

# Key aspects of Georgian Orthodox Church's autocephaly

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*In Orthodox world it is commonly known that Tomos on recognition and acceptance of autocephaly of Orthodox Church of Georgia took place on the 25th of January 1990. The Georgian Orthodox Church occupies the sixth place in the local Slavic Church diptychs alongside the ninth place in the diptychs of ancient eastern patriarchates. All those facts may cause an uninitiated reader to consider Georgia to be a developing country that managed to gain its political and religious independence only after Russian Empire had collapsed. Few know nowadays that Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the most ancient in the world and that Georgia itself after the 5th century is a country with its own autocephalous Church, mentioned by a Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea in the 6th century: «Iberians are Christians, they abide by rules of faith better than anyone we know». Even such an influential clergyman and theologian as Archbishop of Telmessos Job (Getcha) stating that «the Orthodox autocephalies, except for the most ancient ones, were created due to Tomos granted by Church of Constantinople and only they can be considered as truly autocephalous Churches,» apparently does not include Georgia into the number of those «most ancient» ones, as further on he mentions: «Autocephaly is every time declared due to a number of political reasons, for example owing to acquiring national independence as it happened in Georgia, Czech Republic and Slovakia»<sup>1</sup>. The reason for such underestimation of Georgian Orthodox Church is deprivation of autocephaly for more than a hundred years when the history of the nation, past and present of its church were questioned. In Tsarist Russia very few theologians and church historians would defend the right of Georgian Orthodox Church, among them M. Sabinin and N.N. Durnovo. Overwhelming number of authors simply tried to justify the status quo. Activists who wrote articles exploring the issue deeply such as bishops (and future patriarchs of Georgia) Kyrion, Leonid, Ambrosius, Callistratus felt like a voice crying in the wilderness. Their works being written mainly in Georgian were rarely taken into account outside of their own country. Our survey intends to familiarize readers with history of autocephaly of Georgian Orthodox Church, with views of the above-mentioned Georgian clergy activists, and to keep*

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<sup>1</sup> Archbishop of Constantinople on the role of autocephaly in the status of ROC [https://zn.ua/WORLD/konstantinopolskiy-arhiepiskop-rasskazal-o-rol-i-avtokefalii-i-statuse-rpc-294489\\_.html](https://zn.ua/WORLD/konstantinopolskiy-arhiepiskop-rasskazal-o-rol-i-avtokefalii-i-statuse-rpc-294489_.html)

*track of the inner and outside factors that led to autocephaly at dawn of christianity and of the reasons that have contributed to the loss of autocephaly and to its restoration again.*

**Key words:** autocephaly, Orthodox Church, Georgia.

Apostolic asceticism of Andrew the First-Called in Georgia paved the way for spreading the saving religion across the whole country.

The Adoption of Christianity in Georgia happened at the same time as Constantine the Great announced freedom of religious practice of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Also, at the time Georgia's patron was Queen of Heaven, the Blessed Virgin, who in order to prove Her vigilance over the country had guided there a virgin. For that purpose the Mother of God had chosen a devoted christian from Cappadocia – Nino.

Thanks to a cross and prayers granted by the Queen of Heaven Saint Nino definitively defeated idolatry in the very heart of Georgia – Kartli, miraculously healed princess Nana and the miracle with king Mirian had contributed to converting Christianity into Georgian state religion. Shortly Mirian ordered everyone in his kingdom to be baptized in Christian faith and the entire nation embarked on the path of Christianity devotedly. Following Saint Nino's advise the king announced his decision to the Emperor of Byzantine, who alongside with his clergy rejoiced at Georgia's conversion into Christianity and sent Mirian True Cross, an image of Lord and a part (the pedestal) of the holy wood of the True Cross as well as one of the nails used to nail Christ's holy hands against the cross.

Constantine the Great sent over to king Mirian some priests together with bishop Ioane who consequently would be elected as a patriarch of Antiochian Orthodox Church in the Council of Nicaea in 325. This election has determined that Georgia would belong to the Antiochian Orthodox Church. During patriarchy of Petre Georgian Apostolic Church got autocephaly from the Antiochian Orthodox Church.

This happened in the 5th century during the reign of Vakhtang Gorgasali who saw the meaning of his life in fulfilling of this principle: *«Seek death in Christ's name.»*

Nevertheless, due to political conflicts Vakhtang together with Persian army marched towards Byzantine. Although it should be stated

that despite confrontations he did not forget about the same faith of the enemy and spared them vigorously outside of the battlefield.

Here is where the king's dream comes on the scene.

Typically even in historiography of Church this dream is rarely mentioned. It is considered to be something legendary, fantastic, proverbial... Nevertheless this dream precisely has outlined the path of onward development of Georgia, just as dreams of Joseph the Beautiful did for the biblical story.

The dream furthermore becomes a significant factor since its protagonist is bishop Petre himself, the one during whose patriarchy Georgia gained autocephaly and who became its first Catholicos!

What was the dream preceded by though?

Juansher Juansheriani in the Georgian Chronicles known as Kartlis Tskhovrena (Life of Georgia) narrates a story about the mentioned events that ends with description of the prophetic dream!

