Newly Independent States: Caucasus

By Robyn Angley

GEORGIA

The patriarch on Facebook: Georgian church-state relations

The influence of religion, and in particular, Georgian Orthodoxy, has risen significantly in Georgia in the post-Soviet period. According to Georgia’s latest census, conducted in 2002, 83.9% of Georgians claim to be Georgian Orthodox, with another 9.9% identifying themselves as Muslim. (1) A comprehensive social science survey conducted in the Caucasus in 2007 highlighted further the attitude the majority of Georgians have toward religion. Of those surveyed, 72.1% said religion was important or very important in life, but only 21.0% reported attending religious service at least once a week, with 48.6% of respondents indicating that they participated in religious services only on special holidays or less often. (2)

At the same time, religious institutions ranked highest among the population in terms of trust. With the trust of 83.1% of respondents, religious institutions were regarded as more trustworthy than the army (70.9%), the media (48.4%), the European Union (47.9%), the president (30.8%), and parliament (17.1%). (3) Events of the past two years—the government’s violent response to peaceful protests on 7 November 2007 and the war with Russia over South Ossetia—only seem to have enhanced the church’s influence. A 2008 survey found that trust in the church had risen to 87% after the war. (4)

Respect for the church seems to revolve around the person of the patriarch. With almost 95% of Georgians claiming to trust him, Ilia II is the country’s most trusted public figure. (5)
Until recently, the church generally has abstained from taking an active political stance, preferring to position itself as a neutral mediator. During the Rose Revolution, for example, Ilia II issued statements urging non-violence and offered the patriarchate as a neutral meeting ground for government-opposition negotiations, but refrained from siding with either group. Similarly, the church mediated between the Saakashvili government and the radical opposition during the prolonged protests of spring 2008.

It is the patriarch’s habitual abstinence from politics and his growing influence, despite low levels of religious participation, that give significance to his recent criticism of the Saakashvili government. A second incident, involving a dubbed video posted on YouTube and Facebook of the patriarch insulting Saakashvili, has raised issues regarding free speech, church-state relations, and the reaction of the Saakashvili government to the patriarch’s criticism.

It started on 12 October, when Ilia II met in Tbilisi with Metropolitan Jonah of the Orthodox Church in America and said that Georgia’s territorial integrity should be restored. (6) That statement, in and of itself, was not particularly incendiary. The restoration of territorial integrity is an oft-sounded theme in Georgian discourse, though its resonance with the church may have been increased by the Abkhaz Orthodox leaders’ decision in September to declare their organization independent of the Georgian Orthodox Church. (7)

The patriarch made another comment several days later, however, in which he implicitly criticized Saakashvili’s leadership regarding the August 2008 war with Russia and South Ossetia. Speaking to a group of teachers, the patriarch said, “The events that happened in Georgia, in Abkhazia, in Tskhinvali, weighed heavily on our people. It should not have happened and it was possible for it not to happen. We could have avoided these problems. When a ship is sailing on the
sea, the leader, the captain, should know where the cliffs are so as not to smash up against them.” (8)

The president and other government officials made no formal response to the patriarch’s comments. However, shortly thereafter several irreverent videos of the patriarch were uploaded to YouTube, a video posting site, and displayed on Facebook, a social networking site. One of the videos depicts Ilia II giving a speech, while a voiceover, imitating the patriarch’s speech pattern, says, “People, let’s get together and [expletive omitted] Saakashvili.” (9)

The Facebook video was posted by Tea Tutberidze, an activist at the Liberty Institute. This particular human rights NGO and think tank was very influential in the Rose Revolution that brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power. It also has close ties to Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili, to whom the other security services are rumored to yield, as well as with Giga Bokeria, the First Deputy Foreign Minister. Both men are former Liberty Institute activists and members of Saakashvili’s inner circle. Tutberidze herself began her career as a youth activist in one of the two student groups that came together to form Kmara, the Open Society Institute-funded and Liberty Institute-directed student movement, whose creative public protest activities in the lead-up to the Rose Revolution helped to highlight the failings of the Shevardnadze regime.

