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Political Radicalization in Georgia: The Role of the Orthodox Church

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Abstract

In this article, radicalization and illiberal tendencies in Georgia are analysed by focusing on the role of one of the most powerful actors involved, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). The GOC is revealed to be an indirect source of political and societal polarization regarding LGBT rights, religious sentiments, family values and other issues that may be seen by church representatives as threats to Christian values and traditions. This perspective often coincides with the narratives propagated by the Kremlin in Georgia. Religious sentiments are broadly used by far-right groups to spread homophobic narratives in Georgian society for political purposes. Despite its softer rhetoric, the GOC is quite radical in its action, which intentionally or unintentionally endorses the agendas of far-right groups and the Kremlin. A new potential pattern in the Church's actions were revealed by events surrounding the Tbilisi Pride Festival on July 5, 2021: a demonstration organized by the Church and far-right groups turned violent when some protesters attacked representatives of the media. The actions of some representatives of the GOC indicate an increasingly direct use of violence and radicalization in dealing with critics and opponents.

Introduction

The Georgian Orthodox Church has been at the centre of attention of both national and international observers after 5 July 2021, when media representatives were attacked by far-right groups (EEAS, 2021). On this day, the LGBT community had planned a Pride March along the central avenue of Tbilisi. This plan motivated homophobic groups to organize a counterdemonstration that turned violent. A part of Georgian society believes that the aggression emanating from homophobic groups, which are mostly affiliated with far-right actors, was endorsed by the representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church, because the Church mobilized people with homophobic views for a communal prayer meeting at a location through which the Pride March was supposed to pass (Civil.ge, 05.07. 2021). If political actors and the media have traditionally been seen as chief sources of polarization, the events of 5 July provided further credence for the view that the GOC might well be the chief source of radicalization. This view gained credibility after the public witnessed some priests not only attending the homophobic demonstration but also calling for further radicalization and even calling upon attendees to engage in acts of violence in the name of God, the nation and purity (Chichua, 2021). As the Georgian Orthodox Church has a tremendous influence on Georgian society and priests are often viewed as divine representatives, it should come as no surprise that these calls directly impacted parts of society and resulted in violent action. In this paper, an analysis is performed on the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in political radicalization in Georgia as one of the main instruments used to influence politics.

The Georgian Orthodox Church as an Important Actor in Georgian Society

The Georgian Orthodox Church has been one of the most important actors in Georgian society since the fall of the Soviet Union. Several factors may have ensured the stability and institutional influence of the GOC. First, the vast majority (85%) of Georgian society consider themselves Orthodox Christians (Caucasus Barometer, December 2020)), out of which 82% trust the GOC (CRRC 2020). Moreover, 88% of the Georgian population has a favourable opinion of Patriarch Ilia II (IRI, June 2021). This opinion prevails despite decreasing trust in the institution of the Georgian Orthodox Church in recent years. This waning trust became particularly pronounced after the 2017 Cyanide Case (CRRC 2020), when a priest was charged with the attempted poisoning of Patriarch Ilia II, which damaged the Church's reputation in some parts of society (Agenda.ge 2017).

Currently, no more than 66% of the Georgian population in general assess the performance of this religious institution positively (CRRC 2020). Still, the Georgian Orthodox Church is almost always among the top positively assessed institutions in Georgia, although this statistic may speak more to the problems of public institutions that hold less public trust than the Church.

Although Orthodox Christianity is not the state religion and there is a formal separation of power between the state and religious institutions, the GOC has been guaranteed certain privileges under the "Concordat" (2002), a constitutional agreement between the church and the state. According to this agreement, the state is not allowed to interfere in religious issues. However, there is no mention of the Church's interference in the

affairs of the state (Kakachia 2014). For this reason, some experts and politicians believe that the agreement should either be renewed or annulled because of numerous gaps and a large disbalance with the rights of the other religious denominations (Ananidze 2021). The “Concordat” is the key document guaranteeing the significant influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church not only over society but also over social and political processes at large (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021). Apart from the public trust and legal guarantees given to the GOC, mainstream political parties have tended to remain loyal to the GOC for the purpose of gaining electoral support.

A clear example of the above-mentioned issues is the inaction of the Georgian government on 5 July while journalists were being beaten in the streets and the office of the Pride organizers was under attack. All this violence was made possible through the inadequacy of law enforcement forces at the respective locations to protect journalists and activists. Moreover, the organizers of the anti-LGBT demonstration were not questioned by the investigative body and the government until a joint statement was issued by representatives of diplomatic missions. However, after being summoned to the police station, some members of the radical right-wing groups publicly posted that in the event of their members being charged, the Georgian Dream would not procure the 43% of the vote needed by the ruling party to prevent the scheduling of national snap elections in the context of the agreement facilitated by the EU (TV Pirveli 16.07.2021). These statements provide evidence of the existence of political connections between the far right and the Georgian Dream.

