

Freedom of Religion in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region

Brief prehistory

Orthodox Christians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are considered by the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church to be subject to its canonical jurisdiction. The above is not formally denied by any Orthodox Churches.

Abkhazians demand full independence and imagine their Church also to be independent. As for South Ossetia, the probable stance of "official" Ossetia is to unite with Alanya together with North Ossetia and integrate into the Russian Federation, therefore, they do not want to establish or "restore" the Autocephalous Orthodox Church. In both the political and ecclesiastical circles, the ruling elites of the occupied territories do not imagine their future together with either the Georgian State or the associated Orthodox Church. As a result of such attitudes and Russian influence, the Georgian Orthodox Church has no its clergymen in Tskhinvali or Abkhazia, cannot manage the property or relics owned by it before the conflict, and cannot provide adequate support to the parishioners that identify themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Although both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have state sovereignty unilaterally recognized by the Russian Federation, ecclesiastical issues have not been resolved in a similar way. The Russian Orthodox Church does not formally or officially recognize the separate dioceses in these territories, which exist independently from the Georgian Orthodox Church, nor does it demand their integration into its own space. Clearly, **this does not necessarily mean that the Russian Orthodox Church is guided by the "historical truth" and has great respect for the jurisdiction of the Georgian Orthodox Church in these territories.** Its religious policies, with more or less variations, repeats the policies of the State.

The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church never mentions the full title of the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, omitting the part of "Metropolitan of Tskhum-Abkhazia and Bichvinta". He also cooperates and supports orthodox clergy serving in the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The above affects the rights situation of citizens of Georgia who identify themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church. The above clearly represents complex discrimination on the grounds of religion and ethnicity. That is why it is important to focus on this aspect of Georgia's secessionist conflicts and to bring this issue up.

Ethnic divisions and building dioceses

De-facto President Aslan Bzhania's visit to Syria in connection with the establishment of an Autocephalous Church on the territory of Abkhazia and his meeting with the Patriarch of Antioch, John X, activated religious issues in the region.¹ The intensification of fears in Georgia is primarily explained by the fact that the Georgian Orthodox Church has not been able to exercise de facto

¹ Radio Liberty, 2021, "The de facto President of Abkhazia in Syria: Meeting with the Dictator and the Patriarch of Antioch", available - <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31263525.html>, accessed on 14.06.2021

jurisdiction in Abkhazia after the end of war, which means that none of its priests or monks can perform church services there. Consequently, both ecclesiastical and political communities worryingly wonder whether the time of separation of the Abkhazian Church from the Georgian Church is approaching.

Recently, it has been clear that the Russian Church does not pay attention to the concerns of the Georgian Church. Moreover, when Metropolitan Gerasime, Head of the Foreign Relations Department of the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church, expressed protest in January 2021 against the Christmas liturgy delivered at the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Tskhinvali by a clergyman subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Secretariat of the Russian Patriarchate accused him of trying to escalate relations between the two Churches.² As far as the Democracy Research Institute is aware, the discussion of this issue has not been resumed since then, as the Georgian Orthodox Church avoids aggravation of relations.

In the Georgian political and broad public circles, the above-mentioned fears are absolutely logically conditioned by the factor of the Russian Orthodox Church. Its clergymen have the opportunity to serve on the territory of Abkhazia and are governed by the Diocese of Maykop. It was thanks to this Russian episcopal diocese that the Abkhazian Ecclesiastical Council was established in 2005, reconciling the previously conflicting monks Besarion Apla and Andrew Ampari, who have since been equal Co-chairs of the Council. In addition, it should be noted that there is another group led by Archimandrite Dorotheus Dbar, who speaks in the name of the Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia and demands the autocephaly of the Abkhazian Church. This group is in conflict with the above-mentioned individuals, but not with the Russian Orthodox Church.

