

Georgia: tensions between the state and the Church

On 6 July in Georgia a regulation which strengthens the legal status of faith-based groups other than the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) came into force. The new law was adopted by parliament against the unanimous opposition of the GOC, which triggered an unprecedented increase in tensions between the government and the Church. The deterioration in relations between the ruling camp and GOC, which a huge majority of the population trust, may affect support for the government before the parliamentary election next year.

So far faith-based groups other than the GOC (its special status is governed by an agreement with the state signed in 2002) could not obtain a status of a legal entity as a faith-based group but only as foundations, associations etc., which largely limited their scope of activities.

The work on new regulations and then the voting on them provoked violent resistance from the GOC (an appeal made by the head of the Church, Elias II to stop the work) followed by a wave of criticism (the statement made by the Church on 6 July, two marches which rallied a few thousand faithful in Tbilisi on 9 and 10 July). The official reason for this stark reaction is the fear that the special status of the Orthodox Church will be weakened. In practice, however, it seems that the cause is the concern that the position of the Apostolic Armenian Church in Georgia will be strengthened. The majority of Armenians living in Georgia (approximately 6% of the population of Georgia) belong to this Church. The GOC is in conflict with this Church over several sacred sites.

From the perspective of the ruling camp the new law was intended to improve relations with national minorities, above all the Armenians who live in close clusters in the south of the country, are poorly integrated with the rest of the society and averse to the Georgian state, and therefore constantly suspected of separatism. However, the adoption of the new legislation against the will of the Georgian Orthodox Church, a force that has so far been favourable or neutral towards the government (in the past during crises the GOC was asked to act as a mediator) may decidedly affect the social legitimisation of the government.

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