*«Vakhtang sent out heralds in order to get all the monks out of their shelters, set free the prisoners and let them go wherever they please. So multitude of priests and deacons, monks and encratites left caves and cliffs and moreover left Pontic city for it had been besieged for almost four months.*

*And two people were among them: priest Petre, a student of Gregory the Theologian, as he ordained at his tomb, and a monk called Samoel. And they appeared before Vakhtang to give their gratuities for letting prisoners go and for setting churches and priests free. After the prayer king showed compassion and visited them and ordered to bring in all the prisoners and monks and the weak that he'd set free for all those wretched were outside the city. The wretched were granted mules and the young were given three drachmas each and were free to go. Petre the priest and Samuel the monk were left with the king.*

*And when the warriors left to their tents and the king headed to dine, he said to Petre: «God favored this deed of mine for I protected churches and set prisoners free.»*

*Petre said: «Should your slave speak up to you boldly or should he praise you falsely?»*

King tells him: «Speak up for I seek nothing but denunciation in order to prevent lies.»

Petre said: «Before God bodily churches are taller than the stone ones. A church made of stone will fall one day but will be rebuild from the same stone. When bodily churches fall though - no one can manage to heal that: neither a healer nor a king. Thus what number of alive people you'd thrust? It is said about Abel's blood: every blood is washed off with Noah's flood, as for the blood of Zacharias, the son of Barachias, it was paid off to jews with full disgrace; Isaiah talks about this: take and destroy all of his children through Titus and Vespasian. Or have you not read books of Moses: when an israelite began to fornicate with a foreign seed, how many souls were destroyed for this only adultery? Therefore what number of virgins and churches had been violated by your soldiers?»

And the king said: «Don't you see that Iovian, the defender of churches, at the same time served the wicked Julian? And if one stumbled, one must fall.»

Petre said: «I shall not push someone who've stumbled, but I shall rise you who had fallen as if David from Uria's seduction. I do not wish you to resemble someone who creates with his right hand but with the left one destroys, nor someone who blesses with his lips but with his heart curses and smears, you should be like blessed memory of kings that have mastered this world but have not drifted apart from Heavenly Kingdom: David, Solomon and Constantine, Iovian and many more like them. What is your resemblance with Iovian though and who rules over you, whose sword would hang over your neck as did Julian's (sword) over Iovian? Or who did God chose to be your ruler so that he could be held responsible for your righteousness before God? No way, you have been put a ruler over all these and to you all of them were given. Henceforth God will ask you about all the evil and you'll be punished if you do not repent.»

The king said: «I want my justification, but you have blamed me rightfully.»

Petre said: «Since you stepped on the path of confession, your sins have abandoned you. Although now I shall announce the words of

*your heart: not for the ignorance of yours have you risen to fight against God's children but for helping your Persian family. You do not know that Greeks are God's tribe by promise and by promise He named them God's children and handed them a seal that destroyed hell, is that not a cross?»*

*The king said: «So what do you need now?»*

*Petre told him: «I want you to put down the fire you have inflamed and to become Caesar's friend as before you were a friend of Persians.»*

*The king responded: «I wish to encounter with Caesar this same night by your prayers and I wish love to come between us so that I would recognize Christ's will according to your call.»*

*Petre said: «I am confused by your request because of something like that are capable only chosen people, similar to angels and full of excellence, the ones that live among these rocks, only they are able (to accomplish) the matter you've asked of. Give me time to go to see them and announce your will and by their prayers to make it happen. How do we not embarrass ourselves, for we are only sinners, and maybe God will consider this an insolence».*

*Monk Samoel got offended and said: «Priest! You speak of God's deeds as of deeds of men. Have you not read how God told Polycarpus: «If angels wanted this for the benefit of humans I would be ready to crucify myself in any city for salvation of everyone. Or is a Christian king less than Ahab, the king of Israel, to whom Isaiah spoke - ask for a miracle in heights and depths announcing him that a virgin is bearing a fruit? Or you have forgotten who said to Israeli - ask what you want in my name and this I will do? For he ordered Heaven to turn and it turned into three fields. From now on the word of your obedience is virtuous, Petre, and it is an obstacle for those of poor faith. As for you, my lord, help us with your faith so that the prayer of the wretched of this city would fulfill your desire.» And the saints left to their shelters.*

*The king prayed more and lied down. As soon as he started to fall asleep a woman who was Saint Nino appeared in front of him and said: «Stand up, oh king, beforehand at Candlemass because both*

kings, earthly and of Heaven, will arrive to you.» And as soon as he looked he saw a vision that happened in (the city of) Constantine. He approached quickly and saw two thrones: an armed royal young man sitting on the first one and the second one with an old man in white chlamys with a glowing wreath upon his head, but not made of gold, and Nino sat next to his feet. Priest Petre was holding the right hand of Vakhtang and monk Samoel was holding his left hand. And Samoel said: «First fall to the feet of the great Heavenly lord Gregory.» He approached and bowed. And Gregory said: «What an evil you have committed, man, by devastating my camp and feeding my flock to animals. And if not for those two that are standing next to you and not for this holy woman that like Mary relentlessly works for you, I would have had my revenge as I did (once) to your ancestors that praised burning flames instead of light bearing purifier of all.» And he stretched out his hand and the king kissed it. And as if he touched the glowing wreath, he gave Vakhtang an equal wreath and said: «Place it upon Petre.» And Petre took a wreath somewhat more simple and placed it over Samoel the monk. And Nino spoke to Vakhtang: «Now approach the king and take your gifts.» He came before the king and they kissed each other and (the king) showed him a place on his throne and placed him beside. And Caesar gave him a ring from his hand with a big glowing stone and said: «If you want to get a crown from me, promise to the one who ascended above us all that you will fight his enemies and take a crown from him.» Vakhtang looked and saw a cross that had a crown on its bars and the image of cross plunged him in a special awe for his horror was frightening and he went silent. However Nino rose and looked at Petre and Samoel and they said in one voice: «We vouch, oh Victorious Cross, that he will succeed better than all.» And Caesar stretched his hand and placed that crown upon Vakhtang's head.

