

Malkhaz Toria

**Graduate program is Sociology
New School for Social Research (NSSR)
Coordinator of the Memory Studies Group at the New School**

Old Wine in New Bottles: State and Church in Georgia during the Pandemic

In the republic of Georgia, government measures to cope with the outbreak of COVID-19 received positive assessments from both the World Health Organization and local experts¹. Even some opposition parties recognized that the authorities had taken necessary preventive steps in a timely and adequate manner. The country's top epidemiologists -- three men and a woman, sometimes referred to as "the four musketeers"² - are praised for coordinating the successful efforts of the country's health care system against the pandemic. Every day they update the public through their media briefings about new cases of infection, the number of recovered patients, and ongoing preventive actions. They assure people that thanks to the government's proper undertakings (state of emergency, shutting down major cities to decrease mobility, nationwide lockdown, quarantine, and curfew), the country avoided a dramatic acceleration in the number of cases at the peak of the pandemic. And so hospitals and healthcare professionals in the country have enough beds and medical equipment to treat all infected people³.

¹ This paragraph was published as part of the "PanDemos" series text: "NYC – Tbilisi: Traveling through the Pandemic into Uncertainty". https://blogs.newschool.edu/tcds/2020/05/07/nyc-tbilisi-traveling-through-the-pandemic-into-uncertainty/?fbclid=IwAR2jvDbQShOIK3_vGKZhGFIB31e7hAfNWgoHjjl2BCVz_jo23NieUV7w5c

² Civil.ge. 15.04. 2020. The Four Musketeers at Frontline of Georgia's Fight against Pandemic, <https://civil.ge/archives/346979>

³ "As of May 28, 12:00, Georgia has confirmed 738 cases of the novel coronavirus of which 573 patients recovered and 12 died. 153 patients are now undergoing COVID-19 treatment. In addition, 3 infected Georgian citizens have been transferred from neighboring countries to Georgia for treatment. Currently, 3076 people are kept in a 14-day mandatory quarantine, while 250 patients remain under observation in hospitals." Civil.ge. 28.05. 2020 <https://civil.ge/archives/342486>.

Georgia declared the state of emergency on March 21, 2020. The imposed regulations did not restrict the freedoms of expression and media. The government was granted to exercise emergency power in certain cases. According to an official statement: a person violating the protocol of mandatory self-isolation or quarantine would be transferred to quarantine zones by „force of law’; public services would be delivered according to emergency regulations; the government could “restrict private ownership rights for quarantine, self-isolation or other medical purposes; to commandeer property and material resources of natural and legal persons when the need arises to intervene in the management of businesses and private companies to restrict their service or instruct them to carry out specific tasks; to cap prices on the products of basic consumption, drugs, and medical service”. Gathering of more than 10 people were banned, etc. ¹⁰

On March 30, Georgian Prime Minister announced: “more stringent lockdown measures to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus as the country had already registered cases of internal COVID-19 transmission”. According to the new restrictions, citizens were required to observe a curfew between 21:00 – 06:00; public transportation (both municipal and intercity) were suspended; the number of passengers in a single-vehicle was limited to three; a gathering of more than three people was banned except for “essential” stores (grocery stores and pharmacies), where citizens would have to observe a 2-meter distance; checkpoints for a thermal screening of citizens were set up in the major towns in Georgia including Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Poti, Rustavi, Zugdidi, and Gori; every citizen should have been carrying a passport/ID cards at all time. Special “operations emergency staff, an executive arm of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council” would work round-the-clock to coordinate enforcement of these measures ⁴.

⁴ Georgia Announces Nationwide Lockdown, Partial Curfew Effective from March 31, 2020. <https://civil.ge/archives/344761>

The Ministry of Internal Affairs called upon citizens “to obey restrictions imposed within the frames of the declared state of emergency, otherwise, the measures provided by law” would be applied. That measures included official fine with 3000 GEL (around 950 USD) for individuals, and the for legal entities - 15 000 GEL (around 4700 USD). In case of the repeated violation of emergency regime regulations, the violator would face up to three years of imprisonment⁵.

At the same time, the criticism is mounting over the government’s responses to the crisis caused by the pandemic. There are questions as to whether the relatively low number of confirmed cases of infections reveals flaws in the tracking of infected people because of the state’s inability to do nationwide testing. And so, the authorities try to sell their failure as an example of successful management. Opposition parties have also slammed the government for not having a real anti-crisis strategy to address the impact of the coronavirus on the economy⁶. There are no real plans to ease the financial burden for ordinary people or businesses by cutting taxes and/or subsidizing them, for instance.

Critics also point to more structural problems. Namely, the ongoing pandemic vividly exposed a selective approach to human rights and equality in Georgia. The state of emergency during the outbreak of COVID-19 does not include all segments of society, despite Prime Minister’s assurance that “the lockdown measures applied to “everybody”⁷. The Orthodox church was semi-officially privileged to defy governmental restrictions, while “regular” citizens were kept

⁵ Police.ge. 29.03. 2020. *Ministry continues to operate in round-the-clock regime to prevent the spreading of the coronavirus*. <https://police.ge/en/shinagan-saqmeta-saministro-akhali-koronavirusis-gavrtselebis-tavidan-atsilebis-miznit-ganagrzdobs-24-saatian-sagangebo-rejimshimushaobas/13421>

⁶ Civil.ge. 24.04. 2020. *Georgian Politicians Assess Government’s Anti-Crisis Plan* <https://civil.ge/archives/348536>

⁷ Civil. Ge. 30.05. 2020. *Georgia Announces Nationwide Lockdown, Partial Curfew Effective from March 31, 2020*. <https://civil.ge/archives/344761>

in isolation by imposing heavy penalties. The Easter services in churches, even though they were not crowded, seriously jeopardized the state's efforts to keep social distancing measures. For many, it was doubtful that the imposition of the state of emergency and curfew would help to halt the spread of the coronavirus because special restrictions did not apply to all.

