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INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES OF THE CAUCASUS

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Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies

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**Conflicts in the Caucasus:  
History, Present, and Prospects for Resolution**

*Special Issue*

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# GEOCULTURE

Elmir GULIEV

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## THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN THE CENTRAL CAUCASUS: FROM THE SOVIET UNION'S DISINTEGRATION TO THE NEW CAUCASIAN POLICY

### A b s t r a c t

**T**his article presents an analysis of the religious and religious-political processes taking place in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. The author draws on a vast amount of factual material to assess the impact of religion on the political, social,

and cultural policies at the national and regional levels and concentrates on the specifics of the separation of religion from the state in each of the three countries; he predicts the future relations between the state and religion within the regional political context.

### I n t r o d u c t i o n

Wedged between Europe and Asia, between the East Christian civilization and the Islamic world, the Central Caucasus<sup>1</sup> is home to dozens of nationalities and ethnicities who speak different

<sup>1</sup> According to the division of the Caucasian region suggested by Eldar Ismailov, prominent Azeri scholar and Director of the Institute of Strategic Studies of the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia should be described as the

languages and profess different religions. Very similar and very different at one and the same time, these peoples learned to live side by side amid the never-ending rivalry over self-assertion and superiority and incessant efforts to establish political stability and consistent military-political, trade, and economic ties with their strong neighbors. Today, the political establishments of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia are looking for a reliable partner (the United States) to disentangle themselves from Russia's geopolitical lead. All of them want to "open a window to Europe:" this is their main geopolitical vector. This is not as easy as it sounds because of the fierce political rivalry among the three states; there are too many clashing external interests in the region pursued by the states on different sides of the civilizational split. Russia's territorial integrity and its claims to a Great-Power status depend on its continued geopolitical influence in the region. The United States and its West European partners regard the Central Caucasus as a transport corridor between Europe and Central Asia which buries Russia's transit monopoly. Iran and Turkey, locked in centuries-long rivalry over leadership in the Muslim ummah, are competing for geopolitical ascendancy in the region and a greater share in global projects.

The Great-Power rivalry over the "Eurasian Balkans" (to borrow an apt formula from Brzezinski) is fanned by the prospect of the region's involvement in drawing up a political map of the Greater Middle East. Inside the region, ethnic contradictions and resentments inherited from the past and transformed into territorial claims, as well as different confessions which change the nature of ethnic conflicts and affect the geopolitical balance, never let the tension subside.

Today, very much as in the past, the religious aspect figures prominently in regional policy. In the past, it even prevailed over the ethnic factor and economic interests. For example, after ascending to the Caucasian Albania throne, King Vachagan III the Pious (487-510) plunged into a "cruel and uncompromising struggle" against the Zoroastrians and pagans to unite the people around the Albanian Church.<sup>2</sup> Later, in the 15th and 16th centuries, the religious factor played an important role in the fates of the Turkic tribes of Azerbaijan: they joined ranks under the Shi'a slogans to put the Safavid dynasty on the throne. Christianity largely affected the political preferences of the Georgian rulers who invariably sought first Byzantine's and later Russia's support when going to war against the neighboring Muslim states. The Armenian settlers in the Caucasus exploited their spiritual closeness with Russia to fill administrative posts and ensure its military support and imperial resources to pursue their own ethnic and cultural interests.<sup>3</sup>

Today, however, the foreign policy of the Central Caucasian states is much less affected by the religious factor, even though politicians exploit it for lobbying the interests of their states in regional and international organizations. The ethnic conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia remained free from religious overtones despite the efforts of certain external forces. In the post-Soviet period, however, the nature of religious feelings in the region changed considerably, while the share of religious factors in domestic policy increased. In the last twenty years, external forces have learned to use religion as a vehicle of their political and cultural impact in the region, therefore its present and future role in the region should not be underestimated. Here I intend to reveal the nature of the religious processes in the Central Caucasus and assess their effect on the regional political and economic projects and on the development of sociocultural and political contacts between the Central Caucasus and the entities of world and regional politics.

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Central, rather than Southern Caucasus. This means that Turkey's ills, which border on the three states, belong to the Southwestern Caucasus, while the northwestern ostans of Iran are part of the Southeastern Caucasus. This approach fully fits the "three plus three" model of political and economic integration of the Caucasus: the three states of the Central Caucasus and the neighboring regional powers—Russia, Turkey, and Iran (for more detail, see: E. Ismailov, "New Regionalism in the Caucasus: A Conceptual Approach," *The Caucasus & Globalization*, Vol. 1 (1), 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See: Hieromonach Alexy (Nikonorov), *Istoria khristianstva v Kavkazskoy Albanii*, available at [[http://baku.eparhia.ru/history/albania/christianity/vachagan\\_111/](http://baku.eparhia.ru/history/albania/christianity/vachagan_111/)].

<sup>3</sup> See: S.V. Lurye, *Istorieskaia etnologia*, available at [[http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek\\_Buks/History/Lyrie/67.php](http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/History/Lyrie/67.php)].



## Relations between the State and Religion: Twenty Years of Religious Freedom

After acquiring their sovereignty, the three Central Caucasian states opted for a secular and democratic road. Early in the 1990s, the landmarks of their independent development remained unclear: together with social ideals, which were transformed beyond recognition, society lost its social and cultural principles and found itself immersed in unrestrained permissibility. "Soviet" man was exposed to a crisis of identity: practically all the social categories by means of which the Soviet people identified themselves and their place in society lost their boundaries and value.<sup>4</sup> After being discarded, communist ideas about the world (in which religious ethics had been replaced with the allegedly natural norms of behavior) left a void that was promptly filled with religious and quasi-religious teachings. Under the pressure of vehement public censure of atheism, politicians and public figures (sometimes contrary to their atheist convictions) had to feign religiosity. On the other hand, liberalization of social and economic relations bared the solitude of man in the contemporary world and gave rise to moral nihilism, which challenged religion as a form of world perception. Having failed to rally the nations around a single cultural and political dominant, the ruling elites produced divided societies. Intensive global exchange, which at the turn of the 21st century reached the Caucasus, interfered with the creation of large and closely knit ethnocultural communities. In other words, the post-Soviet societies were drawn into social stratification in which religion was one of the main factors. The traditional religious institutions acquired a historic chance to recapture their lost influence and move to the frontline of national construction. The traditional clergy, however, proved to be easily scared by the prospect of an open society and unhampered competition with other confessions perceived as a threat to their social status and religious specifics. Afraid of the changes and unprepared for an open dialog, the clergy preferred the role of a pillar of national traditions, very much approved by a large part of society.

Meanwhile, the social expanse of the post-Soviet states proved attractive for non-traditional trends, syncretic and universalist sects, psychotherapeutic and neo-pagan cults. They thrived on the mistrust of the official clergy and their failure to adjust to the changed sociocultural conditions to profess social and religious protest at least among certain social groups. The content and social attitudes of these religions, as well as their perception of the social and political order, their active God-seeking, and their high level of social involvement kept them apart from the dominant confessions. They know how to instill positive emotions and confidence in their adepts, who do not hesitate to break with the past, get rid of drug addiction, bad habits, etc. The urgency of the problems which the new religions successfully address and the methods they employ give them a huge advantage over the dominant traditions which, while protecting order, call for patience and humility. Young people are especially lured to the liberal Protestant churches that easily adjust to the changing conditions, close their eyes to violations of ethical norms, and combine religious service with elements of grass-roots culture.

At the turn of the century, the confrontation between traditional and non-traditional religiosity stirred up disagreements over the meaning of spiritual traditions, the limits of religious freedom, the threats of cultural globalization, etc. Today, the Central Caucasian states are looking for ways and means to play down the disagreements between the official clergy and non-traditional trends to add legitimacy to the hegemony of the former and somehow quench the protest zeal of the latter. This

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<sup>4</sup> See: G.M. Andreeva, *Psikhologiya sotsialnogo poznavania*, Aspekt Press, Moscow, 2000, p. 187.

makes the official attitude to the non-traditional faiths an indicator of sorts of the democratic changes in society. In fact, an analysis of common trends in the interaction among confessions in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia may help predict the region's political and social-cultural future.

## Azerbaijan: Secular State vs. Political Islam

In Azerbaijan, the government prefers to remain equidistant from all confessional groups and religious associations. The Law on Freedom of Religion (adopted in 1992; revised in 2009) does not allow the state to interfere in the internal affairs of communities or shift the functions of any of the branches of power onto them. Religious figures cannot be involved in political activities or fund political parties. If elected or appointed to any state post, members of the clergy must suspend their religious activities. Strict adherence to the secular model of state organization presupposes that freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are realized with due account of the diversity of religious forms and create favorable conditions for "positive and non-conflict development of religious life in the country and stronger stability of Azerbaijan society."<sup>5</sup>

In the 1990s, liberal religious legislation and the state, which distanced itself from the religious sphere, allowed missionaries of all hues to come to Azerbaijan and stir up a lot of interest in their cultic practices. Guided from abroad and in many cases enjoying diplomatic support, some of the communities promoted views and ideas which destroyed the country's social structure. Burdened with economic and social problems caused by the decline of the Soviet economy and Armenian occupation, the state had no choice but to ignore minor religious conflicts; it moved forward to cut short abuse of religious freedom by political forces, totalitarian sects, and extremist groups.<sup>6</sup> To be more exact, the government responded to the religious renaissance with a wait-and-see policy. Religious trends of all sorts capitalized on this to realize their latent potential and demonstrate their compatibility (or incompatibility) with the social-cultural milieu.