And they started to leave and the bishop announced three times and said: «Vakhtang, Vakhtang, Vakhtang! You will be more faithful than all of your Persian kins.» And the second time: «You will build churches and place bishops and archbishops.» And the third

time: «And you will get a halo of martyrdom.» And in the dream itself as if he had woken up he called upon Petre and Samoel and told them about the dream and they explained it: «The one you saw on the throne in the glowing wreath - is the great master Gregory, and the one who handled me a wreath from him - granted me superiority over bishops, and I by giving a wreath to my fellow made him a bishop; and the one embellished with the golden crown is Caesar; and that he granted you the ring means that he would give you his daughter to marry her and will return all the Kartli borders that had been detached; and the crown from the cross given to you means that you will work hard for succeeding cross; and our master that announced thrice has begged for three gifts for you so that the truth in Kartli could be restored with your help by Catholicos and bishops and so that you could defeat your enemies till the end of your days. And by the end of your days you will get a wreath of martyrdom in fighting in order to not fall into the hands of enemies. All this will come true before you become weak and of great age.» When king Vakhtang woke up he thanked God that had revealed him all of this, and called upon Petre and Samoel in a hurry and asked: «What did you see?» They answered: «If you must know, lord, one of us on your right side and another on your left were standing when you came before Caesar and the Theologian seated on thrones; after that our Queen consoled the offended master and handed you over to him.» And the king said: «Keep silent saints for you've imagined this as have I.»<sup>2</sup>.

Far-sighted king does not let go of holy old men any more and takes them with him to his Motherland where first Petre and eventually Samoel become patriarchs of Georgia.

And precisely at the times of Saint Petre, in God's plan Georgia obtains autocephaly! Therefore an honorable reader will easily recognize for what purpose our article bears such a wide quoting of Georgian chronicles.

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<sup>2</sup> Juansher Juansheriani - <https://litlife.club/authors/16638>



Just as before obtaining autocephaly, after that Georgian church followed the rules of Eastern Greek Orthodox Church.

«Definitely depending upon Antiochian patriarch,» writes a famous Georgian theologian and church historian of the 19th century Platon Ioseriani,

*«the church of Iberia accepted all the decrees and ceremonies of Greek church and maintained in a strict union with it. That is how Trisagion was met when patriarch Proclus of Constantinople introduced it in 433. On the occasion of arising monophysite heresy Peter Fullo or Peter «the Fuller» who did not recognize Council of Chalcedon urged the Iberian Church to add to Trisagion the «get crucified for us» part, but this innovation was downturned by the reunion. The Iberian church maintained its former status... In important cases Catholicos of Georgia often approached patriarchs of Greek churches and let Ecumenical church to judge everything that in order to preserve purity and unity of faith needed to be agreed upon in synod<sup>3</sup>.*

Nevertheless soon something that showed just how necessary it was for Georgia to identify itself autonomously happened. Emperor Zeno due to resistance in Egypt, Palestine and Syria was obligated to pursue a reconciliation policy with monophysites. Year 482 patriarch Acacius of Constantinople publishes a so called Henotikon, the main point of which was peace between chalcedonians and monophysites.

Georgia could not reconcile with Orthodox truth being abused and broke off from the Church of Antioch gaining autocephaly in times of already known patriarch Petre. The above-mentioned dream can become the key to whether the saint could leave Georgia within the limits of Henotikon.

As a consequence M.Sabinin quite logically concludes that «In 488 Antiochia almost against its will recognized the independence of Georgian church.»<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Platon Ioseliani – Short history of Georgian Church, Saint Petersburg, 1843, pp. 34, 39

<sup>4</sup> Gobron (Mikhail) Sabinin. History of Georgian Church before the end of the 6th century, Saint Petersburg 1877, p.79



And by «Issuing a dyophysite to be the first Catholicos Vakhtang Gorgasali openly declared war against monophysitism»!<sup>5</sup>.

During the VI Ecumenical council a decree of local Council of Antioch was reconfirmed and the Georgian Church was granted the right to make Chrism on their own from 681.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually autocephaly of Georgian Orthodox Church up to the 19th century would be argued only once, in the 11th century. This opinion appeared in hard times for Byzantine Empire.

The rulers of the Church of Antioch found themselves in pursuit of conquering the Georgian Church again. Somewhat tense relationship between Antiochian and Georgian monks who lived in Antiochian monasteries contributed to the conflict. It got to the point where 60 Georgian monks were removed from the monastery of Saint Simeon in Antiochia.

In order to achieve their goal the local priests appealed to an extreme method:

Greeks blamed Georgians of being non orthodox and claimed them heretics. The question of legitimacy of autocephaly of the Georgian church followed. They remembered the old subordination before the 5th century and raised the issue of the need to subdue this «*self-controlled and ignorant tribe*» to an Antiochian patriarch.

The honor and rights of the Georgian Church were defended by Reverend George the Hagiorite. Moreover it had to be done twice.