Among other things, the Liberty Institute is known for its defense of religious freedom and non-Orthodox minorities, a stance that has made it unpopular with the Georgian Orthodox Church. So it is not surprising that, if anyone were going to break the taboo regarding criticism of or irreverence toward the church (these two are often considered to be the same thing) or the patriarch, it would be someone affiliated with the Liberty Institute. The timing, however, implies that it might have been instigated by someone in the government in an attempt to undermine the patriarch as he appears to be taking a more critical stance toward the authorities.
Tutberidze’s comments in a Kavkasia TV interview cast the decision to post the video partly as a reaction to the patriarch’s comments and partly as an attempt to promote free speech. Referencing the patriarch’s criticism, Tutberidze accused the patriarch of sympathizing with Russia, an inflammatory claim in this time of tense relations between the two countries. “For me, that statement was truly anti-state,” she said. “Whose hands does that play into? Russia’s. It seems that Russia still has support in many places, including in the patriarchate.” (10) Her other statements, however, framed her actions as a call to “more pluralism and tolerance.” She evaded the issue of whether the government had encouraged her to post the clips. (11)

Whether the irreverent clips will serve to undermine the patriarch’s authority in the long term is unclear. What Tutberidze’s actions have done is to unleash an immediate groundswell of support for the church leader, mostly expressed in threats of physical harm posted on her Facebook page or voiced in interviews on media outlets.

The incident prompted a statement by the president’s administration in which the videos were described as “unethical escapades” that “intentionally or unintentionally serve the purpose of dividing the public.” The statement went on to declare that the government would “resort to every democratic political means in order to protests [the patriarch’s] reputation and not to allow anybody to abuse the principles of freedom.” (12) Despite this public indication of support for the patriarch, Saakashvili himself has refrained from comment.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has reacted to the videos by issuing a statement calling for public debates in which participants selected by the church may respond to the controversy. (13)
An investigation into the issue was launched by the Interior Ministry, which subsequently seized “video files and computers” as evidence from the two students it claimed created the video clips. (14) The legal grounds of the investigation are obscure, as the act of making the videos is not in violation of the law.

The incident raises several questions: Why did the patriarch choose this moment to criticize the president? Is it an indication that he is siding tacitly with the opposition? Additional questions arise concerning Tutberidze’s actions. There does not seem to be enough information available yet to formulate an answer to these questions, although future developments should add insight. Was any group or actor within the government using Tutberidze’s video clips to respond to the patriarch’s criticisms by proxy, as it were, in the form of the Liberty Institute? If this was the case, it must have come from a very senior or influential actor, as the risk of the anticipated societal response would have been too great to allow the decision to be taken by an underling.

The controversy also invites several observations. First, it highlights the limits of free speech in Georgia. Clearly, there are some areas in which Georgian society considers that free speech should be curtailed in favor of other values – in this case, that of respect for the Georgian patriarch, a cultural, as well as religious, symbol.

Secondly, the internet has gained sway as a political medium in Georgia and, by receiving coverage on television and in newspapers, it is growing in influence as a political tool. The younger, more urbanized segment of the Georgian population is increasingly technologically savvy and has access to information outside the Georgian mass media, whose major outlets are all state-influenced, to some degree.
It is unclear to what extent Ilia II could exert political influence if he decided to expand his criticism of the Saakashvili government. The main conclusion from the events of the past month, however, is that the government perceives him to be of such influence that it cannot afford to address his criticisms directly and must either ignore such statements or respond by proxy. Should the patriarch continue in a critical vein, the government’s position could change.

Source Notes:
(3) Ibid.
(5) Ibid.
(7) “Abkhaz Orthodox Church separate Georgian,” 16 Sep 09, Russia and CIS General Newswire via Lexis-Nexis.
(8) “Georgian TV suggests government behind anticlerical campaign on Facebook,” Kavkasia TV, 1700 gmt, 18 Oct 09; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(9) Ibid.
(10) Ibid.
(11) Ibid.
(12) “President defends head of Georgian church against ‘insulting statements,’” Rustavi 2, 21 Oct 09; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
Newly Independent States: Central Asia