In recent years the situation has changed dramatically; the state's political priorities have become much clearer: satisfaction of the spiritual needs of society; confessional harmony; and protection of the religious sphere against destructive foreign influences. Much is being done to organize religious enlightenment on a mass scale and competitive professional religious education. So far, the results leave much to be desired, yet the state tries to add creativity to the religious processes. With this aim in view, the Law on Freedom of Religion was amended: Muslim religious rites and ceremonies were entrusted to citizens of Azerbaijan educated inside the country. In August 2009, the Baku Islamic University (founded in 1991 as the Baku Islamic Institute and renamed a university in 1997) received a license for educational activities in the sphere of higher professional training. This was a great step forward: from that time on students and masters have been enrolled on the strength of a standard test supervised by a state commission; the graduates receive state diplomas.

In Azerbaijan, a country with a long history of religious tolerance, the government is prepared to cooperate with the traditional religions present in the country. The head of state repeatedly con-

<sup>5</sup> R. Mekhtiev, *Na puti k demokratii: razmyshleniia o nasledii*, Şərq-Qərb (East-West), Baku, 2007, p. 585.

<sup>6</sup> This is related, for example, to the fact that in 1995 state registration of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan was annulled; in May 1996, its leaders were arrested; in April 1997, they were convicted of cooperating with the Iranian special services. In April 1996, Azerbaijan intercepted the separatist activities of a citizen of Russia who called for an independent Lezghian Islamic State to be set up in an area between the borders of Azerbaijan and Dagestan. In 2000, leaders of the extremist Islamic group Jeyshullakh (The Army of Allah) were arrested and later convicted of several grave crimes.

firms this in his addresses to the religious communities on the occasion of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish holydays; the state and the Heydar Aliev Foundation finance reconstruction and restoration of religious buildings; the country's authorities create favorable conditions for the development of cultures, languages, and religions of the ethnic minorities. The country's confessional makeup (Muslims account for about 96% of the total population) calls for greater attention to the Muslim community.

The officially registered Muslim communities are united under the Administration of the Muslims of the Caucasus (AMC). The Law on Freedom of Religion describes the AMC, set up in 1872 by a decree of the emperor of Russia, as the "historical center" of the country's Muslims. Some of the religious figures and human rights activists, however, disagree with this as a vestige of the imperial system no longer compatible with the demands of the time.<sup>7</sup> The latest amendments passed in June 2011 confirmed the status of the Muslim's religious center: from that time on, Muslim communities should not only be registered on the strength of their written applications to the AMC, they may only start functioning when the AMC appoints their heads (Art 12).

While the public finds it hard to agree with the AMC's status, the structure itself is working toward religious harmony in the region. For fifteen years now, its Chairman Sheikh ul Islam Allahshukur Pashazade has been working hard to tap the potential of people's diplomacy for settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; he believes that religious leaders should be actively involved in peacekeeping. In April 2008, he, together with Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II, suggested that a Consultative Religious Council be set up at the U.N. to ensure active cooperation between religious structures and peacekeepers.

Despite the international prestige and international activities of its chairman, the AMC remains passive inside the country. Executive and judicial structures tend to ignore its opinion when dealing with the Muslim community, a fact amply confirmed by the judicial decisions on the removal of two half-ready mosques in the Surakhan and Yasamal districts of Baku; in August 2009, at the 12th AMC Congress, Sheikh ul Islam Pashazade criticized the decisions of the district courts.<sup>8</sup>

In an effort to improve the situation the AMC leaders have recently been concentrating on religious enlightenment and a more effective personnel policy: today, they prefer to hire young theologians the faithful know well and respect.

The positions of official Islam in Azerbaijan are contested by Shi'a pro-Iranian communities; orthodox Sunni Salafis, Nursists (followers of theologian Said Nursi of Kurdish Turkish origins who died in 1960), and Sufi Tariqats. Among the latter, followers of Naqshbandi Sheikh Osman Nuri Topbaş (Turkey) are especially active in the capital and elsewhere in the country, while the followers of Avar Sheikh Sayid-afandi Chirkeevsky (Daghestan) teach in the country's northern and northwestern regions among the followers of Naqshbandiyya, Shaziliyya, and Jazuliyya. The Tabligh Jamaat movement, which in the middle 1990s actively promoted spiritual liberation and asceticism, has lost practically all its followers and, along with them, its former impact.

The non-traditional non-Islamic religious trends are represented by Protestant churches (Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses), the Roman Catholic Church, the Krishna Conscience Movement, and the Bahais.<sup>9</sup> Society is concerned about proselytism of the

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<sup>7</sup> See: Interview of Chairman of the Center for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Confession DEVAMM I. Ibrahimoglu to the Novosti-Azerbaijan Agency of 9 September, 2008, available at [<http://www.newsazerbaijan.ru/exclusive/20080909/42476974.html>].

<sup>8</sup> See: *Zerkalo*, 13 August, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> The friendly relations among the leaders of the AMC, the Baku and the Caspian Eparchy and the community of the mountain Jews of Azerbaijan created the impression that the Shi'a (Jafarite) and Sunni (Shafi'i and Hanafi) madhhabs, Christian Orthodoxy, and Judaism are typical of Azerbaijan. The official visit of Pope John Paul II to Azerbaijan on 22-23 May, 2002 created the impression that the Roman Catholic Church had deep roots in the country; recently, it has been enjoying much more attention than before. At the same time, some of the Protestant churches (Baptists and Lutherans) which, like Catholics, arrived in Azerbaijan in the 19th century, also want to be counted among the traditional religions.

Protestant and neo-Hindu trends<sup>10</sup>; their adepts are not ostracized, however their refusal to accept national cultural and historical traditions causes social conflicts. Some of the Christian groups support Armenians as fellow Christians and hold a special position on the Azeri-Armenian conflict. In this way they stand opposed to the dominant social-cultural paradigm.<sup>11</sup>

In the last two decades, the non-traditional and independent religious communities have expanded their social base. While the official clergy has done practically nothing to revive the spiritual health of the nation and consolidate it, independent missionaries (many of them were citizens of Azerbaijan educated abroad) have been displaying much more vigor in proselytizing. With no state support and no sympathy among the official religious figures, they inevitably run into legal and organizational problems which add to their popularity and increase the number of their followers and sympathizers.

Today, the situation is fairly contradictory: independent missionaries exploit the freedom of religion and religious tolerance and feel free to disregard the social consequences of their sermons. In the mid-1990s, people were concerned about family conflicts or conflicts at work; recently attempts have been made to use religion for criminal purposes. On 17 August, 2008, an explosion in the Juma, also known as the Abu Bakr mosque (Narimanov District of Baku), killed two citizens of Azerbaijan. The response was prompt: activities in the mosque, the main seat of ideological confrontation between the moderate Salafis headed by imam Süleymanov and the radical Sunni wing, Kharijites, were suspended by a court decision. To prevent religious intolerance, the government took resolute measures to cut short violations of the freedom of religion. Stricter control over the religious situation resulted in the removal of two "illegally built" mosques, which raised a wave of public discontent. The authorities of the Surakhani District in Baku intended to pull down another incomplete mosque in the Yeni Gunesli settlement; the tug-of-war which went on for nearly twelve months caused the indignation of several prominent spiritual leaders in Iran. The AMC chairman had to register the mosque.<sup>12</sup>

Between 2009 and 2011, the Law on Freedom of Religion was amended by the Milli Mejlis of Azerbaijan to minimize foreign influence on the religious life inside the country and tighten punishment for illegal religious activities. The Criminal and the Administrative codes were amended accordingly, yet problems in religious life persisted; on the eve of the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest, an armed group was arrested on the suspicion of planned terrorist acts in several locations, including mosques and other places of worship.<sup>13</sup> This cost Chairman of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations Hidayat Orujov his post: he was replaced with Elshad Iskandarov, an experienced politician and diplomat with perfect knowledge of the Islamic world.

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In the past, followers of the Albanian Apostolic Church lived in the territory of Azerbaijan. Today Udins follow their religious and cultural traditions. Molokans, "spiritual Christians" who moved to the Transcaucasia in the 1830s under a decree of Nicholas I, have been living in Azerbaijan for nearly two centuries now. Bahatism arrived in Azerbaijan at almost the same time as Mirza Husayn 'Ali (Baha-ulla) proclaimed himself in 1863 to be "Promised One." I count these groups among the non-traditional religions because they follow special religious forms different from those which dominate Azeri society today.

<sup>10</sup> The report of the U.S. Department of State on Freedom of Religion in Azerbaijan in 2008 pointed out that society was prejudiced against those who change their faith, missionaries, and pro-Iranian and "Wahhabi" groups. They are all regarded as a threat to political stability and religious harmony (see: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Azerbaijan (2008)*, available at [<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108435.htm>]).

<sup>11</sup> See: M. Quluzadə, "Dinimizi qorumaq hamımızın borcudur," *Dövlət və din. İctimai fikir toplusu*, No. 1 (5), 2008, S. 54. M. Quluzadə, "Protection of Religion is a Duty of Everybody," *The State and Religion*, Collection, No. 1 (5), 2008, p. 54).

<sup>12</sup> See: Mediaforum.az, 17 May, 2010, available at [<http://www.mediaforum.az/az/2010/05/17/PREZİDENTİN-FATİMEYİ-ZƏHRA-MƏSCİDİ-İLƏ-BAĞLI-TAPŞIRIĞINA-045321821c00.html>].

<sup>13</sup> See: Statement of the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan Republic, 30 May, 2012, available at [<http://www.mns.gov.az/az/news/341.html>].

In these conditions, the future of relations between the state and religion in Azerbaijan remains dim. The government demonstrates its readiness to talk to all religious associations loyal to the states' secular principles and respecting the spiritual and moral traditions of the peoples of Azerbaijan. The rulers, however, are fully aware of the fact that the state's religious policy and wider contacts with the main confessions should not infringe on the freedom of conscience and religion. This explains why the authorities demonstrate restraint and adequacy when dealing with the independent and non-traditional communities. Today, it is more or less clear that the religious permissiveness of the last decade of the 20th century will not return. Liberalization of the religious sphere might strengthen independent Muslim communities, which frequently produce independent radical groups. Liberalization might transform Muslim associations into religious-political communities and add to their political weight. This, in turn, will fortify the positions of Iran and Turkey and weaken the positions of Russia, the West, and Israel, which will hardly accept this. The fears that politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan will destabilize the political situation in the region are well justified.

