

RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN THE GEORGIAN MEDIA QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Religious conflicts attract special interest of the media. A journalist's responsibility is vital in the process of covering religious crises in order to present to the audience balanced, objective, stereotype-free facts and provide the user with a media product prepared at a professional level, without distortion and/or misinterpretation of facts, and also avoid formation of stereotypical views and attitudes. It should be taken into account that the information spread by the media should not lead to deepening of the conflict among religious groups. Recently, the Georgian media often covers religious issues, because the number of religious conflicts in the country has increased fairly.

Relationship between religious organizations and the state is a particularly important area of interest both in the world and in Georgia, and a country where these relationships are regulated is even considered ideal. According to the annual report of the Public Defender of Georgia, Georgia is unfortunately not considered to be among such ideal countries. According to the report, facts of intolerance on religious basis in Georgia are quite often recorded, and what should be surprising, that media organizations often incite to the situation more than state officials. How are religious events covered in Georgian media? In this regard, a systematic and in-depth research on the coverage of religious issues in the media has not yet been conducted. The presented research is an attempt to improve the above-mentioned condition, and naturally, like all first attempts, it may have some imperfections. Within the framework of the research, the public opinion regarding the coverage of religious issues in the Georgian media is analyzed for the first time.

The presented report provides an opportunity to see a comprehensive picture of the current situation in the Georgian media regarding the coverage of religious issues. I hope that the presented findings will be a significant part of discussions and with their help it will be possible to start a dialogue between the interested parties in order to improve condition of the Georgian media in terms of reporting on religious issues.

Keywords: religion in the media; coverage of religion; religious events; Georgian media.

Introduction

Actuality of the research. It is indisputable today that the media plays a special role in the process of spiritual and cultural development of a person and that television is a quite powerful tool for formation public opinion. Today the reality is that there is no family that does not have at least one TV set, as being informed is a strong human demand. Objectivity of Georgian television is under question, as television fuels formation of stereotype in a society. Georgian television is not an exception in this regard. Therefore, it can be said that the biased statement made by Georgian TV-journalists is a powerful tool for establishing an undesirable stereotype in the society.

Religious conflicts attract special interest of the media. A journalist's responsibility is vital in the process of covering religious crises in order to present to the audience balanced, objective, stereotype-free facts and provide the user with a media product prepared at a professional level, without distortion and/or

misinterpretation of facts, and also avoid formation of stereotypical views and attitudes. It should be taken into account that the information spread by the media should not lead to deepening of the conflict among religious groups. Recently, the Georgian media often covers religious issues, because the number of religious conflicts in the country has increased fairly.

Along with the spread of information, the media should also pay attention to educational function. This means that more media products should be made in Georgia regarding the values of both the religious majority and the minorities in the country, in order to provide more information about their culture and religious values to the society. As the media is a significant tool in the process of formation of public opinion, A journalist while reporting about the religious issues must be guided by internationally recognized standards and ethical norms related to religion, and must also take into account the country's legislation.¹

Novelty of the research. Relationship between religious organizations and the state is a particularly important area of interest both in the world and in Georgia, and a country where these relationships are regulated is even considered ideal. According to the annual report of the Public Defender of Georgia, Georgia is unfortunately not considered to be among such ideal countries. According to the report, facts of intolerance on religious basis in Georgia are quite often recorded, and what should be surprising, that media organizations often incite to the situation more than state officials. How are religious events covered in Georgian media? In this regard, a systematic and in-depth research on the coverage of religious issues in the media has not yet been conducted. The presented research is an attempt to improve the above-mentioned condition, and naturally, like all first attempts, it may have some imperfections. Within the framework of the research, the public opinion regarding the coverage of religious issues in the Georgian media is analyzed for the first time.

