

Warsaw conference – 29-31. March 2019

Panel II „In defense of freedom of conscience and of the rights of women, LGBT, atheists, children”

The [orthodox] church as a powerful institution, the pressure on the LGBT-community and their rights - the Georgian example.

Introduction

The topic of this panel will be based on the orthodox church and its homophobic attitudes towards LGBT(QIA*) Persons and portray the potential scope of the church power as an institution or as a political actor based on the Georgian example.

In order to fully display the actual homophobic situation in Georgia that has been partly (re)produced from the representatives of the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church and from the political actors in many cases, requires the frames of master's thesis at least. In this case this paper only intends to display the main facts that address this issue.

Historical Background

Part of the roots of homophobic attitudes in Georgian political discourse goes back in the beginning of 1930s when Stalin added article 121 to the soviet criminal code and criminalized male homosexuality¹. It is important to consider, that in the soviet times there was a policy of communist (and scientific) atheism, that mainly was directed against the church and stimulated not only a philosophical rejection of god, but furthermore of any religious values². In the soviet times churches as religious institutions did not have much societal and political influence due to the state policy, so was the Georgian Church. Nevertheless, the situation changed after the fall of Soviet Union as in most of the post-soviet countries the financial and political crisis rang the bell³. Indeed, the governmental institutions were not able to perform their duties and carry out their governmental

¹ Jong, 1982

² Bercken, 1989, S. 273-274

³ Koiava, 2016

functions and to offer the political stability. The church as an institution strengthened its moral authority while it took on many functions out of their competences primarily in those the state failed. It is believed that this was main reason why the church became one of those institutions that offered the simplified definition of identity and security to many Georgians⁴ that in fact shaped the nation-building process in Georgia after the fall of Soviet Union. As the church was not persecuted by the soviet order and gained legitimation to interfere in the spheres of the state and social order, that were out of their actual competences, it felt like church could stabilize its power at the constitutional level and strengthen its role as the creator of the moral order as well.

Church and the state

In the constitution of the Republic Georgia from 1995 is written, that “the State declares absolute freedom of belief and religion. At the same time, the State shall recognize the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the State”⁵. However, the church was recognized as independent, in the late 1990s, the Georgian state entered into closer dialogue with the Georgian church, which took the form of a constitutional agreement between the two sides in 2002. The constitutional agreement gave the church many benefits from the state, such as: the material damage inflicted on the Church during the Soviet era should be calculated and partly covered by the State; the Catholicos Patriarch, who is the supreme person of the Georgian church, was revealed as untouchable; the church was given the title of historically established legal entity of public law, the special rights regarding tax policy and so on⁶.

Power of the church

The question how the orthodox church can be influential and have political and societal power, can be answered by some conditions:

⁴ Bogishvili, Osepashvili, Gavashelishvili, & Gugushvili, 2016

⁵ Parliament of the Republic of Georgia, 1995

⁶ Parliament of Georgia, 2002

- Influence deriving from religious importance – as the statistics from 2014 show, more than 80% of Georgians define themselves as Christian-orthodox.
- Ethnocultural understanding of religion – In Georgia national identity and its understanding is deeply intertwined with ethnocultural narrative (research study⁷).
- Historical factors that emphasize the importance of the orthodox church in Georgian way of surviving many wars and defending its sovereignty.
- Interference with the state (win-win relationship) – According to the constitutional agreement the church becomes many benefits from the state. The state does benefit from the church support from beginning of 21st century as well. Praxis and examples show the need for the government to have a good relationship with the church is real, in order to have chance on the political space at all and further being able maintaining political power and societal trust⁸

It should be noted that according to the study (2015), the head of the Georgian church, the Catholicos Patriarch Ilia II had 87% of the social trust, while [former] President Giorgi Margvelashvili only 52%⁹). That's why from the mid-90s on the main political actors were much careful to the relationship with the church and their actions towards this institution, showing respect (inaugurations in the cathedrals, etc.).

Is the church homophobic?

Religious institutions as homophobic organizations in general, that have been described in different academic articles as for instance: „Legal Homophobia and the Christian Church“ from Ellen M. Barrett already in 1979; “Catholic homophobia” from Gerard Loughlin from 2018; The report from European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights „Homophobia and Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the EU Member

⁷ Bogishvili, Osepashvili, Gavashelishvili, & Gugushvili, 2016, S. 54

⁸ Narsia, 2018; ISFED, 2017

⁹ National Democratic Institute, 2015

States: Part II – The Social Situation” (2009), in which the information are provided regarding the religious institutions and their attitudes towards LGBT-community.

The reasons for religious/church based homophobia may be various in general, however in fact there is an assumption by some Georgian gender researches and philosophers, that the Georgian orthodox church tries to create boundaries between the society and establish the moral order, create the image/concept of “other” as Georg Simmel describes in his concept of “the stranger”¹⁰. The “stranger” that is the symbol for the enemy to the Georgian national identity in the name of non-traditional/non-heteronormative way of thinking and shaping the sexuality.

17.05.2013 Tbilisi, Georgia

Herewith I would like to go to the incident on 17th of May in 2013, that can be seen as a climax of the public illustration of the power that Georgian orthodox church has, indeed the aggressive form of its power. That day approximately 200 LGBT-Community members were holding the peaceful demonstration in the capital of Georgia – Tbilisi for the international day against homophobia and transphobia. In fact, the church was able to mobilize around 20,000 counterdemonstrators, that aggressively raided the peaceful demonstration¹¹. Most of the LGBT-Demonstrators had to be rescued and brought away with the buses from the middle of the aggressive wave. Amnesty International reports, that “the ensuing violence resulted in 17 people being injured – 12 of whom were hospitalized, including three policemen and a journalist”¹².

The interesting fact is, that the offenders (including the clerics) have not been convicted accordingly or not punished at all¹³. No punishment against aggression towards the LGBT community deepens the homophobic climate in the country. From this event it became obvious that the clerics are endowed with special rights in Georgia, even if they represent the direct source of violence. It is important, that the catholicos-patriarch Ilia II called for

¹⁰ Maisuradze (conceptual reference)

¹¹ Video material for visual perception → <https://youtu.be/fuTacTQw6ls>

¹² Amnesty International, 2013

¹³ [Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center, 2015](#)

the government for abolishment of the 17 Mai 2013 demonstration license in advance and interpreted the peaceful demonstration for LGBT rights as a propaganda and called the LGBT-community members sinful persons¹⁴.

What's the aim?

It seems, that the church is much interested in eliminating the importance and covering up the attention on the international day against homophobia and transphobia in Georgian discourse. One year later 11th of May 2014 catholicos-patriarch Ilia II announced 17th of May as an official “family purity day”¹⁵. It is clear, that in Georgia family is considered and juridically allowed to be formed between the heterosexual couples. Furthermore in 2016 catholicos-patriarch and a [patriotic] nongovernmental union initiated and fulfilled the universal/mass matrimony ceremonial, that has been held on the “family purity day”. In 2018 500 couples have undergone the mass matrimony ceremonial in the holy trinity cathedral in Tbilisi¹⁶.

Conclusion

On the Georgian example it can be assumed, that the orthodox church may target non-heteronormative sexuality and try to (re)produce homophobic attitudes in the society and use it as an instrument for manipulating some religious groups in order to maintain its power of being a political actor.

¹⁴ [Ambrioni, 2013](#)

¹⁵ [Georgiatoday, 2018](#)

¹⁶ [Radio Liberty, 2018](#)

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