On the other hand, the leaders of Azerbaijan will hardly place their stakes on limiting religious freedom so as not to undermine the course toward democratic changes and the trust of the democratic institutions in the people in power. Any attempts to stem the natural transition from atheist ideology to traditional spirituality will encourage corruption, devalue moral values, and destroy the national idea. This is not all: pushed aside the religious opposition might become fertile soil for the ideology of religious extremism.

Stronger state control over the religious sphere, support of the traditional confessions, encouragement of the inter-religious dialog, and creation of better conditions for religious enlightenment are the right answers to the current problems. However, any democratic state that decides to rely on the traditional religions should take into account the degree of their correspondence with the requirements of social development. Traditionalist teachings keep society together in the face of social upheavals, although they hardly meet the needs of the rapidly developing societies oriented toward absorbing and mastering progressive ideas and technologies. There are religious figures and theologians among the clergy who, while disagreeing on what can be accepted as an adequate scope of reform, know that the religious traditions "ossified" in certain respects should be critically reassessed. Influential Azeri politicians are also involved in the discussions of modernization of Islam. So far, the Muslim community has not adjusted itself to the idea of reforms; this means that the future of religion in Azerbaijan and its social role largely depends on whether spiritual leaders will create modernization mechanisms and transform the religious institutions into vehicles of progressive ideas and moderators of public consciousness.

## **Georgia: Between the Liberal Project and Orthodox Nationalism**

Unlike in Azerbaijan where religious communities have been pushed to the fringes of society, in Georgia, the Orthodox Church plays an important role in social and political life. In the latter half of the 1990s, when Georgia lived through an abysmal political, social, and economic crisis, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) did a lot to unify the country spiritually and politically. Even though the Church failed to completely restore its authority undermined in the Soviet period, Georgian politicians and public figures developed the habit of demonstrating their religious feelings. On 30 March, 2001, the Georgian parliament passed a Constitutional Law which stressed the GOC's "exceptional historical role" and stipulated the possibility of concluding a concordat between the Church and the

state. On 14 October, 2002, a Constitutional Agreement appeared between the State of Georgia and the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which was practically ratified by the parliament. Georgia was the first among the Soviet successor-states to regulate relations between the state and a religious association by means of a Constitutional agreement.

Under the Concordat, the state recognized the GOC as a legal entity of public law acting in the interests of the whole of Georgian society; the Church and top figures received certain privileges: the Catholicos-Patriarch was granted immunity; the top figures were relieved from conscription; under Art II, priests were obliged to keep secret the information they acquired during confession. According to the memorandum signed in March 2010 by the Public Prosecutor Office of Georgia, the Georgian Patriarchate, and the Ministry of Correction and Legal Assistance, convicts recommended by the Patriarchate are to serve their terms in monasteries rather than in prisons.

The state recognizes marriages concluded by the Orthodox Church and pledges to create an institution of priests in military units, prisons, and detention centers. The GOC enjoys wide rights in education: secondary schools offer optional courses in Christian Orthodoxy; under Art V of the Concordat, the GOC is responsible for the curriculum and personnel policy.

The Church is partly funded from the state budget, which contains a corresponding item.<sup>14</sup> It enjoys tax preferences and special property rights. Under Arts VII and VIII, the state recognized the Church as the owner of all Orthodox churches, monasteries, ruins, and corresponding landed plots as well as church treasuries protected by the state (with the exception of those privately owned). Church property is inalienable and exempt from land and property taxes. Art XI said that the state acknowledged “the material and moral damage to the Church” incurred during the period of lost independence (the 19th and 20th centuries) and pledged to partially compensate for the losses.<sup>15</sup>

In recent years, the Tbilisi-based building of the former spiritual seminary (which cost 26 million lari, or about \$17.6 million), a plot of land (4 thousand sq m), and a building with a total floor space of 4,600 sq m (8 million lari, or about \$5.4 million) were returned to the Georgian Patriarchate. It also received the grounds and a building adjacent to the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi, 279 hectares of forests in the Dedoplistskaro District (Eastern Georgia), and land in various settlements.<sup>16</sup>

This means that under the Concordat, the GOC acquired numerous advantages of which other confessions (including the large communities of Muslims, Catholics, and Armenians) are deprived. The status of a legal entity of public law<sup>17</sup> allows the GOC to engage, under state control, in political, state, social, educational, cultural, and other types of public activities. Under Art 1509 of the Civil Code of Georgia of 1997, all religious associations identified as legal entities of public law are entitled to similar rights. The Law on Legal Entities of Public Law of 1999, however, did not envisage the registration procedure for religious associations. This means that all other confessions could not enter into legal relations with the state. In April 2005, Art 1509 of the Civil Code was amended, which allowed religious organizations to be registered as non-profit legal entities of private law. Several religious associations, the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia, the Roman Catholic Church in Georgia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Georgia, and the Baptist Church in Georgia among them, refused to be satisfied: they demanded either a Law on Religious Associations (there is no such or similar law in Georgia), or simple (not constitutional) agreements between the state and all religious organizations without exception.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Georgia (July-December)*, available at [[http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168312.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168312.htm)].

<sup>15</sup> For the full text in English, see official web-site of the Patriarchate of Georgia, available at [[http://www.patriarchate.ge/\\_en/?action=eklesia-saxelmcifo](http://www.patriarchate.ge/_en/?action=eklesia-saxelmcifo)].

<sup>16</sup> See: Interfax Agency, 28 March, 2008, available at [<http://religion.customers.ru/gry/?act=news&div=23608>].

<sup>17</sup> Georgian laws distinguish between legal entities of private and public law. The legal status of legal entities of public law is regulated not only by the Civil Code, but also by special legal acts.

<sup>18</sup> See: *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 14 April, 2001.

Intensive cooperation between the GOC and the government displeases part of the Orthodox community and irritates the liberals. The Concordat was signed at a time when the discredited political leaders were seeking support of the Orthodox community and religious nationalists. The Rose Revolution brought different people with different geopolitical priorities to power. Today, the GOC's corporate interests no longer coincide with the official course toward stronger democracy and liberalized religious rules.

The Five-Day War further complicated relations between the Georgian Patriarchate and the Georgian political leaders apprehensive of the GOC's efforts to strengthen spiritual and cultural ties between the peoples of Russia and Georgia as promoting Russia's interests.<sup>19</sup> The Imedi TV channel, likewise, voiced its concerns: "The Georgian Church might be involved in a very dangerous game. It should not be excluded that the Russian forces will use the high authority of our patriarch to whiten their ideological intervention."<sup>20</sup> Similar statements came from the Public Television of Georgia and the Rustavi-2 TV Company. The GOC heads firmly disproved all accusations of promoting interests of a foreign state: while "holding a neutral position about internal political forces, the Patriarchate of Georgia takes active measures as a guarantor of territorial integrity of Georgia and unity of the Georgian people in external political process."<sup>21</sup>

Despite strong popular support, the Catholicos-Patriarch avoids open confrontation with the president, even though he constantly sides with prominent politicians and public figures potentially able to alter the nature of the presidential reforms. On the eve of the 2007 parliamentary and presidential elections, the Catholicos-Patriarch spoke about monarchic rule for the country under the Bagrationi Dynasty<sup>22</sup>; in November 2011, he suggested that billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, an inveterate critic of President Saakashvili, should be returned his Georgian citizenship.<sup>23</sup>

The authorities, on the other hand, are seeking closer contacts with other confessions. In March 2011, the parliamentary majority represented by the ruling United National Movement Party amended the Civil Code so that all religious organizations—traditional and those with an official status in at least one other country (EU member)—could acquire the status of an entity of public law. The Georgian Patriarchate did not like this: so far its exceptional status had allowed it to trim the impact of other churches. It was especially concerned about the prospect of transferring the six disputed churches (so far on the balance of the Ministry of Culture, Protection of Monuments and Sport) to the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC).<sup>24</sup>

The GOC does not like the attention the Georgian authorities are paying the Muslims and their problems. In February 2012, the Georgian Patriarchate demanded that it be represented at the talks with Turkey on servicing the mosque in Akhaltsikhe and restoring the Abd-Aziz Mosque in Batumi.<sup>25</sup> In May 2011, when the Administration of the Muslims of Georgia (AMG) was set up, the dialog between the Muslim community of Georgia and the country's authorities became even more active. The new structure detached itself from the AMK which, until that time, had been the head structure of the Georgian Muslims. In 2005, the AMK resolutely opposed the attempts of certain religious leaders (the heads of the Akhli-beyt and Iman societies among them) to set up an independent religious center: the AMK and Georgian authorities were apprehensive of greater Iranian

<sup>19</sup> See: K. Kolodin, "Saakashvili zapisalsia v antiklerikaly," available at [<http://www.izvestia.ru/georgia1/article3132814/>].

<sup>20</sup> *Georgia Times*, 7 September, 2009, available at [<http://www.georgiatimes.info/analysis/20753.html>].

<sup>21</sup> Statement of the Georgian Patriarchate of 5 September, 2009, available at [[http://www.patriarchate.ge/\\_en/?action=news\\_show&mode=news&id=98](http://www.patriarchate.ge/_en/?action=news_show&mode=news&id=98)].

<sup>22</sup> [<http://www.religare.ru/article46333.htm>].

<sup>23</sup> See: *Georgia Times. Info*, 14 November, 2011, available at [<http://www.georgiatimes.info/news/67281.html>].

<sup>24</sup> G. Dvali, "Prezident protiv Patriarkha," *Kommersant Ukraina*, 7 July, 2011, available at [<http://www.kommersant.ua/doc/1674179>].

<sup>25</sup> [<http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2012/02/10/944205.html>].

influence.<sup>26</sup> The AMG has already been registered with the National Agency of Public Registry and intends to cooperate with the religious and state structures inside the country and outside it. Significantly, in March 2012 by an order of the minister of culture, six mosques received the status of monuments of cultural heritage: obvious recognition of the contribution of the Georgian Muslims to the culture of Georgia.

