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GEORGIA: Catholics fail to break Orthodox monopoly

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The Catholic Church failed in its bid to become the second religious community to gain legal status when the government abruptly cancelled plans to sign an agreement with the Vatican on 19 September. Catholic officials stressed that the Church needs the agreement. "For the past decade they kept saying a law on religion would be adopted which would grant such recognition, but it never happened," a Catholic official told Forum 18 News Service from Tbilisi. "That's the reason for the agreement." The government's change of mind followed complaints from the Orthodox patriarch and street protests. "These demonstrations were organised by the Orthodox Church, which stirred up the students by telling them the agreement was part of a plot by European and Masonic agents," Orthodox priest Fr Basile Kobakhidze told Forum 18.

With the last-minute refusal by the Georgian government on 19 September to sign an agreement with the Vatican which would have granted the 50-000 strong Catholic Church legal status in Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Church remains the only religious community in the country with legal status as a religious community (see separate F18 article). "The Catholic Church – like all other non-Orthodox religious communities – still has no juridical recognition," a Catholic official, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Tbilisi on 24 September. "For the past decade they kept saying a law on religion would be adopted which would grant such recognition, but it never happened. That's the reason for the agreement." No-one in the foreign ministry was able to tell Forum 18 why the government declined to sign at the last minute or whether the agreement could be signed in future.

In his weekly radio interview on 22 September, President Eduard Shevardnadze expressed his regret that the agreement had not been signed and promised that a religion law would be adopted to regulate the legal status of all faiths in the country.

The Georgian government's refusal to sign the agreement came after a sustained campaign against it by the Orthodox Church, which included demonstrations outside the nunciature in Tbilisi and at the airport as Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, the Vatican's "foreign minister", flew in on 18 September. "For Orthodox Georgia the signing of an inter-state agreement with the Vatican cannot be desirable," Patriarch Ilya, the head of the Orthodox Church, told a press conference on 18 September. He said he had written to President Eduard Shevardnadze warning him not to allow the signing to go ahead. The patriarch claimed that other unnamed faiths in Georgia also opposed the signing of any agreement with the Vatican.

The following day some 2,000 students waving placards joined demonstrations outside parliament in central Tbilisi, where Orthodox Bishop Zenon of Dmanisi told the protestors that the agreement would have allowed the Vatican to increase its influence in Georgia. After an hour State Minister Avtandil Djorbenadze addressed the crowd, telling them that President Shevardnadze, who was attending a summit in Ukraine, had ordered the signing to be cancelled.

In televised comments on 20 September, Bishop Zenon denied the protest had been organised by the church leadership, calling such claims "amoral" and saying the demonstrators "simply showed that they understand the importance of Orthodoxy for Georgia".

One Tbilisi-based Orthodox priest rejects Bishop Zenon's claims. "These demonstrations were organised by the Orthodox Church, which stirred up the students by telling them the agreement was part of a plot by European and Masonic agents," Fr Basile Kobakhidze told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 25 September. "They told them our Church is in danger and that the Catholics want to destroy Orthodox belief."

He particularly criticised Bishop Zenon's role. "He made fascist statements saying that they should drive the Catholics out of Georgia," Fr Kobakhidze complained. "He was the main organiser of the demonstrations."

Among the Orthodox Church's complaints against the agreement was that the text had not been made public and had been prepared in great secrecy. Forum 18 has been unable to get a copy of the text.

Teimuraz Mikeladze, the head of the foreign ministry's information office – one of those at the ministry who was unable to explain why the signing had been stalled – said that it was not possible for agreements between two subjects of international law (i.e. Georgia and the Holy See) to be published before they are signed. "This is a very serious juridical norm," he told Forum 18. "Only if

both sides agree can the text be made public." He declined to say if the Georgian foreign ministry wanted to see the text published.

Likewise the Vatican nunciature in Tbilisi declined to give the text to Forum 18. "There is no definitive text because it has not been signed," a nunciature spokesman told Forum 18 on 23 September. "It cannot be published until it is signed." A spokeswoman at the Vatican Press Office told Forum 18 on 24 September that it was customary for agreements between the Holy See and individual states to be in the public domain once they were signed. But she was unable to say why they were not made public before then so that they could be openly discussed.

Fr Kobakhidze described the refusal to sign the agreement as a "great mistake". "If anyone had any disagreement with it they could have protested in a civilised and democratic way."

His views were echoed by Bishop Oleg Khubashvili, head of a Pentecostal Union with some 5,000 adult members, who condemned the refusal. "The right of Catholic believers has been infringed," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 25 September. "The agreement was there to protect their rights to function, build churches and open schools. This means that now they have been deprived of those rights."

The Georgian government's unexpected decision to refuse to sign the agreement provoked a sharply-worded statement by Archbishop Tauran. "It is mainly the Catholic community in this country that will suffer this failed pledge, a community which continues to be deprived of every juridical guarantee and to whom we express our solidarity," Archbishop Tauran declared on 20 September as he left Georgia.

"In addition, the Holy See delegation felt gravely hurt by the conduct of the Georgian Orthodox Church which has spread news that does not correspond to the truth, notwithstanding the fact that it has been shown many times (our) willingness to provide information about how the talks were going," Archbishop Tauran added. "The Holy See hopes that Georgia, which takes part in important international conventions on human rights, will know how to remedy such a regrettable situation."

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