Goal of the research. The purpose of the research is to determine public attitudes and beliefs regarding the coverage of religious issues in the Georgian media. Particularly, the objectives of the research are to study public sentiment and beliefs regarding such issues as:

- How poignant are religious issues for society, whether media product related to religious issues are interesting for the population and what kind of religious programs they would like to see in the Georgian media;
- What means used by the society to get religious information;
- Content and values of the TV channel of Patriarchate of Georgia, what this television broadcast about, determining the pluses and minuses of the broadcasting policy of the above-mentioned television;
- Determining public opinion on whether airtime should be given to programs about Orthodoxy/the Georgian Orthodox Church and/or religious minorities in Georgia/their religion;
- What functions the media actually fulfill and what basic functions it should undertake while covering religious issues in Georgia;
- To what extent the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church, the religious minorities in Georgia, and the Georgian media are oriented on increasing religious awareness in Georgia;
- Regarding the spreading of information on religious topics, what kind of information is provided and how free is the Georgian media (press, television, radio, social and online media) in covering religious issues today;
- Who controls the editorial activities of the Georgian media when reporting religious issues;
- To what extent religious values are protected, as well as freedom of speech and expression in Georgia;
- Public opinion regarding the education of journalists in terms of covering religious issues;

¹ Lyberty Institute, Human rights, 2005.

- How frequent is the violation of consumers' rights by journalists when covering religious issues?
- To what extent the Georgian consumer is protected from receiving incorrect information about religious issues through the Georgian media;
- How effective the relationship between religious hierarchs and the population (regardless of denomination) is through the media, and whether the clergy, especially a high-ranking clergyman, should make a public statement through the media;
- Patriarchate of Georgian Orthodox Church of and the religious minorities in Georgia should cooperate with the media, or how well the press office of the Patriarchate of Georgia cooperates with the media;
- In your opinion, whether the Georgian media follow ethical standards when covering issues of religious themes (not only about Orthodoxy, but also the religions existing in Georgia);
- Whether there are any problems regarding the coverage of religious issues in the Georgian media.

The presented report provides an opportunity to see a comprehensive picture of the current situation in the Georgian media regarding the coverage of religious issues. I hope that the presented findings will be a significant part of discussions and with their help it will be possible to start a dialogue between the interested parties in order to improve condition of the Georgian media in terms of reporting on religious issues.

1. Methodology used in the research

Type of research: quantitative sociological research; Quantitative content analysis.

Type of selection: targeted so-called evaluation sampling.

The target audience of the survey was several groups of experts by profession:

- Journalist (media representative / media expert)
- Academic staff
- Student
- Clergyman of the Georgian Orthodox Church
- Clergyman of the religious minority in Georgia
- Representative of the State Agency for Religious Affairs
- Theologian
- Religious scholar
- Historian
- Other

The target audience of the survey was also the group of community according to religious confession:²

- Orthodox - 78% of respondents
- Muslim - 8% of respondents
- Representative of the administration of the Latin-Catholic Caucasus - 2% of respondents
- Representative of Tbilisi International Baptist Church - 2% of respondents
- Representative of the Union of Christian Baptist Churches of the Gospel - 2% of respondents
- Evangelical-Protestant Church of Georgia - 2% of respondents

Within the framework of the research 88% of the respondents are confessors, and 12% are not. The research indicated all the religious organizations that function in Georgia. The above-mentioned religions are taken from the website of the State Agency for Religious Affairs

As part of the research, the population of working age - 18 to 65 and 65+ was interviewed. Different age groups were given the opportunity to express their specific views on the research question. According to

² State Agency for Religious Issues. <https://religion.gov.ge/religiebi-saqartvelosi> [L.s. 09.11.2022].

age, the percentage of respondents looks as follows: 18-25 – 10%; 26-35 – 36%; 36-45 – 26%; 46-65 – 24% and 65+ - 4%.

The research also ensured gender fair representation and the research allowed the problems and attitudes of women and men to be reflected in the research. Finally, within the framework of the research 46% of the respondents are male and 54% are female.

In the context of mass survey, an internet survey was conducted, which was carried out by means of questionnaires sent by e-mail. Although, within the framework of the research, we contacted all religious organizations, as well as the State Agency for Religious Affairs, since their involvement is important because of their activity in order to reflect the broad picture of the religious situation in Georgia, some of them refused to participate in the research. In the end, representatives of 7 religious organizations in Georgia participated in the research. Although it should be in the interest of the State Agency for Religious Affairs to get involved and facilitate such studies, they did not participate in the study.

