



THE PAPAL VISIT TO GEORGIA

Interview with H.E. Tamar GRDZELIDZE,
Ambassador of Georgia to the Holy See

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NICOLAS KAZARIAN: Why is the Pope visiting Georgia? What are the most important aspects of this visit?

H.E. TAMAR GRDZELIDZE: First of all, many thanks for your interest in Pope Francis's visit to Georgia. I appreciate that IRIS' audience will have an opportunity to learn a little more about it than they will from the news.

Tbilisi will become the 20th capital visited by Pope Francis when he arrives on 30 September as part of his pastoral visit to the Caucasus. As he himself said during the Angelus prayer few weeks ago, he is traveling to the Caucasus region to bring a message of peace. The logo that Georgia has created for the papal visit expresses this well. We live in a fragmented world where human suffering caused by humans is a matter of fact. The Catholic Church sees its involvement in the international community as defending Human Rights, human dignity, and the rights of the oppressed and marginalized. These themes are particularly well advocated under the current pontificate.

For Georgia, the visit of Pope Francis carries a very strong message: it is a great honor to welcome the Pontiff, who is one of the most famous people in the world. He has achieved this popularity since his enthronement in March 2013. The source of his popularity is difficult to define: he has not made any scientific discoveries, he is not a billionaire philanthropist, none of the usual criteria are responsible for his success. Yes, he is trying to reform the Holy See, yes, he cares for the poor and for the planet. Yes, he is warm with children and ordinary people. But since when has the world become sensitive to those qualities? My partial explanation of his popularity is that he lives what he preaches, in other words, his life has become paradigmatic. So his personal presence as a very distinguished leader is a great honor for our country, which is both ancient and very new.

Secondly, when the Pope travels, the media covers his travel as widely as possible. This means that the world will be reminded of Georgia, of the fact that we have been occupied since 2008 and that in spite of this we are doing well enough to be exemplary in the region in terms of issues like media freedom, human rights, and elections. Certainly there is much more to do, but you have to see where we were 25 years ago. Georgia was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1801, then the first Democratic Republic was proclaimed in 1918, before falling under Soviet rule from 1921-1991. In 2016, Georgia is celebrating the 25th anniversary of the restoration of its independence.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: What is the role of the Catholic Church in Georgia and what is its relationship with the Orthodox Church of Georgia?

H.E. TAMAR GRDZELIDZE: Christianity became a state religion in Georgia around 320. The Orthodox Church of Georgia was founded at around the same time by a female missionary, St. Nino. It is one of the 14 orthodox autocephalous churches.

Catholics are just 1% of the population of Georgia. There were historical ties between the Georgian kings and the Roman See. As early as the 12th century A.D., soon after the schism in the Church, Georgia established links with Western Christians. Diplomatic relations with the Holy See have existed since 1992.

The relationship between the two churches is currently the same as it would be almost anywhere where one of them is disproportionately larger than the other.

In 2011, there was a legislative amendment to the Constitution whereby the major religious minorities in Georgia were granted recognition as public legal entities. So our legislation is trending towards justice, but there is not a good balance of the past and the present in our society so it will take time to fully normalize inter-church relations.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: Where does Georgia find itself today geopolitically?

H.E. TAMAR GRDZELIDZE: Georgia is located on the crossroads of two continents, in the South Caucasus, on the Black Sea, surrounded by Russia to the north, Turkey to the south, and Armenia and Azerbaijan to the east. It has a population of 3,700,000.

Georgia is currently seeking Euro-Atlantic integration. Since 2014, Georgia has been an associate member of the European Union, and has been working internally to meet the requirements to seek further progress in its partnership with the EU. Georgia also actively participates in international security: Georgian soldiers are a part of the EU peacekeeping forces in CAR and Mali, as well as the NATO forces in Afghanistan. Proportionally, Georgia is the second-biggest contributor to the international peace-keeping process.

You can gauge the country's progress by looking at the numbers of tourists it hosts, which reached 5 million this summer. You can see tourists everywhere in the capital, in the mountains, and at the seaside. They come from around the world, but mainly from the region.

Georgia has tried to maintain economic relations with Russia in the absence of diplomatic relations, in parallel to the informal talks held in Geneva since the 2008 war. Occupation, the violation of our territorial integrity, remains our main problem.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: Could the Pope serve as a mediator between Russia and Georgia?

H.E. TAMAR GRDZELIDZE: I wish that Pope Francis could act as a mediator between the two countries but it is very unlikely, firstly, because of the Pope's agenda and nature of papal visits, and secondly because of the complexity of the situation. ■

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