The first time went considerably easy. For the second time two issues were raised:

1. Have the Apostles preached in Georgia?
2. Did Georgians support Orthodox Church faithfully?

Saint George the Hagiorite offered as a proof the Greek creation «*Walking of Saint Andrew*» where it was mentioned that Andrew the First-Called preached Gospel in Georgia. The holy church legend says that Andrew was Christ's first pupil. He brought to Christ Apostle Peter, his own brother who was considered to be the Enlightener of

<sup>5</sup> ჯანაშია სიმონ, შრომები, ტ. I, თბ. 1949 წ. გვ. 91

<sup>6</sup> ვახტანგ გოილაძე, მირონის კუროთხვის დაწესება საქართველოში, <http://www.orthodoxy.ge/istoria/mironi.htm>

Antiochian patriarchate. Referring to this circumstance Saint George said to the patriarch:

*«Holy Father, you are saying that you sit on the throne of the head of Peter's apostles, but we are preserve of the First-Called who called his brother, we are the flock that he had turned and enlightened: moreover one of the twelve Apostles Simon the Cananine is buried in our country, Abkhazia, in a place called Nicosia»... «Or would you now order us to obey you?»... «Holy Lord, so it befits the one being called to obey the one who calls. Therefore Peter should obey his brother Andrew who had called him and you should obey us.»*

To answer the second question Saint George relied on the entire church history of Georgia:

*«Once we have learned the true faith, we never deviated neither to left nor to right from it and we shall not do it due to God's will. As for the Greek church, there was a time during iconoclasm when according to Greek sources themselves the Orthodox Church in Greece wavered so much that a Georgian Catholicos sanctified in Mtskheta Ioan for chair of bishop of Gothia.»*

After getting the answers the patriarch of Antiochia addressed his fellow countrymen half-joking:

*«Just take a look at this monk who alone overpowers the multitude of us. Let us behold not to oppose him for he may in deeds not just words unveil our defeat and enroll us in his flock.»*

Thereby Saint George convinced the Antiochian patriarch in canonical legitimacy of autocephaly of Georgian Orthodox Church that preserved its apostolic continuity from Saint Apostle Andrew the First-Called<sup>7</sup>.

When George the Hagiorite was proving credibility of autocephaly in Georgia in front of the Antiochian patriarch, he was guided by a statement that the Church had been founded by an Apostle, and every church founded by one was considered autocephalous!

<sup>7</sup> ბარბაქაძე ლია. ჯიბის ცნობარი მართლმორწმუნე ქრისტიანისათვის; თბილისი, 2013 წ.

Apart from his apostolic sermon and Saint Andrew being first-called, firmness and determination of the answers of George the Hagiorite, by the look of it were due to the fact that

*«almost all eastern Churches found themselves on the side of iconoclasts, and in the entire East Georgia was the only exclusion that had never disowned iconodulism, but on the contrary had always been its faithful follower!»<sup>8</sup>*

During the upcoming centuries Georgia honourably withstood severe difficulties that befell on Orthodox Church, starting with Church separation in the 11th century up to the Council of Florence in the 15th century. Since the 10th century Georgia was the only Christian country in the Caucasus that preserved its national independence and since the 14th century after the downfall of Byzantine, it was the only independent Christian country in the entire south-east conquered by Muslims.

No wonder that since kingdoms of Rus' broke free from the power of Horde, Georgia had been attracted towards them as to fellow Christian countries.

Nevertheless instead of selfless help Georgia was annexed by the fellow faith neighbor in 1801. The 19th century brought not only physical subjugation but also spiritual enslavement - in 1811 dicastery was created and Russian Synod abolished Georgian autocephaly and robbed Georgia of its legitimate V place in Church diptych alongside its independence. This is how Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church have lost its autocephaly. Since 1811 up to 15 monasteries were closed as well as more than 800 churches. Those were the fruits of management and government of Russian clerical bureaucracy in Georgia.

As it is indicated in a fundamental work that appears to be exceptionally honest for a Russian scientist N.N.Durnovo: *«Fates of Georgian Church (on the issue of Georgian autocephaly)»*:

*«In decrees of Paul I (Jan.18, 1801) and Alexander I (Sept.12 of the same year) there is no mentioning of subjugation or accession of Georgian Church to Russian Church.» «Anticanonical order of*

<sup>8</sup> ვ. ჯელიძე „ქართლის ცხოვრების ქრონიკები“, თბ. 1973 წ. გვ.179

*the Synod not only broke rules of any Ecumenical or Local Councils but the definition of local Georgian Church itself as well as civil laws of Georgia that were in force there at the time by an order of the Synod»... «Subjugation or accession of Georgian Autocephalous Church district could not take place by an order of Russian Church government, it was inevitably required to get for this purpose an order from the Council of Iberian Church and nation that is to say from supreme clergy, Church and civil leader, and approval from Ecumenical Church, «a member of which Iberian Church is since the 14th century... Abolishment of the ancient Iberian Catholicos as an independent church district and a member of Ecumenical Church, subversion and the fact that Anton II, Catholicos chosen for life, son and brother of a king, «a person of rare properties and rules, who was well-respected in the community», 46 years old, who lived for 19 years more in Russia in peace, was forcibly removed to Russia with no Council order, no trial or investigation - an act that violated a number of Church regulations, both private and general.» (Canon 5 and 17 of Council of Serdica; Canon 4 of Council of Antioch)<sup>9</sup>.*

The mentioned above survey here is talking about the fact that after violating the terms of Georgian tracts and annexation of Kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti, on the 30th of July 1811 The Russian Emperor Alexander forcibly called off from Georgia Catholicos-patriarch Anton II and abolished autocephaly of Georgian Orthodox Church. Catholicos-patriarch Anton II in 1811 announced to the Russian Council that Iberian Church being autocephalous cannot abide to this on basis of holy laws (the 39th law of the 2nd Council and the 8th law of the 3rd Council). Eastern patriarchs approval was needed and did not follow but the Empire could not bother less. The Synod did not consider this circumstance and abolished Georgian autoceph-

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<sup>9</sup> N.N. Durnovo - Fates of Georgian Church (on the issue of Georgian autocephaly). Issue of the newspaper "Russkiy stiag". Printing house "Russkaia pechatnia". Arbat, h. of Tolstoi 1907. Particular imprint of "Russkiy stiag" [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Istorija\\_Tserkvi/sudby-gruzinskoj-tserkvi-po-voprosu-o-gruzinskoj-avtokefalii/](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Istorija_Tserkvi/sudby-gruzinskoj-tserkvi-po-voprosu-o-gruzinskoj-avtokefalii/)

aly. An unknown before injustice happened in the history of Orthodox Church: one Autocephalous Church abolished another!

