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Religious minorities struggle for space and recognition in Georgia

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The Orthodox Church is a privileged religious organisation and a political player in Georgia while non-dominant religious groups are often sidelined by state institutions and city administrations. A new ZOiS Report delivers insights based on in-depth research in Batumi.

Publication:

[Tsypylma Darieva: Faith, state, and religious competition in Georgia, ZOiS Report 1 / 2021.](#)



The dispute about the proposed Ahali Mosque is an expression of religious contestation in Batumi, Georgia © Tsypylma Darieva.

A new ZOiS report investigates how Georgia handles its growing religious plurality on a state as well as on a local level. It includes in-depth explorations of lived religious plurality in Batumi, the capital of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, at the Turkish border.

The Orthodox Church remains the central symbol of national cultural identity. At the same time, Georgia is a multi-religious society, with more than 13 per cent of the population identifying as Sunni or Shia Muslims and 3 per cent belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Dominance of the Orthodox Church

On a national level, the Orthodox Church enjoys a privileged legal status, and a wide range of structures governs the current uneven relations between majority and minority religious communities. An amendment in Georgia's Civil Code has improved the status of non-Orthodox religious groups, but there is still unequal treatment in regard to property tax and funding. "The State Agency on Religious Affairs imposes restrictions on minority religious organisations and is less focused on the protection of minority rights, the promotion of pluralist views, or an inclusive policy towards non-Orthodox denominations," the author of the report, Tsypylma Darieva says.

Contestation on the ground

Contestation is visible on the city level, especially when it comes to religious sites and public religious practices. The research shows that there is only a limited possibility for visible religious plurality in urban spaces that are dominated by the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Given the hegemonic position of the Orthodox Church, there is a competition for status and recognition among religious minorities. This competition can take different forms: conflicting

approaches to a given religious site can remain latent or hidden or can escalate into visible confrontation.

“Systematically ignoring the demands of religious minorities for recognition of their rights creates a gap between the national policy of tolerance and bottom-up practices that can increase the potential for conflict in the region,” Tsypylma Darieva concludes.

The main findings of this report relate to the specific context of Adjara, but they may also be relevant for other regions of multi-religious Georgia that have been shaped by post-socialist uncertainty, globalisation, and interethnic tensions.

Read the full report online:

[Tsypylma Darieva: Faith, state, and religious competition in Georgia, ZOiS Report 1 / 2021.](#)

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