The radical wing of the Orthodox clergy, which carries a lot of weight with the Holy Synod, is the most consistent opponent of the spread of non-Orthodox trends in Georgia. In 1997, under the pressure of Orthodox nationalists, the GOC withdrew from the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches. On 18 August, 2003, the Synod condemned the attempts of the public to interfere in the internal affairs of the Church and warned that the anti-Church activities of the pro-Western liberals “might cause a serious split in society.” The verbatim report of this sitting registered that the Orthodox Christians rejected political, economic, and cultural integration with the West, as well as any forms of dialog with the non-Orthodox confessions and neglect of the church traditions under the pretext of democracy and freedom of speech.<sup>27</sup>

While the Muslims (mainly Azeris, Ajars, and Kistintys), the AAC followers (mainly Armenians), Catholics (mainly Georgians and Aysories), Jews and Yezidies are tolerated, non-traditional groups are resolutely rejected, especially by ethnic Georgians. The annual reports of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, the U.S. Department of State, and international organizations regularly report attacks on members of religious minorities by certain public figures and politicians.<sup>28</sup> Schools are not free from religious discrimination either: those students who do not profess Orthodoxy or refuse to attend history of religion classes are bullied by teachers and classmates.<sup>29</sup>

Between 1999 and 2004, followers of excommunicated priest Vasily Mkalavishvili caused havoc in the country. Despite numerous complaints to the public Prosecutor’s Office, the Orthodox extremist was not arrested until March 2004; he was brought to court and sentenced to six years in prison for inciting violence against minorities, pogroms, beatings-up, and burning non-Orthodox books. In July 2008, on the eve of the war in South Ossetia, he was released and even performed a service in an Orthodox church. Paata Bluashvili, head of the Orthodox Jvari Union accused of religious violence, has been on the run from the Georgian authorities since 2007. In May 2007, the European Human Rights Court in Strasburg recognized numerous violations of the European Human Rights Convention in relation to 97 members of the Gldansk Congregation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and imposed on Georgia a fine of €41,523 in favor of the aggrieved party.<sup>30</sup>

According to the Human Rights Department at the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia and the office of the Public Defender of Georgia, which monitor the religious situation in the country, religious discrimination is on the decline. In January 2008, in his second inaugural address President Saakashvili pointed out that religious tolerance should be maintained; the heads of several religious minorities were invited to attend the inauguration ceremony.<sup>31</sup> In 2010, the office of the Public Defender received only seven complaints of religious intolerance.<sup>32</sup> In his 2011 report, the Georgian

<sup>26</sup> See: C. Prasad, “Georgia’s Muslim Community: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?” *ECMI Working Paper*, No. 58, February 2012, available at [[http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx\\_ifpubdb/Working\\_Paper\\_58\\_En.pdf](http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_ifpubdb/Working_Paper_58_En.pdf)].

<sup>27</sup> See: N.A. Belyakova, “Ocherk religioznoy situatsii v Gruzii,” available at [[http://www.ia-centr.ru/archive/public\\_details084d.html?id=46](http://www.ia-centr.ru/archive/public_details084d.html?id=46)].

<sup>28</sup> See, for example: European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, *Second Report on Georgia*, June 2006, available at [[http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XML/Ecri/ENGLISH/Cycle\\_03/03\\_CbC\\_eng/GEO-CbC-III-2007-2-ENG.pdf](http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XML/Ecri/ENGLISH/Cycle_03/03_CbC_eng/GEO-CbC-III-2007-2-ENG.pdf)].

<sup>29</sup> See: Human Rights Centre, *State of Freedom of Religion in Georgia since the Adoption of Constitutional Agreement between Government and the Orthodox Church of Georgia*, Religious Freedom Report, April 2008, available at [<http://www.humanrights.ge/admin/editor/uploads/pdf/ReligionReport.pdf>].

<sup>30</sup> [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/newstext/news/id/1185797.html>].

<sup>31</sup> See: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Georgia (2008)*, available at [<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108447.htm>].

<sup>32</sup> See: *Civil Georgia*, 4 April, 2011 [<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23309&search=>]



Public Defender pointed out that in the last two years the law-enforcement bodies have been much more responsive to this type of crime and acted much more adequately.<sup>33</sup> Religious intolerance in Georgia, however, has not yet been completely eliminated, which means that nationalists and radicals have nothing to fear.

It seems that the continued political tension and vague geopolitical prospects do not allow the people in power to openly confront the Georgian Patriarchate, which has a lot of public support behind it. This might change if the presidential team moves ahead in the talks on NATO membership, or if it resolves the ethnopolitical conflicts. The Georgian ethnic identity, on the other hand, is closely connected with the Orthodox Church, which skillfully taps the political context and popular support to cement its position. Today, the anti-Russian sentiments of the people in power clash with the anti-Western rhetoric of the Orthodox Church. The future of relations between the state and the Church in Georgia depends on the extent to which the corresponding elites manage to synchronize the opposing trends.

## **Armenia: Great-Power Ambitions are Still Alive**

In Armenia, where ethnic self-identity is practically entirely associated with the prevailing religion, the relations between the state and the church took on a special form. Throughout their history, the Armenians repeatedly lost and restored their independence (they lost it in 1375 when the Cilician Dynasty of Lusignan was deposed to regain it when the Soviet Union left the stage). This explains why the AAC not only provides the people with spiritual support, but also protects the political interests of the Armenian nobility. The Constitution of the Republic of Armenia says: "The Republic of Armenia recognizes the exclusive historical mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church as the national church, in the spiritual life, development of the national culture, and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia" (Art 8.1). The preamble to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations stresses the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the development and protection of the Armenian nation. Meanwhile, in Armenia the state and the Church have not yet entered a Concordat.

On 17 March, 2000, the sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Armenia and the AAC, which presupposed a concordat. Under the document, the sides intended to resolve the problems related to the property of the AAC, specify taxation privileges for the Church and its traditional organizations, give it a priority place in the state media and in educational and cultural programs, agree on the conditions for the Church's presence in military units, detention centers, prisons, etc. The sides, however, disagreed on several fundamental issues, which explains why the draft never became a final document either in the next nine months, as had been preliminary stipulated, or in the next eight years.

This can probably be explained by the clash of interests of the conservative-minded clergy determined to retain its influence and the politicians seeking closer ties with the West. This also accounts for the fairly contradictory aims the Armenian clergy is expected to pursue in the interests of the state. On the one hand, the AAC as a national Church seeks to preserve the nation's religious uniformity to achieve the nation's political cohesion. On the other, the AAC has to move closer to other confessions to create a cultural background for Armenia's strategic partnership with Russia and

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<sup>33</sup> See: *Civil Georgia*, 29 March, 2012 [<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24610&search=>]

promote Armenia's Euro-Atlantic integration. The latter aim has already driven Etchmiadzin into a tight corner: the proselytizing zeal of the Protestant churches cannot but cause concern among the Orthodox nationalists. Closer ties between the AAC and the Armenian Catholic Church might cost the former its church identity, the main source of its integrating function. Today, the two churches are disunited only by the doctrine of papal primacy.<sup>34</sup>

Despite these problems, Etchmiadzin is steadily widening the scope of its involvement: there are 30 priests working in the Armenian army on the strength of the Charter of Spiritual Service in the armed forces. In August 2009, the government of Armenia postponed conscription for students of several spiritual seminaries. Since 2005, all schoolchildren have been studying the history of the Armenian Church as part of the obligatory school curriculum; the teaching materials are the product of joint efforts of the Ministry of Education and Science and the Center for Spiritual Education of the AAC. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance repeatedly recommended that the Armenian government exclude everything from the teaching aids that might breed prejudice against the followers of other religions and insult the feelings of children belonging to religious minorities.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, different confessions in Armenia are treated differently by the state and society. The Catholic community (between 100 and 180 thousand according to different sources)<sup>36</sup> maintains friendly relations with Etchmiadzin, which does nothing to alleviate its organizational problems. It has neither a seminary nor a cathedral and has to use a chapel for its religious needs. The Russian Orthodox Church has four registered religious organizations in Armenia; two more organizations found it hard to register.<sup>37</sup> On the whole, the Armenian leaders cherish their contacts with the ROC. They help all the ROC churches in Armenia, which canonically belong to the Maykop Eparchy of the ROC. A convent is being built in Erevan at an Orthodox church; in March 2010, construction of a new Orthodox church began. The Armenian authorities are doing a lot to preserve the religious traditions of the Aysories (followers of the Assyrian Church of the East) and the Yezidi Kurds (Sun worshippers); the religious leaders of both groups are very much concerned about Protestant missionaries operating among their followers.<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that the Armenian priests are, on the whole, not involved in missionary activities among other ethnic groups (they account for about 5.3% of the total population).<sup>39</sup> The small communities of the Kurds, Russians, Aysories, Greeks, and Ukrainians who identify themselves with various churches or religions stir up no anxiety among the authorities and official clergy.

The non-traditional confessions are fully exposed to the effects of state protectionism of the AAC. This is particularly true of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists, and other Protestant

<sup>34</sup> See: G. Fagan, A. Shipkov, "Armyanskiy konkordat," available at [[http://www.archipelag.ru/ru\\_mir/religio/gko/questions/armenian-concordat/](http://www.archipelag.ru/ru_mir/religio/gko/questions/armenian-concordat/)].

<sup>35</sup> See: European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, *Second Report on Armenia*, June 2006, available at [[http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XML/Ecri/ENGLISH/Cycle\\_03/03\\_CbC\\_eng/ARM-CbC-III-2007-1-ENG.pdf](http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XML/Ecri/ENGLISH/Cycle_03/03_CbC_eng/ARM-CbC-III-2007-1-ENG.pdf)].