These privileges are justified by claiming the exceptional historical role of the Orthodox Church in consolidating the Georgian nation. These claims are mediated by historical arguments about the oldest and rich historical tradition of Christianity in Georgia. Today, Orthodox Christians make 83.9 percent of the religious population the GOC exercises and demonstrate “enduring influence on public opinion⁸. GOC's claim of the “guardian of the nation”⁹ usually implies promoting ethnoreligious values and ‘traditions’. Particularly, an array of issues that are essential for a secular society including guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities, anti-discriminatory measures, LGBT rights, and, generally, basic civil liberties occasionally meet protest from the church.

The special status of the GOC was formalized in a constitutional agreement “between the Georgian State and the GOC in 2002 referred to as the “concordat”. The agreement delegated exceptional authority to the GOC. The privileges included exemption from taxes, freeing religious clerics from military service, allocating state funding¹⁰. The article 11 placed on the state the responsibility to compensate the material and moral damage inflicted to the Georgian Orthodox Church by Tsarist empire (1801-1917) and particularly, by the Soviet regime (1921-1990)¹¹

⁸ Sulkhanishvili, *Struggle for Power: Religion and Politics in Georgia from the 90s to the Present*, p. 148.

⁹ Metreveli, Tornike.2019. “The State's Guardian Angel? The Georgian Orthodox Church and Human Security”, in Lucian Leustean (ed.) *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*. London: Routledge.

¹⁰ Metreveli, Tornike.2016. “An undisclosed story of roses: church, state, and nation in contemporary Georgia”, *Nationalities Papers*, DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2016.1200021, p. 12

¹¹ Ibid.

Later, during president Mikheil Saakashvili's (2004-2012) administration, the state continued this balancing policy especially when the important reforms were on an agenda. For instance, the Church was extremely dissatisfied with the Law on General Education (2005) that aimed to guarantee the independence of public schools from religious unions; establish principles of neutrality and non-discrimination, prohibit the use of public schools for religious indoctrination, proselytism, or forced assimilation, etc.; generally, the law intended "to eliminate an ingrained connection between the education system and a religious institution"¹². "To avoid GOC's protest, Saakashvili's government amended the tax code and granted it exclusive tax-exempt status. "As a result, the GOC became free of revenue tax and its products (imported church utensils and products such as incense), noncommercial property, and land could not be taxed."¹³

The current ruling party "Georgian Dream" advanced further the tradition of "amicable relations with the GOC. An illustration of this could be the government's selective approach in employing the standard healthcare and security regulations. This became evident when the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) allowed believers to attend Easter Vigil on Easter Eve, April 18. Eventually, Authorities declared about reaching the consensus with Church that agreed to follow essential recommendations and called parishioners to maintain social distancing during the Easter celebration and remain within the churches' premises until the end of the nighttime curfew at 6 am. However, holding the service during a state of emergency was widely perceived as an open challenge to secularism and democracy in Georgia by a powerful and widely trusted religious institution. Therefore, this "agreement" was perceived as "government's capitulation to the *fait accompli*"¹⁴.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid, 9.

¹⁴ Ibid

In other cases, there were revealed different clusters of infected people to trace the trajectory of the pandemic. For instance, someone who came from Italy infected others and these people formed one cluster. In other situations, new cases appeared in certain regions of the country which led to putting these areas into complete lockdown and quarantine. Even though there are some infected priests, no one says anything about the “church cluster”¹⁵. Accordingly, no special and preventive state measures are taken regarding the GOC.

Thus, the “consensus” follows the “traditional” strategy of balancing constantly shaking power relations between the state and the church, but, maybe, the pandemic opened new opportunities. In this situation having the GOC on their side, the government might benefit the realization of political agenda that, many suspects, includes monopolizing the country’s public space and political life. “The domestic political developments suggest that Georgian democracy is in for a difficult year with its democratic opposition and political pluralism under severe pressure”¹⁶. There are worries about the fulfillment of the agreement on electoral reform that was reached in March this year by the government and main opposition parties. The agreement facilitated by the US and EU presupposes distribution of the majority of seats, 120 out of 150, under a proportional system; 1% electoral threshold; 40% of the votes required for a single party to form a government, etc. This deal might be a big leap toward political pluralism in the electoral system generally and for the upcoming parliamentary election in October 2020, particularly.

To sum up, because the state was not willing to restrict all, there were certain risks to infect those who were told and obey “stay at home” orders not mentioning that lockdown affects the

¹⁵ Interpressnews.ge. 05.05. 2020. Health Minister : No case of so-called “church cluster” has been reported in Georgia. <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/107234-health-minister-no-case-of-so-called-church-cluster-has-been-reported-in-georgia/>

¹⁶ Fras, Max. 2020. “COLCHIS: In Georgia, the opposition may become the next COVID casualty”. *Intellnews.com*. 30.05.2020. <https://www.intellnews.com/colchis-in-georgia-the-opposition-may-become-the-next-covid-casualty-182231/>

economic situation in the county and many people lost their jobs. Currently, fortunately, the situation is looking up. The state of emergency and Curfew was ended on May 23, 2020. Some remaining restrictions (on transportation and shopping malls, for instance) also have been lifted. However, the deep structural problems revealed during the pandemic are not likely to go away so soon.