One of the reasons of why the establishment of an autonomous church structure on the territory of Abkhazia may cause more sentiments seems to be property issues. Unlike South Ossetia, Abkhazia is home to the New Athos Monastery, which the Russian Orthodox Church is interested in. This monastery is currently owned by the Holy Metropolis of the Abkhazian Church, although Russian priests and the Diocese of Besarion Apla, who is loyal to the Russian Church, also have some access to it. The Russian clergymen divide with the Abkhazian clergy other churches-monasteries as well and have access to religious relics.³

It should be noted that the situation in South Ossetia is different. The clergy subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church do not own any religious buildings and are represented in several important centers, primarily in Tskhinvali. One of the reasons for this may be the fact that the territory of South Ossetia has become much more deserted than Abkhazia after the end of the hot phase of the conflict. Consequently, the parish have also scattered. Another characteristic of religious institutions in South Ossetia is their search for the Ossetian roots of relics (the same can be said about Abkhazia as well). This clearly fits into the very nationalist discourse that uses the religious aspect of public life for ideological purposes. This is in line with the insistence of the de facto South Ossetian authorities that

² Response to the response - The Russian Patriarchate is threatening. Main Channel. 19/01/2021. Accessed on 3/06/2021 at the link <https://mtavari.tv/news/29473-pasukhis-pasukhi-rusetis-sapatriarko-imukreba>

³ Churches-Monasteries Functioning in the Diocese of Abkhazia (in Russian). Accessed on 03/06/2021, available at - <https://www.abkhazia.ru/history/activetemples/>

Tskhinvali be given the tenth-century icon of Okoni⁴ and the relics of Elizbar and Shalva Eristavis of Ksani and Bidzina Cholokashvili be transferred from the Ikorti Cathedral to the Annunciation Monastery in the Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church on the motive that they are Ossetian saints.⁵ It is interesting that these relics are important not for so-called South Ossetia, but for Ossetia in general, namely for Alanya, in order to highlight its Christian and religious character and to mobilize nationalist sentiments.

These developments contribute to the deepening of religious divisions and ethnicization, especially considering that Georgian believers do not have the opportunity to exercise their faith or cultural rights in their preferred language, attend services delivered by their clergymen in their traditional cult buildings.

Discrimination on religious grounds

As far as the Democracy Research Institute is informed, the number of Georgian clergymen in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is extremely low.

There are several Georgian clergymen on the territory of South Ossetia: one clergyman in Akhagori; two nuns in the Ikoti Monastery; one person preparing for becoming a monk in Largvisi and one monk in the Trinity Monastery.

There have been no recent incidents of harassment of Georgian clergy, except the case of Metropolitan Isaiah of the Diocese of Nikozi and Tskhinvali,⁶ who had not been able to leave Akhagori for about three years since 2014. Later, this problem was solved personally by the Catholicos Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II with the involvement of the Russian Patriarch. Currently, Metropolitan Isaiah is in the village of Nikozi, Shida Kartli. He was not in Akhagori at the time of the closure of the Mosabruni crossing point, and like everyone else, he has been unable to return to the district.

Apart from the Georgian church, there is also an Ossetian church in Akhagori, which is subordinated to the Diocese of Alanya. Services in Ossetian churches are held in the Ossetian language, but very rarely (maximum three times a year), when ethnic Ossetian priests arrive from North Ossetia. This mainly happens when an ethnic Ossetian wants to perform a baptismal ritual in the church. There are no Russian clergy in Akhagori. Prior to the construction of the Ossetian church in Akhagori, Ossetians from Tskhinvali used to go to the Georgian church, including nationalists, who probably did not like the Georgian-language liturgy, however did not protest against it.

In the Russian church of Tskhinvali, services are delivered by Russian priests, in the Russian language. There is a tense relationship, one might even say a conflict, between this church and the so-called Ossetian church. De facto President Anatoly Bibilov unequivocally supports the Russian church,

⁴ The icon of Okoni – A controversial issue and historical references. Radio Mosaic 23/06/2018. Accessed on 05/06/2021 at the link - <https://radiomosaic.ge/index.php/news/1501-2018-06-23-10-38-25>

⁵ Relics of the Holy Martyrs Shalva and Elizbar Eristavis of Ksani (in Russian). Website of the Alanya Mothers Monastery. Accessed on 05/06/2021 at the link <http://alanmon.ru/nash-monastyr/svyatyini/moshchi-svyatykh-ksanskikh-muchenikov-bidziny-shalvy-i-elizbara>.