By Monika Shepherd

TAJIKISTAN

Hydropower hydra once again ensnares Tajikistan

Early on the morning of November 9 roughly seventy percent of Tajikistan, (1) including Dushanbe and the TALCO (Tajik Aluminum Company) aluminum plant in Tursunzade, lost electrical power. According to Barq-i Tojik’s (Tajikistan’s state electricity company) deputy chief engineer, Rashid Gulov, the power failure was caused when the Norak-Regar 500 kilowatt power transmission line stopped functioning. This resulted in the shutdown of all of the country’s hydropower stations currently in operation, (2) including its largest one, the Norak station, which supplies electricity to the TALCO plant. (3) The TALCO plant requires forty percent of the country’s electrical supply and is one of Tajikistan’s top two revenue producers, the other being its cotton exports. (4) The only regions spared in the black-out were Gorno-Badakhshon, which receives its power supply from a different provider (the Pamir Energy Company), and Sughd (formerly known as Leninobod). (5)

Nozirjon Yodgori, press spokesman for Barq-i Tojik, later explained that the failure of the Norak-Regar transmission line was due to a spike in electricity consumption, brought on by unusually cold weather, as well as the fact that Tajikistan’s electric power system had been forced to operate outside the Central Asian Unified Power System (UPS) for several days. (6) Fortunately, Barq-i Tojik was able to restore power supplies to Talco within roughly three hours (during
which period the plant relied on its back-up generators, in order to maintain production) and to most of the rest of the country by the end of the day. (7)

However, Yodgori also announced that in order to avoid future blackouts of this magnitude, his company had decided to begin imposing power rationing in rural areas, which, beginning November 10, would receive only seven hours of electricity per day. Certain “social vitally important facilities,” such as schools and pre-schools, would be exempted from the rationing. For the time being, Dushanbe and the republic’s “regional centres” also will not be subjected to the restrictions, due to the fact that much of their populations live in apartment buildings, where it is more difficult to use alternative heating sources. (8)

Power rationing and, indeed, power failures have become a common feature of the cold weather months for many of Central Asia’s citizens. Due to the way Central Asia’s power grid was designed, each republic plays a role in supplying electricity and natural gas to its neighbors. The November 9 failure of the Norak-Regar transmission line cut off electricity not only to most of Tajikistan, but also to Uzbekistan’s Surkhondaryo Region and to part of Afghanistan, (9) and is only the latest symptom of a much deeper and more complicated problem, one that the Central Asian states have been grappling with for years. At the heart of the conundrum lies the fact that there is no longer sufficient water to meet each country’s full needs and none of the Central Asian leaders is willing to scale back his pursuit of those needs, especially if it means benefitting his neighbors, financially or otherwise. Short-term agreements on the use of water and hydropower-generated electricity are signed and then ignored, as illustrated by the agreements signed between Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (see ISCIP Analyst, Vol. XV, No. 3, 23 October 2008 for details about the agreement) to supply Turkmen electrical power via Uzbek transmission lines to Tajikistan, in order to allow Tajikistan’s main reservoir to be replenished in time to meet Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan’s irrigation needs. Squabbling over whose state company owes how much in transit and usage fees to whom has torpedoed most
such water and hydropower-sharing agreements in a matter of weeks. Consequently, the water outflow from the Norak reservoir continues to exceed the inflow by roughly 120 cubic meters of water per second, (10) which does not bode well for the heating season ahead.

The latest crisis has been in the making for over a year, as Uzbekenergo (Uzbekistan’s state energy company) continued to demand that Barq-i Tojik pay its transit fee arrears and then on November 1 ceased transmitting electricity to Tajikistan’s southern regions via the Central Asian Unified Power System (CA-UPS), ostensibly in order to carry out maintenance and repairs. Tajikistan’s Deputy Energy and Industry Minister Pulod Muhiddinov disputed not only Uzbekenergo’s claims regarding the necessity of withdrawing from the CA-UPS grid, but also flatly denied that Barq-i Tojik was in payment arrears, instead accusing the Uzbek company of owing $1 million to his state’s company. (11)