Since 1811 Georgian Church, the guardian of Christian faith in the entire Caucasus was turned into an appendage of bureaucracy system of Russia. Before Russian invasion Georgian Church used to own great properties. It used to be an economically independent entity that was entirely different from the Russian Church which was turned into a part of the State by authorities and which was governed since 1722 by the Chief Procurator who was the head of the Most Holy Synod. Given these circumstances Russia could not reconcile economic independence of Georgian Church and therefore had set a goal to reorganize it.

The hardest period in life of Georgian Church had started. In 1817 instead of ethnically Georgian highest authorities archbishop Rusanov was appointed to Exarch post and since then Georgian Church was ruled by Russian bishops. They intentionally cut the number of both eparchies and churches. Russian government intended to raise income from church by cutting the number of priests.

Anti-Church politics of Russian Empire provoked outrage among Georgian people. Rebellions that aimed to protect native Church started in 1818. Its watchword urged to break free from forceful abolishment of both political and Church independence.

In 1820 Metropolitan bishops Dositheos Kutateli and Euthymius Gaenateli were arrested which only provoked the rebellious flames. Bishops whose ranks were respected even by muslims were mercilessly tortured so that the first one was beaten to death and the second one was exiled to Russia where he called Alexander I face-to-face the second Nero.

During the rebellion of 1820 on the 21st of May 2000 Georgians sacrificed themselves for their Motherland and the Orthodox Church. They were presbyters, deacons, monks...

After the abolishment of autocephaly a ban was imposed on Georgian language in churches and schools. Instead of Georgian religious colleges the Russian ones were being opened; church utensils decorated with gemstones and gold that had been preserved in mon-

asteries and churches for ages would get lost now. Treasury robbed churches and monasteries of their lands.

Under these circumstances it was no surprise that Georgian clergy would participate in every national rebellion even before 1820: the 1804 rebellion, 1808, 1812... As for the kingdom rebellion of 1832, one of its most prominent leaders was archimandrite Philadelphos Kiknadze.

A known author of «*Church issues in Russia*» (1896, p. 83-99) dedicated several pages to Georgian church:

*«Russian exarchs had come to Georgia not to take care of the Church they had been entrusted but to plunder and devastate church heritage of Ancient Iberia, violate the language of its citizens and afterwards to go back to Russia taking the looted property and money... The Most Holy Council brought Georgian Church nothing but terrible evil and harm. It considered this Church to be nothing but a barbarian state in the truest meaning. After throwing all the church canons and orders concerning Georgian Church into river Kura, burning to flames a great number of ancient church documents and taking other papers to Saint Petersburg, proteges of Governing Synod deprived Georgian and Imereti Churches of autocephaly, closed more than 25 eparchies, some of which had existed since the very beginning of Christianity in Georgia, that is for around fifteen centuries, destroyed many ancient monasteries, insisted on Georgian church lands being seized to the Treasury and brought Georgian Church to such a sad state of affairs that nowadays more than 860 churches are of no use. Church practices in Georgia never matched those of Russia for Georgian eparchies always were small; archiereus in their majority were elected from dukes and noble-men and were always accessible for people; that is why Georgians had preserved Christianity even though more than once had they been subjects to muslim yoke. Georgian archiereus accessibility and closeness to their people were not appreciated by the Russian exarchs who were foreign to Georgians both by the spirit and the tongue and intended to distance Georgian archiereus and their people by shutting down 25 archiereus posts, to maintain which*

*the Russian government did not spend a single dime. The ancient order of Georgian Church so strictly guarded since the 14th up to the 19th century was destroyed by Russian Church Collegium and changed in favor of clergy of the Church Agency, which in Georgia from now on should be maintained by Georgian Church... » (ref. Church Agency 1906, no.47, p.16)<sup>10</sup>.*

Catholicos-patriarch of all Georgia Kalistrate Tsintsadze would later on say: *«The big head of Russian Church did not match the small body of Georgian Church. It rejected Georgian «spiritual guide», closed shelter for those who carry a burden and those in need and turned the Church of Saint Nino into «department of Orthodox confession»<sup>11</sup>.*

During the long century a number of rebellions and palpable discontents happened, Georgians secretly hoped to break free from both state and religious oppression and enslavement.

In the 20th century Russian Empire began to fall and that reflected in the Church life as well. In order to strengthen empire it was necessary to establish in its limits one nation with one faith and one language. Par for the course a question of assimilation of Georgians was raised, although Georgian people admirably repulsed imperious actions.