<sup>36</sup> See: Interview of priest of the Armenian-Catholic parish in Erevan P. Yasaian of 7 March, 2008, available at [<http://www.wwd.ru/news/catholic/Kard-Bertone-v-Armenii-na>].

<sup>37</sup> See: Interview of priest of the Orthodox Church of the Intercession of the Most Holy Mother of God in Erevan D. Abrakhamian to the Forum-18 Human Rights Organization of 19 February, 2009, available at [[http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=1251](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1251)].

<sup>38</sup> Some Kurdish intellectuals are not happy with the official policy designed to divide the Muslim Kurds and the Yezidi Kurds very much obvious during the 2010 population census (see: "The Situation of the Yezidies in Armenia," available at [<http://kurdistan.org/Current-Updates/yezidi.html>]). At the same time, the Yezidies loyal to the Armenian authorities who are represented by the Yezidi National Union of Armenia insist that they should not be counted among the Kurds and that those who "tamper with" their ethnic origins should be persecuted under the law (see: [<http://www.ezdixandi.net.ru/news/2009-04-30-316>]).

<sup>39</sup> See: *CIA World Factbook*, September 2009, available at [<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/am.html>].

groups.<sup>40</sup> Thanks to international support, the Jehovah's Witnesses acquired official registration in October 2004, but they are still aware of strong and mounting pressure, their conscientious objection to military service being one of the targets. In the context of Armenia's aggressive foreign policy, it is perceived as "betrayal of national interests."<sup>41</sup> In January 2012, the European Human Rights Court granted the appeals of two citizens of Armenia and members of the Jehovah's Witnesses who in 2003 had been sent to prison as conscientious objectors. A similar complaint of another conscientious objector was granted in July 2011. According to defense lawyer Shane Brady who represented the Jehovah's Witnesses, 58 more members of the same organization are serving prison terms.<sup>42</sup>

Since 2009 the Armenian parliament has been discussing amendments to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations designed to tighten punishment for proselytism. The draft contains the concept "fishers of men" by which the authors mean "all sorts of religious preaching that uses physical and psychological violence in relation to people of different religious convictions, belonging to other religions, having different ideas to incline them to apostasy, drawing people into their organizations by promises of material gain or exploiting their dependent position or using their relatives, inciting hatred and enmity of people of other religions, other religious convictions, and organizations, and engaging in persistent harassment of people two or more times, as well as of minors under the age of 14 without the knowledge of their parents or guardians."<sup>43</sup> If passed, the law will effectively stem all attempts of religious minorities to proselytize among AAC followers. If passed, other amendments will exempt the AAC from land and property taxes which, however, will infringe on the rights of other religious organizations. In 2011, a draft was sent to the Venice Commission (the European Commission for Democracy through Law at the Council of Europe).

In Armenia, the public has readily accepted division of all confessions into traditional and non-traditional. According to Hranush Kharatian, Head of the Center of Ethnological Studies Hazarashen, in Armenia a shift from the traditional to one of the non-traditional religions is perceived not as realizing the right to freedom of religion but as loss of an important part of ethnic identity. The efforts to oppose proselytism are shifted from the human rights context "to the right of a group to preserve its ethnic culture."<sup>44</sup>

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In each of the Central Caucasian states, relations between the state and religious organizations follow their own logic suggested by ethnoconfessional specifics and foreign policy priorities. In Azerbaijan, the Muslim organizations have no special advantages over the non-Muslim communities: the country's authorities deliberately maintain parity and encourage religious tolerance. In Georgia, where the Georgian Orthodox Church enjoys considerable advantages, the disagreements inside the Church and geopolitical reality force the Patriarchate to act cautiously and take the country's political leaders into account. In Armenia, the exclusive position of the Armenian Apostolic

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<sup>40</sup> On 13 February, 2009 the Institute for War and Peace Reporting published a whole series of complains of discriminatory actions of the Armenian authorities and the AAC presented by members of religious minorities (see: [<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/499a6f200.html>]).

<sup>41</sup> [<http://old.kavkaz-uzel.ru/digesttext/digest/id/722661.html>].

<sup>42</sup> See: "Kavkazsky uzel," 14 January, 2012, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/199254/>].

<sup>43</sup> "Kavkazskiy uzel," 26 August, 2011, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/191478/>].

<sup>44</sup> H. Kharatian, "Armenia. Religion," in: *Central Eurasia-2008*, Analytical Annual, CA&CC Press® Sweden, 2009, p. 61.

Church makes it a weighty factor in public and political life. Below I will discuss in detail the main external and internal factors responsible for the nature of relations between the state and confessions.

## Religion and the Ethnic Question in the Central Caucasus

In the last two decades, the Central Caucasus has been living under the pressure of two dominant trends: integration into the world community and settlement of ethnoterritorial conflicts. Ethnic fractures, the tectonic waves of which were felt even under Soviet power, developed in the post-Soviet period into seats of separatism and armed confrontation. In the Caucasus, ethnic and religious identities are two sides of the same coin, but the political atmosphere in the warring camps is determined by ethnic rather than confessional self-identity. Indeed, neither in Nagorno-Karabakh nor in Abkhazia did the confrontation between the ethnic groups develop into “religious wars;” however, in both cases different confessions added weight to ethnic motivations.

From the very beginning, that is, since 1988, the separatist movement in Nagorno-Karabakh capitalized on the Armenians’ religious feelings. The separatist leaders did not limit themselves to strikes and protest rallies; they demanded restoration of churches and insisted that the leaders of the C.P.S.U. transfer the Christian churches to them. Early in 1990, the Council for Religious Affairs under the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers endorsed the transfer of six churches (including the Albanian monasteries Amaras and Gandzasar) to the Armenians of Karabakh. Later, on 21 November, 1990, the Council for Religious Affairs retreated on its previous decision concerning the Albanian monasteries, which stirred up a lot of indignation among the Armenians and rumors that the Armenians were being alienated from the “monuments of their spiritual heritage.” Roman Catholic priest Fr. Josef Gunchaga from Slovakia, assistant prior at the St. Ludovic Cathedral in Moscow, was very explicit: the events in Nagorno-Karabakh were a “psychological war against Christianity;” he was not alone.<sup>45</sup>

The Catholicos of All Armenians Vazgen I (he died in 1994) was involved in the Karabakh developments from the very beginning; he inspired the Armenians to fight for self-determination and for what he believed would be fair resolution of the Karabakh question. On 25 February, 1988 he wrote an open letter to General Secretary of the C.C. C.P.S.U. Mikhail Gorbachev, in which he demanded that Nagorno-Karabakh be joined to Armenia.<sup>46</sup> On 14 September, 1990, he sent Gorbachev, elected president of the Soviet Union, a telegram asking him to rely on the “power of the law” to help the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh realize their right to self-determination. Otherwise, warned the head of the AAC, the Armenians would be ready to die for their freedom.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike his Armenian colleague, Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Transcaucasia (later AMC), Sheikh ul Islam Pashazade stuck to the wait-and-see policy; on 4 December, 1988, he tried to convince the protesters on Lenin Square in Baku to go home.<sup>48</sup> The same year he tapped the religious resource to defuse the tension in Nagorno-Karabakh and prevent bloodshed. On 5 May, 1988, he met Catholicos of All Armenians Vazgen I (later these meetings became regular). On 17 November, 1993, the spiritual leaders of the two countries met in the St. Daniil Monastery in

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<sup>45</sup> A. Melik-Shakhnazarov, “Nagorny Karabakh: fakty protiv lzhi,” available at [<http://www.sumgait.info/caucasus-conflicts/nagorno-karabakh-facts/nagorno-karabakh-facts-4.htm>].

<sup>46</sup> [[http://www.armeniaforeignministry.com/fr/nk/nk\\_file/article/61.html](http://www.armeniaforeignministry.com/fr/nk/nk_file/article/61.html)].

<sup>47</sup> [<http://www.sumgait.info/caucasus-conflicts/nagorno-karabakh-facts/nagorno-karabakh-facts-4.htm>].

<sup>48</sup> See: A. Yunusov, *Islam v Azerbaidzhane*, Zaman, Baku, 2004, p. 185.

Moscow through the mediation of Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II. The participants agreed to stop the bloodshed without preliminary conditions and to prevent the conflict's internationalization. On 15 April, 1994, the spiritual leaders met once more and suggested that the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia meet.<sup>49</sup>

This meant that religious antagonism of the Armenians and Azeris in Nagorno-Karabakh was pushed to the backburner and remained there. The Armenians are fond of speaking about their geographic location between Europe and the Muslim world and insisting on their specific mission of "custodians of Christian values and human rights and the strategic border of Europe's security."<sup>50</sup> The prospects of wider contacts with the Arab world and the position of the world community prevent the Armenian politicians from describing the conflict with Azerbaijan as a Muslim-Christian confrontation.<sup>51</sup>

In Abkhazia, the involvement of units of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus (the Chechens under Shamil Basaev were especially active) added religious hues to the ethnic conflict. To a great extent, they helped the Abkhazians succeed in 1992-1993; there were also Armenians, Ossets, and Russians in the ranks of the international volunteers. The Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation was not religious: after the exodus of ethnic Georgians, over half of the republic's population remains Christian. The local Muslims demonstrate no religious zeal: so far, there is not a single functioning mosque in the republic.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, the conflict in Abkhazia triggered, among other things, confessional contradictions in the Georgian Orthodox Church. By 1993, only four priests remained in Abkhazia; in 1998, they set up a new Eparchial Council of the Sukhumi-Abkhazian Eparchy de facto ruled by the Moscow Patriarchate (de jure part of the GOC's canonical territory). Its leaders headed by priest Bessarion (Aplia) repeatedly expressed their desire to be transferred under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. In October 2008, the Holy Synod declined the request and refused to include the Sukhumi-Abkhazian Eparchy in the ROC.<sup>53</sup> On 15 September, 2009, the Eparchial Council, at its extraordinary meeting, suspended the powers of the Sukhumi-Abkhazian Eparchy of the GOC in Abkhazia and restored the Abkhazian Orthodox Church (AOC), which had existed prior to 1795.<sup>54</sup> On 21 December, 2010, the Holy Synod of the GOC responded with a decision to add Abkhazia to the title of the Georgian Patriarch.<sup>55</sup> On 10 February, 2011, the Government of Abkhazia transferred 38 churches free of charge to the AOC for perpetual use, which made the Church the republic's largest landowner.<sup>56</sup>

Today, the Church is torn apart by serious contradictions among Orthodox priests. In the spring of 2011, a group of young priests led by Hieromonach Andrew (Ampar) objected to the appointment of Hegumen Efrem (Vinogradov) Father Superior of the Novy Afon Monastery. According to Professor of Sukhumi State University Zurab Papaskiri, the disagreements were caused

<sup>49</sup> See: R. Silantiev, "Religioznyy faktor vo vnesnepoliticheskikh konfliktakh na Kavkaze," in: *Religia i konflikt*, ed. by A. Malashenko, S. Filatov, Rossiskaya politicheskaya entsiklopediya, Moscow, 2007, p. 134.