The subject of the research was to define the public viewpoint regarding the condition of the Georgian media concerning the coverage of religious issues. In particular, the survey addressed the following issues, such as how significant religious issues are for the public and whether population find media product prepared about religion interesting; What means the society uses to get religious information and what kind of religious programs they would like to see in the Georgian media; To what extent the Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, the religious minorities in Georgia and the Georgian media are focused on increasing religious awareness in Georgia; How effective the communication between religious hierarchs and the population (regardless of denomination) is through the media and whether the clergy, especially a high-ranking clergyman, should make a public statement through the media.

I used a questionnaire as a research tool, which was used as a general guideline.

2. Quantitative research analysis

Religion is a universal concept that can be found in every civilization. Many archeological data and oral texts testify that religion existed at all stages of human development. The development of religion is closely related to the process of spiritual and intellectual development of a person. Religion is a Latin word and means attention, worship, piety, belief. There are several points of views about the original meaning of religion. Other words are also used to denote the field that we call religion: confession, which is a Latin word and means denomination; cult; faith, but the word religion expresses the content of the field in the most perfect way.

The world religions - Christianity, Judaism and Islam - existing in Georgia since ancient times, are still functioning in our country in their characteristic forms. Historically, Georgia is not only a multi-ethnic, but also a religiously diverse country. Since ancient times, from the period of crossing of Western or Eastern civilizations, caravan routes passed in our country. This situation naturally promoted cultural-religious diversity. Along with local beliefs, rituals and goddesses ("mothers of the place"), Greco-Roman and Eastern polytheism paved its way. Archaeological studies and discoveries have confirmed the existence of eastern and western cults in Kartli.

The religious situation in Georgia is as follows: the religion of the majority is Orthodoxy, while a part of Georgian citizens (a significant part of ethnic minorities) recognizes Islam. Other religious groups, such as the Baha'is and the Krishnaites, have also established small congregations in recent decades. Most part of Georgian culture is based on Christian faith-traditions. It is Orthodoxy that had a great impact on entire civil history of Georgia. It should be noted that Georgian culture is Christian, but despite this, non-Christian religions are also involved in Georgian people's cultural-creative process.

The society is constantly interested in processes stemmed by the relationship between politics and religion, as it is this relationship that determines the development of world history. Religion which is expressed in the form of the Georgian Orthodox Church in our country has played an important role in the formation and further development of Georgian statehood. Today, the formation and enhancement of the developing state of Georgia is unthinkable without consideration of Christian Orthodox Church. There is a religious situation with special characteristics in our country.³ These characteristics are: internal ethnic diversity of religious associations (for example: Muslim religious association includes Georgian, Kist and Azerbaijani, as well as Muslims of other ethnic groups); also, confessions with different doctrines are united in one religious group in Georgia (for example, the Division of Muslims of Georgia unites Shiite and Sunni Muslims living in Georgia).

Human rights are a universally recognized standard that includes every human being. The above-mentioned rights are confirmed by a number of international documents emphasizing the special importance of protecting human rights for each individual and each state. Freedom of belief and religion is also the fundamental right on which the idea of a democratic state is based on. Since conflicts on religious grounds are increasing day by day in the world, it is a priority obligation and an important area of interest of all states to determine the degree of freedom of religion and ensure its effectiveness.

The media are particularly interested in religious conflicts. In the process of covering religious crises a journalist's responsibility is vital in order to present to the audience balanced, objective, stereotype-free facts and provide the user with a media product prepared at a professional level, without distortion and/or misinterpretation of the facts, and also avoid formation of stereotypical views and attitudes. It should be taken into account that the information spread by the media should not lead to deepening of the conflict among religious groups. Recently, the Georgian media often covers religious issues, because the number of religious conflicts in the country has increased fairly. In addition to spreading information, the media should also pay attention to educational function. This means that more media products should be made in Georgia regarding the values of both the majority and the religious minorities groups in the country to provide more information to the society about their culture and religious values. Since the media is a powerful tool in the process of forming public opinion, journalists, while covering religious issues, should follow internationally recognized standards and ethical norms related to religion, and the country's legislation should also be taken into consideration.⁴

Hart, Turner and Knupp's research question is the definitions journalists use when reporting about religious events. The above-mentioned specialists note that the media product regarding religion prepared by the media organizations is characterized by stereotypes and they discuss the mentioned issue in a geographical-demographic context.⁵ Media researchers conclude that journalists contribute to the formation of stereotypes and lack of qualifications of journalists while cover religious issues is considered as a significant problem. This problem may foster the danger of encouraging discrimination on religious grounds. Researchers consider as a risk factor the thing that the media creates a narrative that may lead the audience to make the wrong conclusion that a member of a particular religious group is harmful to society.⁶ Regarding the coverage of issues related to religion, McQueen's research is worth noting, in which the author says that journalists are often influenced by the people who are affected by the media

³ Strategy for the development of the religious policy of Georgia, 2015, <https://religion.gov.ge> [L.s. 09.11.2022].

