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GEORGIA

Religious Freedom in Georgia

Historical memory and the challenge of occupation

By Vladimer Macharashvili

Based on remarks delivered at the high-level FoRB event in Prague

In the heart of Old Tbilisi, Orthodox and Armenian churches, a synagogue, a mosque and a Catholic church stand close to one another. Their presence reflects a history in which different communities have made Georgia their home while preserving their religious identities. Yet beyond the occupation lines in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, access to a church, a religious service in Georgian or an ancestral grave can be restricted or denied.

These realities explain why freedom of religion or belief matters so deeply to Georgia. Our country emerged from seven decades of Soviet rule with a clear understanding of the damage caused when the state persecutes faith. We have chosen constitutional protection and cooperation with religious communities. But that commitment cannot be fully realised while people in the occupied territories are prevented from exercising the same rights. As I emphasised in Prague, the occupation remains, in my view, the gravest threat to religious freedom in our country.

Remembering persecution

Soviet rule imposed official atheism and systematic hostility towards religious life. Clergy and believers faced fabricated accusations, imprisonment, deportation and execution. Places of worship were closed or confiscated, while anti-religious propaganda sought to weaken the transmission of faith between generations. Georgia experienced these policies under a regime whose authority and ideological direction came from Moscow.

The suppression of religious autonomy also had an earlier history. Under Russian imperial rule in the nineteenth century, the Georgian Church lost its autocephaly, or self-governing status, in 1811. Interference in religious life became bound up with pressure on language and cultural identity. That history helps explain the importance Georgians attach to protecting churches, inscriptions and worship in their native language.[1]

After independence, Georgia rejected the Soviet model. Article 16 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of belief, religion and conscience and prohibits persecution on those grounds. This protection must allow people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds to belong fully to Georgia without being required to abandon their traditions. Religious freedom is part of the basis on which a diverse population shares a common homeland.[2]

Restoring religious life

Repairing the legacy of persecution requires practical measures as well as constitutional guarantees. Georgia provides funding to the Orthodox Church and has established a programme of partial, symbolic compensation for Soviet-era harm to Muslim, Jewish, Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic religious associations. The return or transfer of places of worship is another part of the effort to restore religious life. These measures recognise suffering that continues to shape communities long after the end of the regime that caused it.[3]

Religious associations also have choices about their legal form. They may register as legal entities under public law, subject to the relevant statutory conditions, or as non-commercial legal entities. They may also operate without registration. Communities should be able to organise their religious life within a framework that respects their autonomy.[2]

The State Agency for Religious Issues provides an institutional channel for engagement between the government and religious communities. I regard this engagement as an expression of the state's responsibility to protect religious freedom. Its value must be measured by the ability of communities to raise concerns, receive a fair hearing and participate in decisions affecting them.

A tradition of coexistence

Georgia's geographical position has brought different peoples, cultures and faiths into sustained contact. The religious landscape of Old Tbilisi gives that history a visible form. Jewish life in Georgia extends back many centuries, and the relationship between Georgian and Jewish communities occupies a special place in our understanding of coexistence. In Tbilisi's mosque, Sunni and Shia Muslims worship in the same building, offering another practical example of shared religious space.

These traditions are a resource for the present. They show that a strong religious identity can coexist with respect for one's neighbours. Preserving that inheritance requires attention to how people are treated in daily life, whether they can maintain their institutions and whether the state protects them equally. Historical pride carries a responsibility to sustain the conditions that make coexistence possible.

When occupation restricts worship

The wars in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, followed by the war with Russia in 2008, brought loss of life and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Approximately one fifth of Georgia's internationally recognised territory remains under Russian occupation. The consequences extend into the most personal areas of life, including the ability to practise one's faith and maintain contact with a religious community.

