.ge/2016/12/14/emc-190/>

⁴³ Beka Mindiashvili. Personal interview. Theologist. March 2017.

⁴⁴ Eka Chitanava. Personal interview. Tolerance and Diversity Institute. March 2017.

⁴⁵ Beka Mindiashvili. Personal interview. Theologist. March 2017.

of information.⁴⁶ The attitudes of the GOC reflect the wider social mood, but frequently that mood does not correspond to democratic values. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the current context in the GOC.

- Public sector representatives should plan and carry out informational activities with the GOC. A suitable example already exists—the seminars carried out by the *Centre for Development and Democracy*. Dialogue allows clergy members to gain a better understanding of the Anti-Discrimination Law.
- It is necessary for civil sector representatives to challenge the GOC in the framework of bilateral and multilateral dialog and to offer assistance in carrying out joint projects on the community and national levels. Such projects would be in the interests of both sides and could focus on the environment, healthcare, agriculture, education, and vocational skills.

⁴⁶ Anonymous. Personal interview. Regional Center for Strategic Studies. March 2017.

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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.



This publication was produced with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Institute of Politics and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).