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CASCADE Newsletter, November 2015

Editorial

How influential are Orthodox radicals in Georgian society?

By Silvia Serrano, lecturer in Political Science at the Auvergne University, Research fellow at CERCEC and CASCADE coordinator of Working Package 6 on 'Religion and Politics'.

On 22 October 2015, the Tbilisi City Court cleared an Orthodox cleric and three followers of the charges of impeding an anti-homophobia rally held in Tbilisi to celebrate the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, on 17 May 2013. This decision brought the issue of Orthodox radicalism in Georgia, and more broadly, of religious radicalism in the Caucasus, back to the forefront.

The events of 17 May 2013 were widely covered in the Georgian and international media. TV broadcasts showed a small group of militants physically threatened by dozens of Orthodox activists under the gaze of indifferent police officers. The image of father Iotam, the superior of Ioane-Tornike Eristavi Monastery, chasing the militants with a stool as he was about to smash the window of a bus where the besieged had found refuge, went viral on social networks. A few days later, a petition initiated by intellectuals against the 'threat of theocracy' gathered several thousand signatures. The rally and counter-rally illustrated the divisions in Georgian society, and exemplified the polarization between 'liberals' in favour of individual freedoms, including

sexual orientation, and 'traditionalists'. The counter-rally was viewed by the former as evidence that groups led by uneducated priests, some of them with criminal records, were ready to resort to anything, including violence, to impose their obscurantist views. Although this interpretation is relevant, it ignores important developments which have to be taken into account in order to understand the role of public religion in post-Soviet Georgia.

This episode highlights the role of institutional actors, namely the State and the Church, in shaping social attitudes towards minorities. Orthodox radicals obviously enjoy – explicit or implicit – support from the patriarchate. After the arrest of Father Basil Mkalavishvili in March 2004 – one of the main instigators of numerous assaults against Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and others – the attacks against confessional minorities had dramatically decreased. Indeed, the behaviour of radical groups is largely determined by the messages sent by the authorities: passivity on the part of the government is interpreted as an authorisation of violence, while sanctions or court rulings draw red lines that are not to be crossed. The months following the coming to power of the 'Georgian Dream' coalition government in 2012 can be regarded as a test; the multiplication of conflicts over religious issues in the first two years of its rule can be correlated with the ambiguity and lack of direction of the new government. From this point of view, dropping the charge against undoubtedly aggressive individuals may be

interpreted as a signal that violence against minorities' rights advocates is tolerated by the state. At the time of writing, the prosecutor had not appealed.

The assertiveness and high visibility of radical groups is often analysed as evidence of the growing influence of the Orthodox Church over Georgian society. However, being active does not mean representing majorities in society. 'Traditional values' often referred to in public debate, although seldom defined, are certainly cherished by many Georgians. But it does not mean that they support violence against minorities' rights advocates nor that they share the hate speeches delivered by some priests in their sermon. A few days after 17 May 2013, when radical associations called for a second rally, no more than a few dozen people gathered and it went unnoticed.

Indeed, the most remarkable development stemming from the rally two years ago was the fact that discrimination according to sexual orientation became a public issue. It illustrates the transnational dimension of social questions now debated in post-Soviet societies. It also sheds light on the role of NGOs in defining the topics to be discussed, while the Church finds it difficult to set the agenda on a broader range of social issues. Focussing on social issues such as homosexuality is hence viewed as a means to

strengthen the ties between the Church and the 'people'. In other words, it may be better analysed as an alternative survival strategy to compensate for its lack of an audience on religious issues. Hence, the rise of Orthodox activism should not be considered as evidence of desecularisation, but rather as a politicisation of religion to counterbalance a still weak religiosity.

The process of reshaping the relation between the religious and the political in Georgia and across the Caucasus lies at the heart of Work Package 6 in the Cascade project. This Work Package looks into the complex and often contradictory dynamics that the dominant paradigm of secularisation / desecularisation cannot alone explain. In order to avoid the trap of simplification, this CASCADE research Work Package seeks to develop theoretical tools to address two mirroring processes: secularisation from below and desecularisation from above, a notion more explicitly expressed by the French 'délaïcisation'. Facing indifference from large segments of the population towards its teachings, the Church, seeks to respond by challenging the secularity of the state; dynamics that are unfolding in other parts of the Caucasus and have their impact on shaping social developments in the region.

Publications

CASCADE Policy Brief, Neil Melvin and Giulia Prelz Oltramonti [‘Managing Conflict and Integration in the South Caucasus: A Challenge for the European Union’](#), 31 October 2015.

In 2014–15, the South Caucasus entered a new phase of its post-Soviet development. Georgia's conclusion of an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) in June 2014 and Armenia's accession to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union in January 2015 were the culmination of a decade of efforts to engage the South Caucasus with parallel integration projects. Meanwhile resolving the conflicts in the South Caucasus remains a key issue for the region's political stability and economic prosperity. In 2015–16, as the EU looks to reshape its role in the South Caucasus through reviews of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its European Security Strategy (ESS), it will need to identify how it can formulate effective strategies to resolve the protracted conflicts in the absence of the offer of membership.

CASCADE Working Paper, Jos Boonstra (FRIDE): [‘The South Caucasus concert: Each playing its own tune’](#), 28 September 2015.

The countries of the South Caucasus have very different

interdependent relations with the EU, Russia, Turkey, the United States (US) and Iran. Tensions between the EU-US and Russia over Ukraine are further entrenching these interdependent relations and hampering development in the South Caucasus. How can Brussels increase its engagement in this important region in order to reduce Russian dominance and bolster security and democracy?

CASCADE Policy Brief, Kakha Gogolashvili (GFSIS): [‘State of the fight against corruption in the South Caucasus’](#), 10 August 2015.

This policy brief examines anticorruption policies in the three South Caucasus countries over the past two decades in light of their cooperation and commitments with the EU. From the point of view of democratic tradition, rule of law and governance, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were pretty much equal when they became independent in 1992. Ten years later, all three countries were still facing similar governance problems. These included: the disconnect presided over by ruling elites between economic development and good governance; the lack of instruments for democratic oversight and monitoring; and a weak demand for democracy and governance free of corruption.