The Georgian Orthodox Church regards Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region as part of its canonical jurisdiction. Yet formal ecclesiastical recognition does not ensure access on the ground. Georgian Orthodox clergy face severe restrictions on reaching congregations and conducting services, while the Church cannot exercise its authority freely in the occupied territories. The absence of formal recognition of the separatist church structures by the Russian Orthodox Church has not resolved these practical barriers.

At the Prague event, I drew attention to unequal access for clergy. Representatives of some other Christian denominations have been able to visit their congregations in Abkhazia, while Georgian Orthodox clergy have been denied comparable access. Visits that enable Catholic, Lutheran or Armenian Apostolic believers to practise their faith are welcome. The same freedom must extend to Georgian Orthodox believers. Selective exclusion on ethnic and religious grounds is incompatible with equal rights.

Restrictions also affect worshippers themselves. Access to religious services in Georgian and to churches and cemeteries across the occupation lines is obstructed, sometimes particularly around major religious holidays. Restrictions on education in Georgian compound the pressure on families seeking to pass their language and traditions to their children. For those who leave their homes to preserve that connection, displacement becomes a continuing experience rather than a closed chapter of the past.

Religious heritage and human lives

Our concern extends to the condition of religious heritage. Reports of damage to Georgian churches, alterations to inscriptions and paintings, and unauthorised restoration raise fears that evidence of Georgian religious and cultural life is being lost. Limited access makes comprehensive independent monitoring difficult. The condition of synagogues, Catholic churches and mosques also requires attention. The heritage of every community deserves protection, including sites whose present condition cannot reliably be established.

The loss of a religious monument reaches beyond its architecture. A church may preserve the language of earlier generations in its inscriptions, hold the memory of a displaced congregation and remain the place to which a family hopes to return. When access is blocked or a building is altered without regard for its history, living communities lose part of their connection to the past.

On 6 November 2023, Russian forces killed Tamaz Ginturi near Kirbali after he had gone to the Lomisi St George Church to pray. His fellow villager Levan Dotiashvili was detained and later released. The European Parliament condemned the killing and abduction. The tragedy symbolises the insecurity surrounding religious observance along the occupation line.[4]

International concern must therefore be sustained and practical. Access for independent monitoring, protection of religious sites and safe access for clergy and worshippers deserve continuing attention. Freedom of religion or belief cannot be separated from the security of the people who seek to exercise it.

Dialogue and the duty of the state

Does religious freedom strengthen security? Georgia's experience leads me to believe that it does. People are more able to live together peacefully when they can practise their faith without fear and bring grievances into an open dialogue. Religious organisations have a responsibility to use that space constructively. The state, in turn, must avoid treating religious difference as a threat in itself.

The European Convention on Human Rights provides an essential framework. Article 9 protects freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Its second paragraph permits restrictions on the manifestation of religion or belief only under defined conditions: they must be prescribed by law, pursue a permitted purpose and be necessary in a democratic society. That provision does not give governments a general licence to control belief. Any interference requires careful justification.[5]

The Interreligious Council operating under the State Agency for Religious Issues offers a setting in which participating communities can discuss concerns with one another and with public authorities. Direct engagement with representatives of the legislative and executive branches can help turn dialogue into practical responses. Such exchanges can reduce stereotypes and make the experiences of different communities better understood.

I favour a relationship between state and religion that allows cooperation while preserving the autonomy of both. The state must remain impartial in protecting rights, and religious organisations must be free to conduct their internal affairs. Cooperation loses its purpose when it becomes a means of control or unequal treatment. A workable balance requires respect for freedom of conscience, religious diversity and the independence of institutions.

Georgia's historical place at the meeting point of cultures gives us a responsibility to continue this dialogue. Remembering persecution, protecting the rights of every community and drawing attention to those living under occupation are parts of the same obligation. Our commitment will be fulfilled when people throughout Georgia can worship freely, preserve their heritage and pass their faith or beliefs to the next generation without fear.

References

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5. European Convention on Human Rights, Article 9. Convention