Meanwhile, both the Uzbek and Kazakh governments officially have announced their intention to withdraw from the CA-UPS grid. In an article published in Pravda Vostoka on November 5, Uzbekenergo chief Esso Sadullaev stated that his country would withdraw from the grid as of December 1, on the grounds that remaining in the CA-UPS would “jeopardize [the] stability and safe functioning of [the] Uzbek power system.” (12) In addition to its complaints that Barq-i Tojik consistently defaults on transit fees, Uzbekenergo also has accused Tajik authorities of illegally siphoning off approximately 100 kilowatts of power over the course of the past year, (13) an allegation echoed by Kazakhstan’s Electricity Grid Operating Company (KEGOC). KEGOC has voiced concerns that its customers in southern Kazakhstan may be faced with restricted power supplies and is even predicting CA-UPS system failures so severe that both Kazakhstan and Russia’s electrical grids could be affected. (14)

The withdrawal of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan from the CA-UPS could result in the most severe electricity shortages that both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan’s
citizens yet have had to endure, unless alternate routes for power transmission are found. Turkmenistan’s Minister of Energy and Industry, Yazmuhammet Orazgulyyew, proposed one such route, by suggesting that Turkmen electricity supplies could be exported to Tajikistan via Afghanistan, should the Uzbek government make good on its threat to withdraw from the CA-UPS completely. Unfortunately, the 450 km-long transmission line necessary for such a solution has yet to be constructed and since it would require another $50 million in financing, the success of this project remains uncertain. (15)

In addition to the problems posed by KEGOC and Uzbekenergo’s threats to abandon the CA-UPS, the Tajik government also is confronting a possible power shut-off from the Russian-controlled Sangtuda-1 hydropower station. Barq-i Tojik is heavily in debt to Sangtuda-1, 75 percent of which is under Russian ownership, with the remaining 25 percent held by Tajikistan. The Sangtuda-1 managers have threatened to stop supplying power to Barq-i Tojik altogether, if the debt is not paid. It seems that a resolution on this issue, at least, may have been reached; on November 18, Nodirjon Yodgori announced that his company’s chairman had ordered $3 million to be transferred to the Sangtuda-1 owners by December 30. Barq-i Tojik’s total debt to Sangtuda-1 currently stands at $14.5 million, due in full by March 31, 2010. (16)

Overall, however, the Tajik government’s short-term options for continued electricity supplies seem quite limited, especially if KEGOC and Uzbekenergo make good on their threats. President Rahmon is maintaining his efforts to attract further investment in the country’s hydropower industry, particularly in the Roghun dam and hydroelectric station project, but so far, with little success. Iran has financed the construction of a much smaller hydropower plant, the Sangtuda-2, which is 55 percent completed and due to come on-line by the end of 2010, (17) but the Sangtuda-2 station alone does not have the capacity to satisfy Tajikistan’s rapidly growing demands for electrical power.
Compounding the energy shortage issue is the concern that Central Asia's water needs may soon far outstrip its existing resources. Unless alternative energy sources are developed, the Tajik and Kyrgyz regimes could find themselves not only without power, but without water, the element without which life itself cannot exist.

Source Notes:
(1) “Some 70% of Tajikistan without electricity as power plant fails,” 9 Nov 09, RIA Novosti via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(2) “Tajikistan restores disrupted electric power supply,” 9 Nov 09, ITAR-TASS via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(4) “Tajikistan restores disrupted electric power supply,” 9 Nov 09, Ibid.
(7) “Electricity consumption in Tajik rural areas limited,” 10 Nov 09, ITAR-TASS via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(8) Ibid.
(9) “Uzbekistan resumes electric power supply to Afghanistan,” 10 Nov 09, Regnum; BBC Worldwide Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
Newly Independent States: Western Region

By Tammy Lynch

MOLDOVA

Will Moldova’s Communists win in the end?

Moldova’s ruling parliamentary coalition suffered a setback last week, when it was unable to muster enough votes to elect a new president. This failure could lead to a new parliamentary election—the third since April 2009—and severely undermine recent progress on cooperation with Western organizations. The latter result would likely be welcomed by the Communist Party, the former ruling party removed from power in July’s elections.
The CPRM (Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova), under the stewardship of former President Vladimir Voronin, often paid lip service to cooperation with European entities, but failed to make any significant progress toward that stated goal. Moreover, in the months leading up to July’s elections, Voronin abandoned even the pretense of such cooperation and regularly attacked the IMF and World Bank. He criticized both organizations for what he called their “puffing and conditions,” and amusingly suggested that they are to blame for his country’s corruption, “which we now come across at every corner.”