⁴ Lyberty Institute, Human rights, 2005.

⁵ Hart, R. P., Turner, K. J., & Knupp, R. E. (1980) - Religion and the Rhetoric of the Mass Media. Review of Religious Research, 83. 256-275 https://www.jstor.org/stable/3509807?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [L.s. 13.11.2022].

⁶ Wright, S., Media Coverage of Unconventional Religion: Any "Good News" for Minority Faiths? Review of Religious Research, Religious Research Association, Inc., 1997, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3512176> [L.s. 13.11.2022].

product they prepare. McQueen mentions that the press is an arena full of symbols, where journalists shape groups as mainstream, religious or non-religious, taking into account the producer's social status.⁷

Most studies on the coverage of religion issues in Georgia are carried out through media monitoring. Researchers only investigate issues such as hate speech from a journalists, objectivity and balance of sources, also violations of professional ethics and problems related to qualifications. Most of the mentioned studies considers how often religious minorities become the addressees of hate speech, how often their rights are violated, etc. However, none of the research deal with the problems of majority religious congregation in Georgia. All studies narrow down to the problems of religious minorities in the country, and there was no assessment of the general religious situation.^{8 9 10 11 12}

According to Article 14 of the Constitution of Georgia, "All people are born free and equal before the law, regardless of race, skin color, language, gender, religion, political or other views, national, ethnic and social affiliation, origin, property and rank status, place of residence." However, despite of various regulations, the problem to tolerate the difference is still acute in Georgia. Therefore, it is very important to determine the role of the media in raising public awareness. Traditional media is the main source of information in Georgia. Due to that it is necessary to follow generally recognized standards - respect fundamental human rights, balance and objectivity - in the process of implementing media activities.

The relationship between the state and the church has played significant role in the development process of the country since ancient times. Therefore, it is not surprising that people's interest in religious events is quite high. 39.2% of respondents actively follow current religious events, and 45.1% of respondents watch religious TV programs with great interest.

With the blessing of His Holiness and Beatitude, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, Ilia II the TV channel of the Patriarchate "Ertsulovneba" was established in November 2008. As we read on the website of the above-mentioned TV company,¹³ it is "the most objective, traditional, spiritual, cultural-cognitive and expressing Christian values and broadcasting television in Georgia". However, the research revealed a tendency that there are many problems in the broadcasting policy of the above-mentioned TV company and in the broadcasting network, which hinders the growth of "Ertsulovneba" rating and questions the attempt to reflect the interests of the audience by the above-mentioned media.

Most interviewees believe that the broadcast rhythm of the television is so sluggish that it does not arouse interest in the audience, on the contrary, it scares the audience. The broadcast network of "Ertsulovneba" is so monotonous that, despite the interesting topics, a person has desire to listen to the program. When asked what you would change in the broadcast policy of the Patriarchate TV, the interviewees note that it is necessary to use modern methods of narrative techniques in the preparation of the media product and to bring the broadcast network in line with modern reality in general. Therefore, it would be good to refresh or change staff and employ more young professionals in this process (both journalists and presenters) who will have relevant education in the field of religious coverage. There was also an opinion stated clergyman from different dioceses should be invited and programs about their work should be

⁷ McCune, C. A., Framing Reality: Shaping the news coverage of the 1996 Tennessee Debate on Teaching Evolution. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2 (1), 2003, pp.5-28.

⁸ Media Development Project, Representation of communities with ethnic minorities in the media; 2010, http://eurocommunicator.ge/mdf/uploads//BCG_kvleva.pdf [L.s. 13.11.2022].

