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Church and State in Modern Georgian Reality

Georgia, a predominantly Christian country (around 85% are Orthodox and few others are the members of different Christian denominations) has around four thousand years of history of statehood. 1991 was a year of reestablishment of Georgian statehood, rather than declaration of independence.¹

The Christian Church was officially established around two thousand years ago. This is according to tradition that claims proselytism of the apostle Andrew in Georgia. Archaeological evidence more or less supports the presence of the first Christian communities already in the 1st or in the 2nd century AD. Hence, the Georgian statehood is at least four thousand years old, while Christian Church is almost two thousand years old. This is very important to bear in mind just as it underlines long-standing tradition of Georgian statehood and Church.

The essence and political legitimacy of the modern Georgian state is partly defined by the 1995 constitution of Georgia, which states that the people are the source of power of the Georgian state. The preamble of the constitution declares:

“We, the citizens of Georgia – whose firm will it is to establish a democratic social order, economic freedom, and a legal and a social state; to secure universally recognized human rights and freedoms; and to enhance state independence and peaceful relations with other peoples – drawing on the centuries-old traditions of the statehood of the Georgian nation and the

¹ The paper was presented at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University Faculty of Humanities Institute of Georgian History International Scientific Conference “Thirty Years After Restoration of Independence”, November 23, 2021. See the program of this conference.

historical and legal legacy of the Constitution of Georgia of 1921, proclaim this Constitution before God and the nation.”

(Constitution of Georgia,

<https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36>).

In other words, the people, according to the Georgian constitution, constitute the citizens of Georgia, while the State itself is represented as the unity of Georgian citizens. Hence modern Georgia is unity of her citizens, those who are established in the land that we call “Sakartvelo” i.e. Georgia.

The old Georgian perception of the state was rather different. The Georgian word for state is “sakhelmtsipo”, which means the land of ruler or country of sovereign. Old Georgian term “Khelmtsipe” can be properly translated as sovereign while prefix “sa” indicates belonging, thus “sakhelmtsipo” means the belonging of sovereign, land of sovereign, country of sovereign. Despite this kind of perception, the sovereigns often acted in the name of people or on the behalf of people, there are many examples for this statement even from the history of Georgia, hence there is no need to recount them. That is quite obvious – kings are officially acting on the behalf of people.

The modern Georgian constitution is no exception from universal reality – the authors of the constitution speak in the name of citizens of Georgia, therefore, the constitution represents the will of people. The state itself is defined as the unity of its citizens. But the constitutional reality is quite different from the perception of state among citizens including ruling elite as well. When speaking about the State, i.e. “sakhelmtsipo”, the majority of people mean government or the officials, those appointed by the government and its subordinates.

Perception of the state by ruling elite is no different. Frequently used expression, “state for the people” („სახელმწიფო ხალხისთვის“) is a good example. Political parties whether opposition or ruling party often announce that the state should take care of its people, hence state should be for the people. In this case, the state is seen as government. By these words they mean that the government represents the state and it should take responsibility for the people. The phrase “state for the people” appears quite often on speeches of different politicians, on their banners and even in the name of political party (i.e. name of political party established by Paata Burchuladze, former opera singer and current politician). Even when common people blame their misfortune to the government and generally to political elite, they use expressions as follows: “is

this a state?” (,,ეს სახელმწიფოა?!“) in negative sense, “What kind a state is this” (,,რა სახელმწიფოა ეს?!“) etc. In those words, that we hear from social media, TV or in our neighborhood people never consider themselves as a part of the state, but rather government or, generally, officials are considered to be the state. They think that the government is responsible to take care of people, hence government acts as a state and is perceived as a state. Therefore, the idea is that officials take responsibility for the state, hence they are identified as a state. Thus, the majority of common folks do not feel themselves as a part of the state and do not take responsibility for the state. Consequently, we have the state and majority of its population divided. The state is considered only as a playground of politicians who are competing for power and one that takes advantage is considered as the official representative of the state.

Almost the same story applies to the Georgian Orthodox Church. In modern Georgian reality the Georgian Orthodox Church is considered to be the patriarchate of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia and the high hierarchies of clergy. This understanding of the Church does not coincide with the official position of Church fathers, leaders of the Church. The Christian Church is considered to be a united body of entire Orthodox Christian believers. According to the Bible, Jesus Christ is a founder of the Church and he built it on humans. The famous words of Jesus to Peter marks a foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ, i.e. Christian Church. Jesus said, *“And I tell you that you are rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”* (Matt. 16:18).

Jesus built his church on the faith of Peter, but faith was with Peter, hence the Church was established upon a man and man himself was seen as a Church. Thus, the humans who truly believe in Jesus Christ are seen as the Church of Jesus Christ. This perception of the Church was well understood even in the 5th century Georgia according to Juansher Juansheriani (The 8th c.). According to Juansher's history, while debating about the actions of the Christian king Vakhtang I Gorgasali against his Christian fellows, monk Peter (future Catholicos of Kartli) tells to a king, who is on his military campaign against Christian Byzantium, that king of Kartli is building stone Churches, but at the same time he is destroying people, living Churches of Jesus Christ – *“God favors the churches of the living above the temples of stone. A church of stone will crumble someday, and it will be built up again with the same stone. But if a church of the living falls, no one will be able to cure it, neither physician, nor*

king” (Juansher Juansheriani. The Life of Vakht'ang Gorgasali. Translated by Dmitri Gamq'relidze. Kartlis Tskhovreba: A History of Georgia. Edited by S. Jones. Tbilisi. 2014, p. 87).

Hence, murder of Christian individual is seen as a partial destruction of Christian Church. Some medieval intellectuals, Church fathers or members of nobility understood the clear essence of the Church based on the New Testament. It is well understood even today, at least in some circles, but for the majority of people the Church is Patriarchate and not the entire folk of Orthodox Christian believers.

Therefore, the modern perception of Church and State are very much alike. According to the Georgian constitution and the Bible, the State and the Church are represented by the people, either commoners or the high hierarchies and officials altogether, but according to popular perception they both are seen as playground of elite, either secular or religious. This perception has a common sense just as government and officials act as speakers in the name of the Georgian State in public. Also the Patriarchate and the high hierarchies of clergy are doing the same to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Judging from the official position, government and patriarchate are only small parts of the State and the Church. But this does not help the wrong perceptions. Majority of people think and act differently. Their perception of the Church and the State is very much different from the official reality. But these perceptions, whether reasonable or unreasonable, right or wrong, prevail among the majority of citizens. In this regard, common folks are losing position in the Church or in the State, thus lacking awareness that they are part of both of these institutions.