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Minesashvili, Salome; Kakhishvili, Levan

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## Georgia: Foreign Policy Identity in the Domestic Arena as a Subject of Contestation

By Salome Minesashvili and Levan Kakhishvili, Tbilisi

### Abstract:

In general, Georgians strongly support their leaders' decision to opt for a European identity and foreign policy. However, some aspects of this choice remain hard for the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) to accept, particularly issues concerning the status of the GOC *vis-à-vis* other churches within Georgia and discrimination concerning gender and sexual identity issues. Due to Church opposition, the politicians have to make compromises.

### Identity Options for Georgia

Since becoming independent after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia has been struggling to establish itself in the international arena. The first decade of independence was a turbulent period during which Georgia did not manage to frame a definitive foreign policy orientation. The country went through three armed conflicts: two of them in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and one civil war in the streets of the capital. The total collapse of the Georgian economy further exacerbated the situation. Crime and corruption raged in the country.

Since the early 1990s Georgia had to submit to Russian influence: in 1993 Georgia was forced to enter the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and had to accept Russian peacekeeping forces in its breakaway regions as well as the presence of the Russian military bases located outside the conflict areas. Georgia, in other words, emerged as a post-Soviet state with limited sovereignty.

Yet Georgia is located at the crossroads of a few regions, which gives the country the possibility to adopt different regional identities including: (South) Caucasus, post-Soviet, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, Black Sea region and (South-) East European. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the political elite consciously decided which identity option was more appropriate for Georgia at that particular time.

In 1999, when Georgia became a member of the Council of Europe, former speaker of the parliament Zurab Zhvania, in what became a historic statement, proclaimed: "I am Georgian, therefore, I am European." Later, however, after the 2003 Rose Revolution, political power was seized by an elite, which was young and western-educated. Under the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia became vocal about its foreign policy orientation. The country adopted strong rhetoric promoting its western orientation and aimed at rapid integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions such as NATO and the EU. For this purpose, the elite made a conscious

choice of Georgia as a country belonging to the Black Sea region and ideally as part of Eastern or South-Eastern Europe. The Black Sea region is the closest it gets to the West as it includes two EU members—Bulgaria and Romania—and three members of NATO—Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. As a result Georgia, discarding any other regional identity option, focused exclusively on those identities that moved the country closer to Europe.

Georgia's determination to "return to the European family," as Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions is often framed by politicians, has been institutionalized in strategic documents and more recently has been codified by the parliament. In strategic documents, such as the National Security Concepts, foreign policy strategy, etc., Georgia is presented as a country located in the Black Sea region or (South) Eastern Europe. While linking Georgia more closely with Europe, this approach is an efficient way for detaching the country from the post-Soviet space, which is closely associated with Russia, the influence of which Tbilisi is striving to escape.

Europeanness is the identity key politicians are constructing discursively and declaring to overlap with the Georgian identity. However, to what extent Europeanness complies with national identity is a matter of contestation. This conflict is particularly evident when value-linked changes are introduced in the country that stem from Western countries or institutions.

### Legislative Amendment on Religious Minorities

Religious diversity and equal grounds for different denominations are markers of Western values. Before July 2011, religious groups in Georgia could only register as noncommercial legal entities under the provisions of a law that usually pertains to NGOs, unions or foundations. The only exception applied to the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), which was granted a special status by the 2002 Constitutional Agreement with the Georgian state. Various religious groups long sought legal status and the country was frequently criticized

by international organizations for lacking the appropriate legislation. In April 2011 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe stated its concern about the “lack of a proper legal status of and legal protection for denominations and faiths other than the Georgian Orthodox Church” and called on Georgia to adopt a law to address these concerns.

In response, at the end of June 2011, the Parliament of Georgia started discussing an amendment to the civil code and within five working days adopted a law that granted religious groups the right to register as legal entities under public law. The amendment applied to religious groups as defined in Council of Europe member states which had historical ties to Georgia. It triggered tense public debates and marked a serious confrontation between the GOC and the Saakashvili administration.

The GOC and its leader Ilia II, along with the Christian-Democratic Movement, protested against the hastened process of law-making. The church condemned the fact that the amendment had been adopted without consulting the Patriarchate and called on the ruling party to refrain from approving it until the law was publicly discussed. Besides its fear that it would lose its monopoly, the GOC was primarily concerned about the ownership of some disputed churches that were also claimed by the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholic Church in Georgia. The GOC opposed the amendment, arguing that it did not have the same status in neighboring states, particularly Armenia. Nevertheless President Saakashvili signed the law, leading the Patriarch to announce that the new legislation violated both state and church interests and would cause negative consequences.

