



NGOs Respond to Prime Minister's Statement on Secularity

On July 23rd 2017, Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Kvirikashvili elaborated on the relations between the State and Georgian Orthodox Church at the opening of Georgian Patriarchate's hotel. According to the Prime Minister, there is no place for secularism in Georgia with its classic understanding.

"Our statehood, our church is as interlaced into each other, as Saint Nino's cross was with her braid. Therefore, despite the fact that the church and the State are independent, secularism with its classic concept is inappropriate in Georgia and we think that the model that is in our country, is unique in the world".

The principle of secularity implies institutional separation of state and religion and state's neutral attitude towards religious groups.

Secularity in a democratic and legal state is an inevitable precondition for peaceful coexistence, religious neutrality and tolerance in a multi-confessional society.

The constitution of Georgia also shares this spirit, according to which, the state and the church are independent from each other. This principle is a traditional, indivisible, the most important part of the Constitution.

In 2002 the constitutional agreement was signed between the State and the Patriarchate of Georgia, the document regulates the relations between two subjects and as the recognition of "historic role" of the Church enshrined in the constitution, also does not exclude the protection of the secularity principle.

Independence model of the state and the church was ascertained by the first Constitution of Georgia (1921) according to which the state and church are absolutely separate and independent from each other and none of religions has any advantage over other.

According to the same Constitution, transferring any type of resources from the state's and/or local self-government's budget for religious purposes was strictly prohibited.

Historically, Georgian clerics were also trying to establish and protect this principle. The Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia, Ambrosi Khelaia in his final word (1924) during the trial said: *"Religion is not originated from and established by the state. It has its own independent foundation for existence, state and church are two different institutions, because of this, they have different operating fields, when fulfilling their purposes they are both independent from each other. The motto of the Gospel is "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's".*

We will emphasize that the clear choice of Georgian citizens, - democratic development and integration into the Euro-Atlantic space is impossible without protecting the principle of separation of state and the church.

The principle of secularism protects the state from the influence of church and on the contrary, - it protects the church from the state's possible attempts of influence. The

protection of the principle represents the only way to ensure the independence and inviolability of clerical authority and on the other hand, to provide a possibility for the government to work effectively and objectively.

Based on the foresaid, signatory non-governmental organizations believe that constitutional secularism has only one understanding and content, which implies delimiting clerical and secular authorities and their independence from each other. Furthermore, principle of secularity is an inevitable condition for establishing modern and democratic state that is oriented towards protection of human rights and represents a cornerstone of the legal order.

Consequently, Prime Minister by his statement firstly questioned legal order of Georgia and secondly, the most important historic values and constitutional principles.

Signatory organizations call on Prime Minister to refrain from irresponsible statements, to protect the fundamental principles of the Constitution and religious neutrality.

Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI)

Media Development Foundation (MDF)

Equality Movement

Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI)

Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS)

Identoba

International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)

Article 42 of the Constitution

Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA)

Transparency International - Georgia (TI)

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Civil Development Agency (CIDA)

Women's Initiatives Supportive Group (WISG)

Human Rights Centre

Sapari