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GEORGIA: Protest against "anti-sect" school textbook

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

Human rights activists and religious minority leaders have complained about a textbook that warns school children about the "dangers" of religious "sects". "Security: Dangerous Situations and Civil Defence", issued with Education Ministry approval last year, is used for children of 15 and 16 in the compulsory subject Security. Emil Adelkhanov of the Tbilisi-based Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development told Forum 18 News Service that he regards the book as a further symptom of "religious hysteria" in Georgia. Baptists and Lutherans have also expressed concern. "I think the textbook encourages religious violence," Malkhaz Songulashvili of the Baptist Union told Forum 18. "If the state is serious about religious freedom it has to withdraw the book immediately and apologise for issuing it."

Opposition among human rights activists and religious minorities is mounting to a textbook that warns school children about the "dangers" of religious "sects". "Security: Dangerous Situations and Civil Defence", issued with Education Ministry approval last year, is used in the tenth class (for children of 15 and 16 years' old) in the compulsory subject Security. Emil Adelkhanov of the Tbilisi-based Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development told Forum 18 News Service on 3 June that he regards the book as a further symptom of "religious hysteria" in Georgia. "I think the textbook encourages religious violence," Malkhaz Songulashvili, bishop of the Baptist Union, told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 5 June. "If the state is serious about religious freedom it has to withdraw the book immediately and apologise for issuing it."

The book, by Otia Mdivnishvili, Otar Tavelishvili, Gela Ramishvili and Dimitri Makharadze and edited by Teimuraz Melkadze, was published by the Meridiani publishing house in Tbilisi. It is prescribed for use in all state-owned Georgian-language schools (some of Georgia's schools teach in Russian, Armenian or Azeri). The five-page chapter "The Dangers from Religious Sects", which comes at the end of the 64-page book, does not mention any specific religious communities by name, but recommends how children can protect themselves from what the authors regard as the dangers from minority religious communities.

"The fact that the textbook does not mention any particular religious group as harmful does not make it less dangerous for our religious minorities," Adelkhanov told Forum 18. He highlighted a number of phrases in the chapter which worried him: "Religious sects ... forbidden in other countries, with their anti-State, antihuman, amoral sermons, are entering the country"; "Many sects brainwash young people and then ask them for money, make them rob their relatives, compel them to sell their houses..."; "The members of some sects have no scruples about using any means (bribing, deceiving, winning over traitors, including officials, etc.) in their business activities."

Adelkhanov pointed out that Georgian newspapers also often write in general terms about "sectarians sapping the Orthodox and national identity and integrity of our nation". "In this context," he warned, "such phrases from the textbook may easily be understood as referring to any non-traditional religious group in this country."

At the end of the chapter pupils were given a task to carry out in their own time: "Collect information about the activities of internationally compromised religious sects (organisations, associations), write an essay to discuss it in your class and discuss their possible danger at school and at home." Adelkhanov was worried by this. "This task invites teenagers to read what our yellow press - the only available source of such kind of information - writes about Satanic devices and the hidden agenda of evil sectarians."

Pastor Gary Azikov, secretary of the Lutheran Church in Georgia, was also concerned about the textbook, although he had not personally seen a copy. "No-one has given it to us but we have heard about it," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 9 June. He believed that school textbooks should not include material on religious issues without broad consultation with religious communities. "There should have been a conference so that all religious communities could know what was in the book," he declared. "There wasn't." He complained that the Education Ministry was the victim of heavy lobbying by the dominant Orthodox Church.

Azikov maintained that there might be "totalitarian sects" which call for the use of weapons or engage in brainwashing, but believed that if so such groups should be identified by name. "Unfortunately there is a tendency to lump together all religious minorities as groups that people should be defended against."

Songulashvili said the textbook would be one item on the agenda in a forthcoming meeting with the security minister. He said there

would also be a meeting with the education minister about the book.

Contacted on 9 June, a spokesperson for the Education Ministry in Tbilisi promised to answer Forum 18's question within ten days as to why such a book which appears to denigrate religious minorities has been issued for use in all state-owned Georgian-language schools.

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