<sup>50</sup> A. Sahakyan, D. Atanesyan, "Democratization in Armenia: Some Trends of Political Culture and Behavior," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Summer 2006, available at [[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3996/is\\_200607/ai\\_n17182658/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3996/is_200607/ai_n17182658/)].

<sup>51</sup> In November 2007, on the eve of the presidential elections in Armenia, Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan had to exonerate himself at a press conference for his incautious statement about a powerful religious element in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in his interview to the *Los Angeles Times* (Novosti-Armenia Agency, 10 November, 2007, available at [<http://www.newsarmenia.ru/karabah/20071110/41768503.html>]).

<sup>52</sup> According to the 2003 sociological poll, 60% of the respondents identified themselves as Christians and 16% as Muslims (see: *NG-Religii*, 17 March, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> See: *Kommersant*, 7 October, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> See: Interfax, 18 September, 2009, available at [<http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=documents&div=942>].

<sup>55</sup> *Rosbalt*, 21 December, 2010, available at [<http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2010/12/21/803195.html>].

<sup>56</sup> [[http://www.govabk.org/news/government/?ELEMENT\\_ID=1371&sphrase\\_id=490](http://www.govabk.org/news/government/?ELEMENT_ID=1371&sphrase_id=490)].

by the attempts of the new father superior, who brought Russian priests with him, to introduce Russian-Slavic rules at the monastery.<sup>57</sup> The local monks were justifiably irritated: Hegumen Efrem was blessed for service in Abkhazia by Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Cyril,<sup>58</sup> while the monastery canonically did not belong to the Moscow Patriarchate. On 4 April, a meeting of priests and ordinary people in Novy Afon passed a decision to ask Patriarch Cyril to recall Hegumen Efrem from Abkhazia and instruct Hieromonach Andrew to organize a congress of religious figures and common people. The congress was convened on 15 May. Despite the acute disapproval of the ROC and the stiff resistance of Father Bessarion, head of the self-announced Abkhazian Orthodox Church, the pro-government and opposition forces agreed to set up the Anakopian Eparchy in the form of the Holy Metropolitan of Abkhazia. This marked a new turn in the disagreements over the canonical status of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church. Father Bessarion, still resolved to become part of the ROC, planned a religious manifestation to drive the nonconformists out of Novy Afon Monastery, however he had to retreat under political pressure. Meanwhile, the conflict did not subside in 2011; on 27 June, 2012, Chairman of the Council of the Holy Metropolitan See of Abkhazia Archimandrite Dorofey (Dbar) discontinued contacts with the ROC when the Bishop of Maykop and Adigey Tikhon extended the ban on his church services.

In South Ossetia, likewise, the situation is not simple. After the war, the Georgian Patriarchate sided with Tbilisi, while the head of the local Orthodox community Alexander Pukhaev went to Moscow to ask the ROC leaders to take the Orthodox Christians of the self-declared republic under its omophorion and ordain him as priest. Unwilling to enter into territorial disagreements with the other local churches, the Moscow Patriarchate declined the request. After that, in 1992, Alexander Pukhaev set up the Alanian deanery of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad with three Orthodox parishes. Five other parishes remained with priests of the Nikozi and Tskhinval Eparchies of the GOC.<sup>59</sup>

In 2003, when the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and the Moscow Patriarchate drew closer the head of the deanery discontinued contacts with his partner. In November 2005, he selected a new partner—the Holy Synod in Resistance, one of the non-canonical Orthodox (Old Style) churches of Greece. After the Five-Day War, the Alanian Eparchy made another attempt to join the ROC. In October 2008, the Holy Synod of the ROC declined its request once more and the request of the Sukhumi-Abkhazian Eparchy.

Despite the political support which Moscow extends to the separatist regimes in Georgia, the Moscow Patriarchate cannot unilaterally revise the canonical borders with the GOC so as not to play into the hands of those who want to detach the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Moscow Patriarchate. Moreover, an agreement could be interpreted as an admission that the Moscow Patriarchate was wrong in its conflict with the Constantinople Patriarchate over the transfer of Orthodox parishes of Estonia to its jurisdiction and with the Rumanian Orthodox Church, which recognized the Bessarabian Metropolitan See that existed alongside the canonical Moldavian-Kishinev Metropolitan See. This explains why the ROC refused to revise the canonical territory of the GOC, even though Russia recognized independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>60</sup> The reefs in the relations between the two patriarchates can hardly be concealed. Moscow does not like the fact that Georgian Orthodoxy is much older, while in Tbilisi the memory of 1811, when the autocephalous church was replaced with the Georgian Imeretian Synod Office with damaging consequences, is very much alive.

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<sup>57</sup> See: *Nasha Abkhazia*, 4 November, 2011, available at [<http://abkhazeti.info/news/1320455877.php>].

<sup>58</sup> See: *Obrashchenie Sukhumo-Pitsundskoy eparkhii k pastve abkhazskoy tserkvi ot 6 aprelya 2011 goda* [<http://apsnypress.info/news/2934.html>].

<sup>59</sup> See: R. Silantiev, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>60</sup> This was what Head of the Department of Foreign Relations of Moscow Patriarchate Archbishop of Volokolamsk Hilarion said (see: *RIA Novosti*, 13 September, 2009, available at [<http://www.rian.ru/society/20090913/184808697.html>]).

In the current political situation, the Georgian Patriarchate has no legal power over the Orthodox parishes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; its recent diplomatic efforts to remedy the situation have failed. The developments of the last few months might somehow reduce the importance of the Orthodox factor for Georgian statehood. Fully aware of the unwelcome repercussions, the Orthodox nationalists are working hard to restore the GOC's prestige by moving into compact settlements of Azeris and Armenians.

In Kvemo-Kartli, the Azeri population objects to large crosses erected in Muslim villages and at cemeteries.<sup>61</sup> Muslims find it increasingly hard to obtain building permits for new mosques. According to the representative of Public Defender of Georgia in Kvemo-Kartli E. Mamedov, in the Azeri village of Muganly (Gardaban District), the Muslims went to a lot of trouble to finally build a mosque, albeit minus a minaret.<sup>62</sup> In September 2009, Orthodox priests finally halted restoration of the mosque in the village of Fakhraly (Bolnissi Region) in Georgia.<sup>63</sup> This problem (the mosque was built in 1905) remained pending for a long time and was mentioned in the 2010 report of the U.S. Department of State on freedom of conscience. This fully applies to the situation in Ajaria and other regions of Georgia.

Local Armenians are not alien to fanning Azeri-Georgian tension; Armenian analysts and political observers contribute to the common efforts by instilling prejudices against the Azeris through the media.<sup>64</sup> Those who try to exploit the religious feelings of the Azeris will hardly push them toward an ethnic conflict in Georgia; these efforts, however, may interfere with the integration of the nearly half-a-million-strong Azeri community in Georgian society. Today, it is the most loyal among the ethnic minorities.

Relations between the Georgian Patriarchate and the AAC Eparchy in Georgia are tense; the conflict over the so-called "disputed" churches does nothing to quench the rising antagonism. Since Soviet times the AAC in Tbilisi has been using two churches; today Armenians claim five other (unused) churches in the Georgian capital. The disagreements over the churches of Norashen in Tbilisi and Surb Nshan in Akhaltsikhe are especially heated. The Georgian Patriarchate is prepared to discuss the issue when the law on religious organizations is passed (which will not be any time soon).<sup>65</sup> The Christian-Democratic movement of Georgia, in turn, demands that several abandoned churches in north Armenia which, they believe, are Orthodox churches, be transferred to the GOC. It should be said that the Georgian Patriarchate is not raising the question of Georgian churches in Armenia, even though in February 2006 the Holy Synod of the GOC ruled that the "historical" Agarak-Tashira Eparchy (in the territory of Armenia) with its seat in Dmanisi on the Georgian border should be restored.<sup>66</sup> The response of the irritated Armenians was restrained: there are practically no GOC followers in Armenia.

The complications between the two confessions are rooted in ethnic contradictions in Samtskhe-Javakheti with its predominantly Armenian population. It was after the Russian-Turkish War of 1828-1829 that Armenians started moving in great numbers from Turkey to Samtskhe-Javakheti.<sup>67</sup> Its geographic location and the terrain are responsible for the region's economic and cultural

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<sup>61</sup> See: *Novosti-Azerbaijan*, 23 February, 2009, available at [<http://www.newsazerbaijan.ru/exclusive/20090223/42743450.html>].

<sup>62</sup> See: *Novosti Azerbaijan*, 1 April, 2009, available at [<http://www.newsazerbaijan.ru/obsh/20090401/42795016.html>].

<sup>63</sup> See: APA agency, 15 September, 2009, available at [<http://ru.apa.az/news.php?id=142704>].