The GOC as a Stimulator of Radicalization in Georgian Society

The very long history of the GOC for the majority of the Georgian population became an inseparable part of the Georgian identity and traditions. Therefore, the Church sees itself as the defender of morality and a protector against “depravity” (Patriarchate 29.06.2021). The fundamental topics feeding societal fragmentation are the rights of minorities and other issues of equality; public debate on progressivism versus traditionalism that includes issues such as sexual education in schools, abortion, and traditional family values; and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration (Kandelaki 2021). More recently, the GOC has been involved in the public debate on COVID-19 vaccination (Kunchulia, 29.01.2021). Radical right-wing parties often use these issues in the name of defending traditions to disseminate their political rhetoric. Some experts believe that right-wing groups use religion instrumentally to increase public support by exploiting traditionalist sentiments in the name of religion (Sartania 2019). However, others believe that the actions of the far right and the Church are in full accordance with each other (GIP, 23.07.2020).

One line of argument is that the official views of the Patriarchate, as the central ruling organ of the GOC, have never been in favour of violence. In fact, in the aftermath of such acts, the GOC usually speaks out to distance itself from violent actions. However, an opposing argument is that the GOC never condemns the actions and violent rhetoric of radical right groups, who are themselves representatives of the flock and often include priests. Two of the most prominent examples in support of this argument are the events of 17 May 2013 and 5 July 2021. 17 May 2013 saw the first unsuccessful attempt of the LGBT community in Georgia to celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. Celebrations were attacked by ultra-conservative groups (Amnesty International 2013). On 5 July 2021 a LGBT Pride was planned to take place and apparently turned into violent actions of far-right groups directed towards media representatives attending the event (Reuters 06.07.2021). After the events of 17 May 2013, instead of distancing itself from violent outlooks and actions, the GOC declared 17 May—which has been designated as an International Day Against Transphobia—to be the Day of the Family, thereby appropriating the date for its own political agenda (Ageda.ge 2014). The priests who participated in the events of 5 July 2021 have gone entirely unpunished both in the secular sense of Georgian law and in the religious sense of ecclesiastical law. In continuance of this tradition, the GOC has only formally distanced itself from violence through the use of neutral language.

The Media vs. the Georgian Orthodox Church

The media has been one of the most powerful critics of the Georgian Orthodox Church in recent years, apart from civil society. The bishops, in particular, have come under scrutiny for their luxurious lifestyles under the auspices of their eparchies (Keshelashvili 2020). The media has actively reported various transgressions of priests, be it financial corruption, lack of transparency, or sexual misconduct, especially since the Cyanide Case (Arabuli 2021). These reports have caused physical aggression within the ranks of the Church towards media representatives. For instance, a few months ago, the Bishop Anton of Vani physically attacked a journalist by hitting him in the neck and throwing his microphone away, following a previous attack on two journalists by monks in the David Gareji Monastery (Civil.ge, 17.07.2021). Therefore, the July 5 events, when 53 journalists were bitten by members of a right-wing anti-LGBT crowd, can be seen, to some extent, as the culmination of a protracted period of gradual development of sentiments of intolerance and aggression by the GOC towards the media. The violence from the far-right groups and members of the flock standing in

front of the church on Rustaveli Avenue during the anti-pride event was directed towards journalists, even though the protest gathering of the far-right groups was aimed at LGBT people, who did not end up carrying out the planned Pride March. The only actors in the streets covering the developments were journalists who were targeted by the far-right groups that included parish members and priests. As usual, the Holy Synod of the GOC distanced itself from the aggressive developments and issued a statement expressing regret that the journalists were injured (Civil.ge, 13/07/2021). However, some of the high clergy of the Church, such as Bishop Anton of Vani, blamed the media and diplomatic representatives of the US and EU for the violence and “dissemination of perversion”. The influential Bishop Ioane of Kutaisi-Gaenati went even further and threatened journalists with further violence (Civil.ge, 11.07.2021). It could be assumed that the official position is either not shared by some members of the Church or is merely an attempt to save face, a facade rather than a stand with substance, whereby the Synod uses individual high clergy as instruments to indirectly convey ultraconservative messages and influence ongoing affairs.