(1) Voronin served as Moldova’s president for ten years, the last five of which involved no IMF financial support or program for his country.

The new ruling coalition’s inability to secure support from a part of the CPRM ensured that the vote for president would fall short. While the coalition controls a majority of 53 of the 101 parliamentary deputies, the president must be elected by 61 votes. Therefore, eight Communists must defect. (2) They didn’t.

The coalition had hoped to lure “liberal” communists to its side by nominating a man for president who had been among their ranks just months ago. Former Parliamentary Speaker and CPRM member Marian Lupo withdrew from the Communist Party following parliamentary elections in April, when massive uprisings broke out in response to perceived fraud.

The 37-year-old Lupo is popular and is viewed as a leader of Moldova’s “next” generation. Before joining the CPRM and gaining the positions and stature made possible by this choice, he served as the Executive Director of the EU’s Technical Assistance to the CIS (TACIS) program.

Following the success of his new coalition in July’s forced snap elections, Lupo appeared sure that he would be able to convince some of his former colleagues to support his candidacy for president. He suggested that the Party actually is
not unified. “Many elements of their cohesion are being propped—and I am not afraid to say so—by repressive measures and fear,” he said. (3)

Lupo’s claims of disunity appeared to have been borne out by the decision of the CPRM leadership to force a full Party walk out from the parliamentary chamber before the vote for president. (4) This tactic eliminated the possibility that CPRM members might choose to cast a vote for Lupo during the secret ballot, and suggests that only strong-arm tactics are maintaining Communist cohesion. Party leader Voronin would not have needed to remove his members from parliament, if he were certain of their votes. Certainly, no CPRM member is brave enough to defy a walk-out. But, a secret ballot is another matter.

Voronin may be looking for concessions from the ruling coalition, which is technically called The Alliance for European Integration (AEI), and which consists of the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova, the Liberal Party, the Democratic Party and the Our Moldova Alliance. In the past, the CPRM has hinted that the party would like to participate in the government.

Lupo and his coalition partners—most of whom have led reform-oriented parties or blocs for years—seem unlikely to agree. “I believe such a coalition will preserve the current situation in the country,” Lupo said, “which could never be beneficial.” (5)

Nevertheless, compromising in some way may be more palatable to Lupo than losing a second vote for president. Should he do so, according to the constitution, a snap election is triggered. This election would need to take place in early 2010, since the constitution forbids more than two elections per calendar year.

A compromise is likely to be far less palatable to other AEI leaders, including Prime Minister Vlad Filat, who recently declared that his language is “Romanian”
not “Moldovan” and instructed Romanian history courses to be returned to the schools.

In fact, the next few weeks should be a test of the so far impressive – and regionally unique – unity shown by the AEI as they decide how to proceed. Do they gamble that CPRM actions have alienated their voters and go to an election, or do they work to maintain the status quo? How much, if anything, might they give up? And is there some way to prevent another CPRM walkout?

A brand new and necessary agreement with the IMF hangs in the balance, as does the start of negotiations with the EU over a “new agreement … that will replace, and go beyond, the current Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.”

(6) Surprisingly, both of these agreements are opposed by the obstinate CPRM.

Source Notes:
(2) For a more in depth look at the coalition and the parliamentary power balance, see “Moldova’s Politicians Face Crucial Test,” The ISCIp Analyst, Volume XV, Number 15 (20 Aug 09) via http://www.bu.edu/iscip/digest/vol15/ed1515.shtml#WesternRegions.
(3) Reuters, 1 Aug 09 via www.todayszaman.com.
(4) “UPDATE 2-Moldovan parliament fails to elect Lupu president,” Reuters, 0821 EST, 10 Nov 09 via http://www.reuters.com/article/companyNewsAndPR/idUSLA63678920091110?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=0&sp=true.
(6) “29th Quadripartite meeting between the Council of Europe and the European Union: Conclusions -15129/09 (Presse 312),” Council of the European Union, 27 Oct 09 via