On the 11th of October 1905 a delegation that consisted of leaders of noblemen of Tbilisi and Kutaisi and members of noble society that had arrived from different corners of Georgia appeared before the Deputy. Their statement read:

*«Georgian Church has no leader, has no legitimate autocephaly... Tradition of electing Catholicos by people must be returned... the planned autonomy of Church of Caucasus headed by a Metropolitan will not satisfy Georgian people... Along with these changes the last traces of Georgian Church existence will disappear.»*

<sup>10</sup> N.N. Durnovo - Fates of Georgian Church (on the issue of Georgian autocephaly). Issue of the newspaper "Russkiy stiag". Printing house "Russkaia pechatnia". Arbat, h. of Tolstoi 1907. Particular imprint of "Russkiy stiag" [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Istoriya\\_Tserkvi/sudby-gruzinskoj-tserkvi-po-voprosu-o-gruzinskoj-avtokefalii/](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Istoriya_Tserkvi/sudby-gruzinskoj-tserkvi-po-voprosu-o-gruzinskoj-avtokefalii/)

<sup>11</sup> კ. კეკელიძის სახელობის ზელნაწერთა ინსტიტუტი, კალისტრატე ცინცაძის პირადი ფონდი, საქმე №97, ფურც. 56



After a negative response that same year Georgian clergy addressed the Emperor with a petition. The Emperor postponed the matter of Georgian autocephaly till the future Russian Church Council.

Professor Sargis Kakabadze writes about these realities:

*«Georgian clergy demanded an immediate return of illegitimately lost a century ago autocephaly. In publications of that time the essence of autocephaly was widely covered and it was always presented as an inseparable part of one and only program of national liberation. They indicated that the loss of autocephaly in Georgia had resulted in eradication of Georgian language from church and from the area of theological education, in reduction of beliefs and in a number of negative outcomes in social life. Re-establishment of autocephaly on the other hand could revitalize national conscience and progress of religion»<sup>12</sup>.*

*«Georgians,» says Mtispireli, «have no need to bicker with Russian Church that according to Holy Canons has no right to intervene in matters of its older sister - Apostolic Iberian Church embellished on the pages of its centuries-old history with martyr's crown that grants it the right of authentic existence without any unwanted guardians that in the last century had led Iberian Church to stagnation of its vital and cultural powers.»*

In 1905 Russian Orthodox Church had an urge to re-establish institute of patriarchy abolished by Peter I. It was decided to call a meeting on the matter and to dedicate it to the issue of restoration of Georgian autocephaly. The meeting never happened though. Instead in 1906 a so called pre-Council Presence took place, where among other issues the matter of Georgian autocephaly was discussed.

Georgian issue was critical and Georgian clergy was about to proclaim autocephaly on the 14th of January, but the case was delayed while awaiting a decision of Synod commission that was supposed to examine the matter. And in fact on the 17th and 19th of January bish-

<sup>12</sup> კაკაბაძე, ს. საისტორიო კრებული. წიგნი II. თბ. 1928 გვ. 142

ops Kyrion Sadzaglishvili and Leonid Okropiridze were summoned to the two sessions.

Bishop Kyrion said this meeting to be as important as the Council of Antioch in the 11th century attended by Saint George the Hagiorite!

They divided tasks: Kyrion was supposed to bring historical data while Leonid was to talk about the devastated state of modern Georgian Church.

When asked about virtues of Georgian Church they answered as did once Saint George the Hagiorite: *«Our native Church knows no heresy!»*

Moreover they explained that if

*«faith for Catholics is a strict church organization, for Greeks it is external rules and discipline, the appeal; for Russians, according to Menshikov, faith is rather a habit, not a moral religion... and for Georgians faith is centuries-long national virtues, cordiality and warmth, and ability to spare, and lack of evil, and steadfastness spread upon Christian base.»*<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless all those efforts of 1906 led to the fact that the committee of 20 people had nipped Georgian hopes in the bud. Ecclesiological proof in bishop Kyrion's report *«National Principle of Church»* was rejected:

*«Besides a thousand year-old autocephaly of its Church,» says Rev. Kyrion, «Georgian people «have the right for an independent existence of their national Church based on the principle of nationality in Church that had been proclaimed at the beginning of Christian era»... «It is enough to remember the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles who right away began to glorify God in different tongues and then preached the Gospel to pagans in their native tongue.» The 34th Apostolic rule states: «The bishops of every nation must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head.»*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> მეუფე ანანია - საქართველოს სამოციქულო ეკლესიის ისტორია (ნაწილი IV) <http://meufeanania.info/საქართველოს-სამოციქულო-4/>

<sup>14</sup> Bishop Kyrion of Sukhumi, "National principle in Church" (Report IV), 1906, June

In a decade, taking advantage of the February Revolution, Georgian clergy finally announced restoration of autocephaly.

On May 12, 1917 in Mtskheta all Georgian clergy was reunited with thousands of worshipers.

Bishop Leonid spoke in Svetitskhoveli Cathedral announcing restoration of Georgian autocephaly and congratulated all Georgian nation on such a memorable occasion.

The Church had undertaken the most heavy burden in protecting national rights and on the 12th of March 1917 it was the Church that raised the flag of freedom and independence before State Independence was restored in a year in the process of revolutionary torments.

The next day, March 13, bishop Leonid officially informed Exarch Platon that he had been dismissed from his post by order of The Council of Mtskheta. On the 23rd of August Georgian clergy occupied house of Exarch.

Former Exarch complained and announced at the All-Russian Church meeting that Georgia self separated from Orthodox Church by re-establishing Autocephalous Church.

Meanwhile in Tbilisi on the 8th of September during the 1st Church Council of Georgia 600 delegates in reviewing Church matters had made the most important decision - to appoint elections of Catholicos-Patriarch. The elections took place on the 17th of September and Kyrion Sadzaglishvili was elected as Catholicos-patriarch.

Response from Russia was quick. Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow in his message of December 29, 1917 to Catholicos Kyrion II, elected in the Council in September 1917 denounced self-inflicted re-establishment of autocephaly of Georgian Orthodox Church.