Political Instrumentalization of the GOC

The Georgian Orthodox Church has several instruments at its disposal that can significantly impact Georgian society. Church representatives have occasionally indicated, during sermons, their support for a particular political party ahead of elections or for the mobilization of homophobic demonstrations. The GOC owns a private media channel (ertsulovneba.ge) and exercises influence via the Theological Academy of Tbilisi, as well as a broad range of seminaries and schools throughout Georgia. The Church also has the power to initiate various legislative initiatives indirectly through third-party actors that are mostly affiliated with destructive far-right groups that use religion as an instrument for their identity policy (TDI 2019). Practice has proved that far-right groups have used religious sentiments in society and the abovementioned instruments of the Church to promote their interests. Some examples are the invitation of representatives of far-right groups on shows of the TV Channel of the Patriarchate, the joint presence of far-right groups and Church members at demonstrations against LGBTQ people and the initiation of draft laws for the legal definition of traditional marriage by lawyers for the far right supported by Church representatives. In addition, far-right groups make wide use of religious symbols, such as crosses, icons and candles, to garner the trust of religious segments of society. These groups try to integrate with parishioners and persuade parishioners that LGBT people pose a threat to Georgian identity, religion and traditions.

Apart from promulgating homophobia, far-right groups broadly spread xenophobic and anti-migrant sentiments, especially towards people with religious affiliations other than the GOC, that are shared by Church representatives. Note that the illiberal group leaders who organized the anti-LGBT demonstrations are affiliated with the Kremlin as well as anti-Western actors. For instance, the founders of the TV channel “Alt-info” have openly cooperated with the anti-Georgian and racist Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, who was invited on a TV show and extensively related news of violence by far-right groups against journalists on the 5th of July with pride (Alt Info Interview with Dugin, YouTube). The leader of the newly formed party “Unity-Identity-Hope—Eri” also has close ties with Russian actors, including Dugin. One of the leaders of the homophobic movement Guram Palavandishvili has close connections with Valeri Khaburdzania, a former representative of the Georgian security sector. In addition, after the developments of July 5th, the leaders of the ultranationalist party Alliance of Patriots sent a letter to the Russian government asking for help in dealing with the political crisis in Georgia. This letter was the first direct signal of the connections of this party with Russia (Caucasian Knot, 3.08.21). Previously, the Russian analytical portal “Dossier” published documents showing that the possibility of Russian sources financing the Alliance of Patriots (Kincha, 2020) had been rejected by the party leaders.

If the connection with Russia has hitherto been kept secret, the inaction of the state has encouraged far-right groups to speak openly of their connections with Russia and on the importance of cooperation between Georgia and Russia. Russia could use far-right groups to advance its own interests or influence Georgian society and politics, and in turn, far-right groups could use religious sentiments instrumentally to rally society around their political agenda. Given this context, it is a risky enterprise for the Church to affiliate with these groups because of attendant security concerns that could cost the support of Georgian society. Therefore, the Church continues to project itself as an independent actor.

Conclusion

The Georgian Orthodox Church has both indirectly and directly endorsed anti-liberal views and actions by not reacting adequately to the violent actions of far-right groups, as well as hate speech, calls for violence and physical attacks by religious actors. The Orthodox Church is an influential actor with a high level of public trust, legal privileges, political influence, its own media, and social and educational channels. In theory, radicalizing and fragmenting society should not be of interest to the Church. Instead, the Church could maintain the *status quo*. However, the issues that far-right groups

explicitly use to advance their political agenda—homophobic and xenophobic attitudes, “traditional family values”, and anti-Western sentiments—are often directly influenced by the preaching of ultraconservative priests and reproduce the religious conservative agenda of the GOC, as well as the Kremlin’s propaganda narratives. It is equally true that a direct affiliation between the far right and the GOC is not *always* present. As a large

institution, the GOC has a diversity of views among its clergy. However, there is a high correlation between two sets of discourses, that of the conservative GOC and far-right groups, which are often informed by one another. The July 5 events show a new pattern of the GOC seeking to increase radicalization to silence its main opponents, such as the media and civil society, thereby “purifying” public space and discourse of unwanted elements.

About the Author

Salome Kandelaki is currently a Project Coordinator and Junior Policy Analyst at the Georgian Institute of Politics. Salome is a Ph.D. student in Political Science at Tbilisi State University. She is an invited lecturer at European University, Georgia. In 2017, she obtained her MA degree in political science from the Central European University, Budapest. She specialized in comparative politics at the same time. She has a second master’s degree in public administration (MPA) from the joint program of the German University of Administrative Sciences and Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. Her previous work experience includes Fundraising Management at the Social Justice Center (formerly known as the EMC). She has been a leading acting specialist in the Tbilisi City Assembly and project management for different youth nongovernmental organizations. Her field of experience is comparative case-study analyses with a particular focus on religion and democracy, as well as regionalism and democratization. Her research interests include Europeanization, frozen conflicts and secularism in Europe.

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