A few days after the legislative change, thousands of parishioners led by their priests protested in Tbilisi, calling the law dangerous for the state. As a result, an explanatory document was attached to the amendment reconfirming the Constitutional agreement and restating the privileged status of the GOC, a move that ended the protests.

Public opinion polls demonstrate that the majority of the population supports the GOC position. According to NDI polls from 2011, of those who were aware of the amendment, 69% did not support it. Over 80% thought that the Parliament should have consulted with the public and the GOC before adopting the law.

### **Anti-Discrimination Law**

Values are an important aspect of identity for any people. While there is a stereotype that Georgians are a tolerant nation, others argue that Georgians find it hard to accept the “different.” In this case, “different” may mean, but is not limited to, ethnic, religious and sex-

ual minorities. In the course of the visa liberalization process with the EU, Georgia has to comply with certain conditions, including the adoption of anti-discrimination legislation.

The initial bill, although lacking a definition of discrimination, listed major identity markers that are a common basis for discrimination. The list included ethnic and religious minorities, sexual orientation and gender identity, among others.

However, the Georgian Orthodox Church was dissatisfied with this list and the formulation of certain clauses of the bill. Therefore, the Church intervened and exerted pressure over the parliament and the government, which led to a reformulation of the draft law. The influence of the Church is derived from various factors, including the high level of religiosity among the population and the high level of trust towards the head of the church from the people. Therefore, the Georgian Orthodox Church has a distinct role in Georgian politics and society—that of a guardian of Georgian identity and culture. The popularity of Patriarch Ilia II is the cornerstone of the church’s influence. According to an April 2014 opinion poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute, 96% of the population likes the Patriarch.

Moreover, the level of religiosity is quite high among the people. 85% of the population says religious beliefs are “important” or “very important” in making decisions in daily life. 12% is neutral and only 1% says religious beliefs are not important. These figures indicate that the Church and the Patriarch have a support base that any political party in any country could only dream of. Against this background, the mobilization capacity of the Church is extremely high and efficient. And it has proven to be so on various occasions, including with the adoption of anti-discrimination legislation.

The church spoke up against the law because it mentions “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” as a basis for discrimination. The church argued that Georgia does not need such laws as equality is guaranteed by the constitution. As a result of its pressure, the final version of the law has two clauses that elicited harsh criticism from civil society. The revised text not only removed the establishment of an Inspector, a new institution that would work against discrimination, but also states that discrimination is only punishable if it does not conflict with public morality or the constitutional agreement with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Consequently, civil society representatives argued that essentially Georgia had legalized discrimination, while the Church was still dissatisfied and claimed that Georgia had legalized perversion.

The result of this struggle was the formal fulfillment of the conditions required by the EU but lacking their essence. The goal seems to have been to give Georgia an antidiscrimination law, while what is written in the law seems to make potential discrimination a matter of choice. Besides, implementing the law has become less feasible without the institution of the Inspector.

### Conclusion

Located at the intersection of various geographical and cultural crossroads, Georgia had multiple identity choices, given its historical ties with surrounding states and regions. However, disregarding this great diversity, the Georgian state has embraced an European identity and has been following a steady pro-Western foreign policy course for over a decade now. The idea of western integration is not only institutionalized but widely supported by the public. However, internal debates demonstrate that the extent to which identity supports Georgia's foreign policy is a matter of question.

#### *About the Authors*

Salome Minesashvili is a doctoral candidate at Free University Berlin.

Levan Kakhishvili is a researcher and invited lecturer at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University and International Black Sea University.

The cases of the religious minorities amendment and anti-discrimination bill show that the identity question is hotly contested in Georgia. The European identity and foreign policy course seems to be an elite choice which often equates European identity with national identity. However, national identity for some groups contradicts the values comprising the European identity. When European identity boils down to specific actions, it becomes a matter of contestation in the domestic arena. The Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the major narrators of national identity whose version often conflicts with that of the political elites. Because of the domestic opposition, political elites have to compromise to some extent. The cases presented here demonstrate that even though the Georgian nation is more or less unanimous in aspiring toward Western integration, its underpinning identity remains a matter of contestation.

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