This is how he characterized behavior of Georgian clergy:

*«...Sad events that resulted in establishment of separation inside the Russian Church, have created alienation of eparchies beyond Caucasus from the Higher Church authorities in our Motherland, have produced havoc inside the Church and a big church temptation and filled souls of all loyal children of Orthodox Church with great sorrow. For all those deeds must be recognized as anti-canonical and extremely dangerous for church wellbeing and order. And*

*you the Bishops in the depth of your conscience cannot find justification for your non-canonical deeds. Above all you have obtained the Holy orders after election of the Most Holy Council and from Russian Hierarchs, all of you were Archpastors of the Russian Church and have sworn on the Holy orders to obey and submit to its Power. How did you keep the promise you had solemnly given? You betrayed your oath, broke the obligations of church obedience and created separation of the Church. As vicars and half-independent bishops you rejected authority of your Kyriarch Platon of Kartli and Kakheti, chose not to submit before him and no longer announce his name during holy mass; without permission of the Most Holy Synod and your Kyriarch you called a Church Council, invaded Church district subordinate to your Kyriarch and performed the Holy orders and other Church deeds outside of the limits of your eparchies. These deeds are condemned by canons of Ecumenical Church... »<sup>15</sup>*

Communication between Moscow patriarchate and Georgian Church was cut short.

On the 27th of June, 1918 Catholicos-Patriarch was killed in his own residency in monastery Martqopi. He was replaced by bishop Leonid who was poisoned and died in June 1921 in times of secondary annexation of Georgia by Russian bolshevik empire.

Unprecedented persecution of church began on the 25th of February after the secondary annexation of Georgia. In Soviet Union the Church was separated from the State and school from the Church, more than that: atheistic anti religious state aimed to turn Church into an organization with no means of survival although the State felt its inner power and treated it somewhat cautiously. Bolsheviks did not dare to eliminate autocephaly of Georgian Church even after the fact that Catholicos-patriarch Of Georgia Ambrosius Khelaia with help of Genoa Conference addressed European and world countries to get their attention on plight

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<sup>15</sup> Message from the Most Holy Patriarch – (Church records published under the Most Holy Governing Synod. Weekly issue with additions. No 3-4. January 31, 1918. – SPB.: Printing house M.P. Frolova, 1918. – P.1-2

of Georgian people during bolsheviks' reign and to ask to cooperate on the matter or re-establishment of national independence. At the same time persecuted religious circles divided in two camps - loyal part somehow managed to mend fences with the State.

Act of recognition of autocephaly of Georgian Church followed next:

*«General meeting of members of the Most Holy Synod of Orthodox Churches on the territory of Soviet Union, that took place in Moscow on January 30 - February 5 1927... viewed order of the Most Holy Council from January 11 1927, heard report on state of affairs of Transcaucasian Metropolis from February 9 1927, report to the Most Holy Council of Catholicos-patriarch Metropolitan Christophorus of Sukhumi and administrator of Interim Management of Georgian Church Rev. M.Natsvlishvili from February 10 1927 and decided: considering ancient age of Georgian Church (since the beginning of the 4th century), its former autocephaly (1053-1810), announced decision of the Most Holy Council to provide nationalities of USSR freedom in organizing their religious life, to recognize unquestionable right of autocephaly for Georgian Church and to submit for approval of the members of general meeting of the Most Holy Council the following order: autocephaly of Georgian Church to be recognized. Eparchies of Tbilisi and Sukhumi to exclude... from the Most Holy Council. The issue of their transmission to resolve in accordance with Catholicos of Georgia, Russian Orthodox parishes to preserve Russian character of religious life. Defined conclusion of the Committee adopted unanimously by general meeting of the members of the Most Holy Synod. In accordance with this the Most Holy Synod on the 3rd of February 1927 decided: to compose a special Act on the matter of recognition of autocephaly of Georgian Church and to transmit it as Eastern Orthodox Patriarchate... To Georgian Church with a prayer statement: let the most ancient Christian autocephaly*

*of Georgian Church thrive for all times in union of peace and love with the entire Orthodox Church of Christ.»<sup>16</sup>*

Metropolitan Callistratus transmits facts that reveal reasons of recognition of Georgian autocephaly:

*«On the 4th of November 1926 Patriarch of Constantinople addressed the Synod of Russia with a message: «In order to establish canonical relationship between the Holy Synod and Georgian Church shortly.»<sup>17</sup>*

Therefore in the 20th century Russian Church recognized Georgian autocephaly for the first time in February 1927. For the second time recognition took place in October 1943. It can be stated with certainty that the second recognition happened on the basis of the first one.

The fact that Russia had no Patriarch and was ruled by the Synod was the reason for the second recognition.

In October 1943 Russian Church recovered liturgical communication with Georgian Church, recognized its autocephaly, the Patriarchal merit of its leader and the 6th place in diptych.