<sup>64</sup> See, for example: E. Abramian, "Azerbaidzhantsy Gruzii: aktivnaia podgotovka k dolgozhdannomu vosstaniu?" available at [<http://www.mitq.org/?l=rus&id=13&news=2685>]. The author is Chairman of the Mitk analytical center (Armenia).

<sup>65</sup> See: "'Spornye' tserkvi, manifestatsiia grekov i propavshiy Molla: doklad Narodnogo Zashchtnika Gruzii," available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/news/569444.html>].

<sup>66</sup> [<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/cgi-bin/sykon/client/display.pl?sid=363&did=1806>].

<sup>67</sup> See: M. Vachnadze, V. Guruli, M. Bakhtadze, "Istoria Gruzii," available at [[http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek\\_Buks/History/Vachn/16.php](http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/History/Vachn/16.php)].

isolation from the rest of Georgia and for its dependence on neighboring Armenia. The Georgian language is not popular there; the local people are hardly integrated into Georgian society. This cannot but cause concern in Tbilisi, since the local people remain convinced that they are living in a historical region of Armenia.<sup>68</sup> The Georgian authorities respond with an active demographic policy to tip the balance in favor of Georgians; they also promote infrastructural projects of all sorts to widen the region's economic potential and upgrade the standard of living. In the spiritual sphere, this policy has taken the form of stronger Orthodox influence in the region and the steadily expanding landed property of the GOC. The Armenians are convinced that they are merely being squeezed out of their native land; they are worried not so much for religious as for political and economic considerations. Both churches took shape and exist as national churches; this means that in the event of the region's political and economic integration, the churches will easily put their differences aside.

In the Central Caucasus, the ethnic factor obviously figures prominently in the relations among confessions and between the state and confessions. This fully explains and justifies the bias toward cooperation with the dominant confessions that remain loyal to official policies and are involved in nation-building. The new religious movements, on the other hand, widen the gap between the titular peoples and the minorities, as well as inside both groups. The traditional spiritual leaders of ethnic minorities, on the whole, can attend to the spiritual needs of their followers even though there are minor disagreements between them and the dominant confessions (especially in Georgia). All those who analyze the religious situation in the Central Caucasus normally wonder to what extent the relations between the state and religion ensure individual freedom of conscience and religion. This is a real problem of great importance for the emergence of a civil society in the region. Geopolitical reality, however, has pushed various questions to the fore: Can secularization in Azerbaijan fortify its statehood without damaging its spiritual and ethical values? How will a stronger Orthodox component of the Georgian national identity affect social integrity? Can the Armenian national idea survive without aggressive narratives, of which the AAC's territorial and church claims are an inalienable part? In short, the religious factor is extremely important for the future of the Central Caucasus, something which all the geopolitical players are fully aware of.

## **Religion in the Central Caucasus: Geopolitical Dimension**

In the last fifteen years, the Central Caucasian states have acquired new geopolitical value. On the one hand, their communicative potential has considerably expanded to create the opportunity to move Caspian energy resources to the world market bypassing Russia. On the other, the unresolved ethnoterritorial conflicts in close proximity to Russia's "overheated" south have already developed from a factor of regional instability into a potential seat of global confrontation among the major powers. In this context, the geopolitical and economic interests of large states and military-political groups have pushed aside the interests of the local countries, which are thus turned into targets of the New Caucasian Policy. The religious factor and freedom of religion have been reduced to a simple geopolitical lever of pressure applied to the independent states and the relations between them and their neighbors outside the region.

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<sup>68</sup> See: H. Lohm, "Javakheti after the Rose Revolution: Progress and Regress in the Pursuit of National Unity of Georgia," *ECMI Working Paper #38*, April 2007 [[http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx\\_ifpubdb/working\\_paper\\_38.pdf](http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_ifpubdb/working_paper_38.pdf)].



The *United States of America* is especially concerned about the religious factor. The U.S. Department of State regularly monitors the religious situation in the region and tries to correct, by diplomatic means, the way the states treat some of the religious associations. America is concentrating on liberalization of religious policies and counterterrorist efforts. While remaining as benevolent as ever toward Evangelical Protestantism, the Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses in particular, the United States is promoting globalization of the "Anglo-Saxon traits, especially in the powerful combination of individualistic self-expression, egalitarianism, and the capacity for creating voluntary associations."<sup>69</sup> Protestant groups which enjoy political support of some of the European states and human rights organizations and which are seen by the local people as non-traditional or even destructive sects<sup>70</sup> imagine themselves to be the vehicles of a certain historic mission and boldly challenge traditional cultures. They have no use for the ecumenical dialog: proud of their association with the West, they are not shy about their geopolitical orientation.<sup>71</sup> They have not made much progress in the Central Caucasus, which means that it is too early to talk about the "Protestant card" in U.S. or EU policy.

So far, the U.S.-initiated struggle against international terrorism has affected the religious situation in the region to a much greater extent. In the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, Azerbaijan suspended the activities of the Kuwait-based Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, an active supporter of the local Salafis. It closed six similar funds suspected of contacts with terrorist organizations.<sup>72</sup> The counterterrorist measures destroyed the infrastructure of the Salafi organizations; they never regained their old scope, which considerably undermined the position of Sunni Islam in the country. The West, likewise, wants to keep the Sunni factor in Azerbaijan under tight control for the simple reason that the religious disagreements between the Sunni Turks and Shi'a Azeris are practically the only civilizational barrier against Turkish influence in the Caucasus. The overseas strategists need a stronger Shi'a corridor from Lebanon to Azerbaijan because the deeply-rooted contradictions create a geopolitical dividing line between the Sunnis and the philo-Persians in the Muslim ummah.

The foreign policy of the *Islamic Republic of Iran* is unthinkable without its traditional religious component. The country, which claims political leadership in the Muslim world, wants to preserve its position in the Caucasus to keep the Turkish influence in Central Eurasia in check. Its status of a regional power promises involvement in large-scale transnational projects and a breakthrough in foreign economic isolation. On the other hand, a stronger Azerbaijan might encourage nationalist sentiments among the Iranian Azeris and threaten the country's territorial integrity.<sup>73</sup> The Iranian leaders do not like Azerbaijan's cooperation with the United States in the economic and military-technical spheres and the fact that it is drawing closer to Israel. Nor does Tehran like the strategic closeness between the Saakashvili regime and the United States. The Tehran-Erevan-Moscow axis turned out to be a temporary palliative: it promised no long-term advantage, while Tehran "worries about its relations with the Kremlin."<sup>74</sup> In the absence of strategic allies, Iran is desperately trying to use its eco-

<sup>69</sup> P.L. Berger, "The Cultural Dynamics of Globalization," in: *Many Globalizations. Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> According to A. Amarian, Head of the Center for Assistance to and Rehabilitation of People who Suffered from Destructive Sects (Armenia), more than a half of the religious organizations registered in Armenia can be described as destructive sects (see: Novosti-Armenia, 19 April, 2006, available at [<http://www.newsarmenia.ru/arm1/20060419/41552277.html>]).

<sup>71</sup> See: R. Lunkin, "Protestantizm i globalizatsiia na prostorakh Evrazii," in: *Religia i globalizatsiia na prostorakh Evrazii*, ed. by A. Malashenko, S. Filatov, Moscow Carnegie Center, Neostrom, Moscow, 2005, pp. 104-105.

<sup>72</sup> See: Interview of the then Minister of National Security N. Abbasov to the *Echo* newspaper (Baku), 9 August, 2003.

<sup>73</sup> According to the *CIA World Factbook*, there are about 16 millions Azeris in Iran (see: [<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>]); the UNPO experts quote the figure of up to 30 million (see: [<http://www.unpo.org/content/view/full/7884/144>]).

<sup>74</sup> A. Majidyar, "Russo-Iranian Relations from Iran's Perspective," 20 May, 2009, available at [<http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/russo-iranian-relations-irans-perspective>].

conomic, cultural, and demographic potential to widen its presence in the region and is falling short of its objective. In these conditions, the mounting political tension in the Caucasus is playing into the hands of the mullocratic regime.

Where and how can Tehran play its "religious card?" First and foremost, in Azerbaijan with its predominantly Shi'a population. In the first half of the 1990s, Iranian missionaries felt free to preach what smacked of revolutionary rhetoric in a country burdened by the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and an ailing economy. Later, when the central government tightened its grip on the domestic situation (it was then that Tehran corrected its foreign policy especially when Mohammad Khatami was elected president), the idea of export of the Islamic revolution to Azerbaijan died a natural death. The clergy remained in the shadows from 1995, when the leaders of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan were arrested, until 2003, when Hajji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, one of the Shi'a leaders, openly supported oppositional leader Isa Gambar for president. This bared the processes underway inside the Shi'a community and revealed it was not strong enough to affect the political situation in the country in any way. At the same time, the supporters of Iranian Islam have a wide network of religious communities in practically all regions of the country and are involved in public and religious activities on a grand scale. The Imam Homeini Relief Foundation and the Iranian Cultural Center are doing a lot to organize a Shi'a movement in Azerbaijan. On 19 August, 2008, a group of Shi'a religious figures condemned the terrorist act in the Juma Mosque in Baku as "contradicting the Muslim identity." The statement published by the Day.az news portal carried the signatures of 40-odd leaders of religious communities and public associations.<sup>75</sup>

Tehran persists in its efforts to knock together a viable Islamic opposition in Azerbaijan to keep in check the spread of right-wing nationalist ideas geared to drawing closer to Turkey and secular pro-Western ideology. At the same time, in the last ten years, what began as clerical rhetoric of Iranian missionaries was transformed into calls to enter a cultural dialog. The numerous cultural and educational programs implemented by the Iranian Cultural Center and private funds make the Persian language and the student exchange programs between higher educational establishments of Iran and the Central Caucasian countries more popular and boost the positive image of the IRI and its political order.<sup>76</sup> Iran rendered political support to and funded restoration of the Blue Mosque in Erevan built by Husayn Ali Khan Qajar in 1766.