⁶ Newpost, 2014, Reverend Isaiah has not been able to leave the occupied territories for several months, available at - <https://bit.ly/3wj9Wc2>, viewed on 11.06.2021.

always visiting it during religious holidays, like most of his supporters. In 2018, Bishop Ambrose of the Diocese of Alanya, who had temporarily gone to Russia, was no longer allowed to return to Tskhinvali, his "citizenship" of South Ossetia was revoked and he is still unable to return to Tskhinvali.

In addition to the Orthodox Christians, there are Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals in Akhgori, who may now assemble freely, without any hindrance, although about four years ago they used to be persecuted, summoned to the so-called KGB and banned from assembling. Tskhinvali has no loyal attitude towards Jehovah's Witnesses either.

Restrictions relating to the pandemic did not affect religious institutions in the Tskhinvali region, as they continue to deliver services as usual.

According to the Democracy Research Institute, there are currently no ethnic Georgian priests in Gali. Father Pimen (Roman Kardava) used to serve there in the past. However, later the Abkhaz side banned him from being engaged in religious service. In April 2008, Father Pimen was expelled by the so-called Abkhazian special service from Gali. The night before the expulsion, he was detained by Mikheil Khishba, Head of the Rapid Response Unit of the Military Intelligence of Abkhazia, at his home in Gali. Prior to that, during the prayer, Father Pimen was physically abused by about ten armed men in the Georgian church in the presence of the parish and was expelled from the church. Eventually, he was forcibly transferred to the Samegrelo-Abkhazia administrative boundary line.⁷

Services in the churches of Gali (except for five functioning churches, one is currently being built in the village of Otobaia) are conducted by Father Mate, who is of Abkhazian descent, in two languages - Georgian and Russian, despite pressure from Sokhumi. Currently, services are held in Georgian every other week, while on big holidays, services are delivered in both languages. There are several temples in Gali that are not functioning due to being damaged.

Clergymen are brought to hold liturgies in the villages that are actually part of the Gali district, but were assigned to the Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli districts by the de facto authorities years ago. In general, there are many priests of Russian origin in Abkhazia. As for the Georgian Church, it is virtually not represented in the region, except for the religious literature and prayer books, which are brought by clergy assistants from Zugdidi.

Abkhaz Muslims do not face any restrictions on religious freedom. Moreover, the de facto Government celebrates their big holidays at the state level. For example, the days of Kurban Bayram are officially non-working days. In terms of exercising the right to religious freedom, only the ethnically Georgian parishioners, who identify themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church, are discriminated against.

During the religious services in Abkhazia, the clergy mention all the Orthodox Patriarchs, except the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia.

⁷ Radio Liberty, 2008, "The Georgian side speaks once again about the need to revise the format of the peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia ...", available at - <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1557253.html>, accessed on 11.06.2021

Summary and recommendations

The Democracy Research Institute considers that even though the relationship between the Churches is beyond the competencies of the Government of Georgia, the latter is obliged to ensure the protection of the fundamental rights of the citizens of Georgia. The Government of Georgia should use all international formats to address these issues so that the religious freedom of every citizen in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali is equally protected and special attention is paid to those who have been discriminated against for years and cannot fully exercise their rights. In this regard, it is especially important not to restrict the right to hold services in the mother tongue and the right to receive the service of the desired Church on the grounds of ethnicity and affiliation with the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is currently neglected and the Georgian Orthodox Church is prevented from accessing parishioners or property that had been previously owned by it.

In addition, while managing the church property and infrastructure remaining in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there should be no restrictions on local Georgian citizens' freedom of religion or expression in the form of a total or partial ban on their access to religious buildings or holy objects.