The reason was following: Soviet authorities that were fighting Germans decided to officially pronounce Patriarchate of Moscow to be the only representative of Russian Church. In September 1943 in Moscow was held a meeting of bishops that voted for Metropolitan Sergius (Starogorodsky) for the post of Patriarch and elected the Most Holy Council. It was important for Russian Church to make sure that Georgian clergy did not contact with renovationists. After being reassured in inviolability of Orthodox foundations a shared Liturgy was held on the 31st of October 1943 and that had restored a mutual recognition of both Churches. Russian Church recognized autocephaly of Georgian Church and expressed the hope that Georgian Church would not have any religious relationship with that part of ecclesiastical world that Russian Church had turn relationship with. Russian Patriarchate

<sup>16</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church – Wikipedia [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Грузинская\\_православная\\_церковь](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Грузинская_православная_церковь)

<sup>17</sup> მიტროპოლიტი კალისტრატე, „მწარე მოგონებანი“, „ქართული მწიგნობრობა“, ტ.9, თბ. 2010, გვ. 333-334

notified all the Eastern Patriarchates about reconciliation between the two Churches.<sup>18</sup>

Stalin was doing everything for the sake of his political and personal interests. He needed one controlled Orthodox Church in Soviet Union that had to complete Soviet directions not only inside the country but also outside. The main objective was to fortificate anti-fascist ideology and with this Church could help immensely therefore it appeared to be a desirable partner in the matter of uniting the nation against fascism. It gets clear why Russia recognized Georgian Church which was supposed to become as dependent of bolshevism ideology as Russian Church already was.<sup>19</sup>

Reaffirmed recognition of Georgian Church in the Orthodox world happened in 1990 - on the 25th of January a meeting of the Most Holy Synod was held in Constantinople and here re-establishment of autocephaly of Georgia was declared.

Tomos on declaration of autocephaly pronounced by Archbishop Demetrios of Constantinople particularly stated:

*«...Spiritual unity neither in the first nor in the following centuries was an obstacle for local structures and Churches to be independent one from another, to self-govern in its own way; in order to be led by Arch priests, presbyters and servants of Christ's Gospel and to compound the one Ecumenical and Apostolic Church. The Holy Orthodox Church that exists on blessed Caucasian lands in limits of the Republic of Georgia obtained self-government, independent authority and therefore ecclesiastical administrative organization...*

*According to the decision of the Synod and enlightened with the Holy Spirit we recognize the Holy Church of Georgia to be the same structure and organization that it has been since ancient times evidenced by Balsamon who wrote: «...it is said that for the period of His Holiness Patriarch of God's city of the Great Antioch, lord Petre*

<sup>18</sup> მეუფე ანანია, საეკლესიო კრებები 1918-1995 წლებში, <http://meufeanania.info/sacklesioni/>

<sup>19</sup> რამ განარისხა რუსეთის ეკლესია საუკუნის წინ – საქართველოს ავტოკეფალია <https://netgazeti.ge/news/338196/>



*a decision was made by Synod to grant independence and autocephaly to the Church of Iberia» (Γ.Α.Πάλλη, Μ.Πότλη, σύνταγμα τῶν θειῶν καὶ ἱέρων κανόνων. Ἀθ., 1852, τομ.Β, σελ. 172). We believe that it is found in the Unity of fraternal Orthodox Churches and by this declare that it will be named «the Holy Autocephalous Orthodox Church of all Georgia». We acknowledge it to be our spiritual sister that has the authority to govern and lead internal affairs independently and with autocephaly according to the laws of Church... »<sup>20</sup>.*

To conclude our narrative we will try to disagree with already quoted at the beginning words of Archbishop Job of Telmessos (Getcha) who did not include Georgia into the list of the most ancient Christian countries and to mark in bold a little correction in the characteristics of granting autocephaly to one or another country due to its spiritual and physical virtue:

*«Autocephaly every time was proclaimed due to a number of political reasons, for example as a result of acquiring national independence as it happened in Georgia (re-established autocephaly), Czech Republic and Slovakia. Nevertheless every autocephaly had deeper goals - «to provide unity of the Church inside each of these countries as well as unity between local Churches»<sup>21</sup>.*

Aside from that, views of theologian proclaim the truth in the best manner that opens a possibility of making lawful conclusions:

The history of Georgian Orthodox completely confirms the statement on political conditionality of re-establishment of autocephaly.

Autocephaly of Georgian Orthodox Church was obtained in the 5th century by God's will during the reign of prominent Georgian king Vakhtang Gorsakhali, who managed to achieve glory of Georgian state. It was protected with honour in the 11th century by George the Hagiorite during the reign of powerful king Bagrat V.

<sup>20</sup> Tomos on recognition and acceptance of autocephaly of Holy Orthodox Church of Georgia <https://cerkvarium.org/ru/dokumenty/tserkovnye/tomos-ob-avtokefalii-gruzinskoj-tserkvi>

<sup>21</sup> Job of Telmessos (Getcha) interview to Cerkvarium [https://zn.ua/WORLD/konstantinopolskiy-arhiepis-kop-rasskazal-o-rol-i-avtokefalii-i-statuse-rpc-294489\\_.html](https://zn.ua/WORLD/konstantinopolskiy-arhiepis-kop-rasskazal-o-rol-i-avtokefalii-i-statuse-rpc-294489_.html)

Autocephaly of Georgian Orthodox Church was lost along with the loss of independence in the beginning of the 19th century.

Events that led to obtaining of Tomos once again were results of politics: this was a victory of the national liberation movement under the lead of the future President of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia that followed tragic bloody events of the 9th of April 1989 when peaceful demonstrations were dispersed.

In October of the same year on Mount Athos President Gamsakhurdia ordered a number of icons of the Mother of God of Iberia, that arrived to Georgia on the 9th of October in attempt to reborn the country. On the icon's way to Georgia the Head of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus said: «*This image will bring Georgians freedom!*» And fair enough on the 9th of April of 1991 Orthodox country Georgia proclaimed its independence and re-established its own state!<sup>22</sup>

Georgia obtained Tomos between 1989 and 1991, in January 1990!

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<sup>22</sup> .ივერიის ღვთისმშობლის ხატის სააღწაულები <http://www.ambioni.ge/iveriis-rvtismsoblis-xatis-saswaulebi>