In its geopolitical strategy, *Turkey* relies on the idea of a revived common Turkic identity rather than on the religious context, but pro-Turkic Islamic movements (such as the international religious network of the followers of Said Nursi and Sufi tariqats with centers in Turkey) are helping Ankara to consolidate its international prestige and bridle the growing Iranian influence. Until recently, because of their moderate ideas and demonstratively respectful treatment of secular statehoods, they were tolerated in Azerbaijan and the other Soviet successor-states. The situation changed when, in November 2002, the Justice and Development Party carried the parliamentary elections in Turkey. Its functionaries, who called for liberalization of the religious sphere and trimming of the army's political role, looked like Muslim modernists who were steering the country toward the West. The fear of spreading the Phenomenon of Erdoğan, a successful secular politician with Muslim ideas, became a pretext for driving the Turkish missionaries away and closing down pro-Turkish religious associations across the post-Soviet expanse. According to former director of the FSB Nikolay Patrushev, in 2002 alone activities of over 50 Nursist functionaries were suppressed.<sup>77</sup> In May 2007, the Koptevo District Court in Moscow banned several books by Said Nursi as being extremist; on 10 April, 2008, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation added the international organization of Nursists to the list of extremist structures.

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<sup>75</sup> Later the document was removed from the portal.

<sup>76</sup> See: R.A. Kasymov, "Politika Irana v zakavkazskikh gosudarstvakh," available at [<http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2005/15-05-05a.htm>].

<sup>77</sup> See: *Kavkazskiy uzel*, 11 April, 2008, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/newstext/news/id/1211850.html>].

Azerbaijan tightened control over pro-Turkish religious groups suspected of trying to worm their way into the power structures. In November 2007, Sheikh ul Islam Pashazade likened the Nurists to “radical Wahhabis” and pointed out that their activities undermined the interests of Islam.<sup>78</sup> In October 2007, the law-enforcers of Azerbaijan detained Deputy Chairman of the Independent Turkey Party Mehmet Harun Kayaci, later sentenced to correctional labor for illegal religious propaganda<sup>79</sup>; in April 2009, the Şehidler mosque in Baku was closed down, allegedly for renovation, along with the religious center of the followers of Turkish Sheikh Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (who died in 1959).

So far, the Turkish authorities have offered no comment in order to keep religious activities and the country’s official policies separate. According to Counselor of the Turkish Embassy in Azerbaijan M. Şahin, the future of the Şehidler mosque is a domestic issue in which the Turkish side cannot and should not interfere.<sup>80</sup> There are other explanations for the Olympian calm of the Turkish lobby in Azerbaijan, which is hardly indifferent to the developments. First, restrictive measures were applied solely to the persons and structures that violated the laws of Azerbaijan in the sphere of religious freedom; second, the far-flung network of pro-Turkish communities remained practically intact.

Unlike the other geopolitical players, *the Russian Federation* preferred to maintain the status quo in the religious sphere. Unable to extend economic aid comparable to Western investments, the Kremlin is resolved to do everything in its power to keep the Central Caucasus within its sphere of influence. Indeed, Russia does not want American and NATO units in its “soft underbelly;” likewise secure communication projects between the Caspian and the Mediterranean threaten Russia’s strategic interests in the European energy market. The conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, which have been dragging out for a long time now, linger on the brink of open hostility. In this context, the world community cannot afford the luxury of ignoring Russia’s opinion: Russia has demonstrated that it is ready to come to the aid of the “offended” side. Vagueness in the Central Caucasus is in Russia’s interests, at least until the Kremlin is ready to implement a geopolitical project of its own. The Russian strategists do not want additional religious overtones in the political processes underway in Russia’s Central Caucasian neighbors. In short, its position balances out other foreign impacts.

The Russian authorities, which actively cooperate with the Russian Orthodox Church, encourage a dialog between the Moscow Patriarchate and the traditional religious leaders of the post-Soviet states, the Central Caucasian states in particular. The Orthodox clergy are not engaged in proselytism in the region and are helping to maintain cultural ties between the local clergy and the Moscow Patriarchate. Any shift toward a stronger presence of non-traditional confessions in any of the Central Caucasian states undermines the interests of Russia. Today, Russia and the Russian analysts are most concerned about the Salafis because supporters of “pure Islam” form the core of radical Islamic resistance in the Northern Caucasus. It seems that Azerbaijan should be even more concerned about Islamic radicalization in the Northern Caucasus. In the early half of the 1990s, the Salafi movement in Azerbaijan developed separately from the North Caucasian processes, however the second Chechen war radicalized a part of the Azerbaijan’s Salafis. Today, the sentiments among the Azeri Salafis and the Kharijites who detached themselves from them are very much inspired by their co-religionists in the Northern Caucasus, not vice versa. Having declared a war on religious extremism, the Kremlin is closely monitoring the regional developments, but is doing nothing to remove the true reasons for Muslim radicalization. According to Alexey Malashenko, Chechnia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria are in chaos, which makes terrorism the only instru-

<sup>78</sup> See: Trend Agency, 16 November, 2007, available at [<http://az.trend.az/news/society/religion/1077128.html>].

<sup>79</sup> See: ANS PRESS Agency, 23 May, 2008.

<sup>80</sup> See: APA Agency, 28 August, 2009.

ment of retribution and oppositional sentiments. He believes that the authorities are using force for want of any other means.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

After leaving the euphoria of the religious awakening of the early 1990s behind, the Central Caucasian states set about sorting out their relations with the traditional and non-traditional confessions in full conformity with the tasks of nation-building and objective social requirements. The Central Caucasian leaders are very negative about the efforts of external forces to affect the religious situation and frequently ignore the pressure of international organizations to defend the interests of certain confessions. Today, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia pursue different religious policies regarding ethnic and religious minorities because each of the states has different ideas about how to respond to the global and regional challenges. Azerbaijan has placed its stakes on desacralization of social relations and cut short all attempts to clericalize the state and the public sphere. In Georgia, where the conditions for a wider material and social base of the GOC have been created, Christianity is not seen as an obstacle to European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In Armenia, the AAC enjoys exclusive privileges and remains a guarantor of the "Armenian idea," irrespective of the official political course. This trend will survive in the coming decade (if the region remains outside another redivision of the Middle East).

There is another alternative: political, economic, and civilizational integration of the Central Caucasus. Transnational projects and European experience of political integration and the opportunities they offer the united Caucasian House are pushing the Central Caucasian states closer together. The heads of Azerbaijan and Georgia frequently discuss the need to consolidate the Caucasus into a "single organism."<sup>82</sup> Today, cosmopolitan values are shared by small elite groups with access to all the boons offered by globalization; to resolve the ethnic contradictions we must be prepared for deep-cutting changes in the role ethnic and confessional stereotypes play in shaping national self-identity. Will the rivaling ethnicities overcome the "self-identification syndrome?" Is a sustainable supra-national identity possible in the Caucasus? How will the conflict of interests between the clergy and the state be affected if the "common Caucasian" triumphs over the "national"? So far there are no answers to these questions: the smoldering ethno-territorial conflicts are far from their final settlement, while ethnic contradictions may ignite new conflicts.

Today, another option cannot be excluded. America's persistent desire to achieve absolute economic and technological domination over its rivals threatens, to a steadily increasing degree, peace in the Middle East. A war with Iran, the main state of the axis of evil, will load America's industry, produce a strong technological impulse, and, which is also important, create huge energy difficulties for Germany, Japan, China, and other global rivals. This war will plunge the Central Caucasian states into an abysmal humanitarian crisis accompanied by nationalist and fundamentalist outbursts. External threats will push regional integration onto the backburner. The political, social, and cultural repercussions of an inflow of Iranian refugees in Azerbaijan can hardly be predicted. Independent Shi'a leaders will ride the wave of Islamic solidarity to consolidate their positions, while attempts to secularize public consciousness will be increasingly rejected. Religious contradictions might flare up in Georgia and Armenia.

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<sup>81</sup> See: A. Malashenko made this statement at the seminar *The Events in the Caucasus: Propaganda or Objective Reality?* held in the Moscow Carnegie Center on 14 September, 2009, available at [<http://www.polit.ru/news/2009/09/15/malashenko.html>].

<sup>82</sup> President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliiev, in particular, spoke about this in a speech at the opening ceremony of the Teze-pir Central Mosque in Baku on 6 July, 2009; President of Georgia Mikhail Saakashvili said the same at a meeting with the professors, lecturers and students of Erevan State University on 25 June, 2009.

The mid-term future of the religious situation in the Central Caucasus is dim. Despite the efforts of all political regimes to independently identify the limits of their secular nature and the priorities of relations between the state and religions, the states are pretty vulnerable in the face of the external factor. They need peace in the region to be able to engage in political integration and become fully involved in global projects. Only time will tell whether they can overcome their contradictions to become independent entities of world politics.

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## THE ABKHAZIAN-GEORGIAN CONFLICT: THE PAST AND PRESENT OF ETHNOCULTURAL TIES

### A b s t r a c t

**T**he author takes Samurzakano, a historical district (today the Gali Region), as an example of close ethnocultural contacts between the Georgians and Abkhazians. She relies on archival and literary sources to analyze migration and the specifics of the ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic processes that went on for many centuries in the Abkhazian-Georgian border area

where Abkhazians and Georgians/Megrels lived side by side and where their cultures intertwined. The author concludes that the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict is not a product of the different mentalities of these peoples with a long history of peaceful coexistence behind them, but of the pernicious and short-sighted policy of the people in power.

### I n t r o d u c t i o n

The reverberations of the Abkhazian-Georgian armed conflict, which have made it the worst in the post-Soviet expanse, are keeping the academic community riveted to Abkhazia. Anyone wishing to sort out the causes of the 1992-1993 war and its reasons must look into the common past of the two peoples to find the answer. Indeed, how were the Abkhazians and Georgians/Megrels ever able to live side by side for decades or even centuries? How did their cultures interact? What ethnic processes took place under the impact of cultural interaction?