⁹ BCG Research, Media coverage of ethnic minority issues; 2010, http://eurocommunicator.ge/mdf/uploads//BCG_kvleva.pdf [L.s. 13.11.2022].

¹⁰ Internews – Georgia, coverage of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities in the press; 2012, https://ge.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Media_Monitoring_report_IV_Geo.pdf [L.s. 13.11.2022]

¹¹ Media Development Fund, monitoring of hate speech and discriminatory expressions in the Georgian media; 2013, http://www.notophobia.ge/uploads/publications/2/file/Monitoring_Hate_Speech_and_Discrimination_in_Georgian_Media_GEO.pdf [L.s. 13.11.2022].

¹² Media Development Foundation, Hate Speech - 2016 Report; 2016, [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/55/file/Hate_Speech_GEO_\(1\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/55/file/Hate_Speech_GEO_(1).pdf) [L.s. 13.11.2022].

¹³ "Ertsulovneba", <https://sstv.ge/about> [L.s. 12.11.2022].

prepared, so that people would know how dedicated and warm-hearted clerics the Georgian Orthodox Church has. According to the respondents, this would be an important step as other media only cover the opposite and contribute to formation of stereotypes that the majority of the clergy of the Georgian Orthodox Church are only harmful to the society. Coverage of such an idea contributes to the dissemination of discrimination and hate speech, which is unacceptable.

Currently, 15 programs are broadcast on the Patriarchal TV "Ertulovneba".¹⁴ Most of the respondents (60.7%) of the survey found the patriarch's sermon the most interesting, 35.7-35.7% watch the news program and the morning program. The respondents would like to see more educational programs on the air of "Ertulovneba" and believe that programs containing more historical and cultural information need to be prepared, which will be interesting and watchable for children, teenagers and young viewers. It was also noted that it is desirable to increase the frequency of news broadcasts and prepare programs related to psychological issues, where psychological issues will be covered and life problems will be explained by a preacher.

To the question - what are the main functions of the media in Georgia in terms of coverage of religious issues? - Research participants stated that "we must distinguish between -"performs" and "must perform." The media must perform the function of a "mirror" during a political crisis. All participants of this or that religious event should see their own face through the media. At the same time, the media should be impartial and objective. However, true independence of the media is depended on its capability to be self-sufficient, that is, the media must be able to maintain itself. Only then will it be able to be free.

Biased coverage of issues related to religion is unacceptable for most respondents. Despite this, according to the interviewees, the impartiality of the news about religion is under threat. Research participants believe that media owners influence the editorial policy when covering religious topics, which is unacceptable for most respondents. Research participants are well aware of the problems in the media. The interviewees express their desire to receive unbiased information on religious matters from the central media and, most importantly, a media product prepared at a professional level.

Majority of the research participants (17.6%) believe that freedom of speech and expression is protected in Georgia, while 7.8% of the respondents believe that that right is not protected at all. It is impossible to form a democratic state and society without protection of freedom of speech and expression. Freedom of speech and expression ensures personal development of a person. Freedom of speech and expression is a legally permissible phenomenon that applies to all individual and is acceptable to be expressed both subjectively and objectively. According to the interviewees, forms of free expression of opinion should not be harmful to one or another person and should not violate legal norms, in no case human rights should be violated. This freedom can be used to impress masses of people. Also, a large part of the interviewees believe that the freedom of speech and expression is the most important right, which should not be aggressive, the free opinion expressed by a person should not be discriminative against another person or a group.

Spread of information and controlling the government, ensuring discussion of important public issues, protecting national values and traditions, as well as promoting the establishment of democratic values - the interviewees unanimously claim that the media, as a rule, should perform almost all these functions, and journalists should play an important role in the process of formation of a democratic Georgia. According to the respondents, journalists should objectively evaluate the current events in the country, especially if this event is related to such a sensitive issue as religion. Journalists should provide the public with timely, stereotype-free, accurate and reliable information especially when the religious topics are discussed, so that it should not cause conflict between religious groups, but will promote their harmonious coexistence. As the media, as the fourth government, shapes public opinion and creates their attitude, its

¹⁴ "Ertulovneba", <https://sstv.ge/shows> [L.s. 12.11.2022].

role is very large both in the process of covering issues related to religion and any other issues, although a large number of journalists do not understand or do not know how important and powerful the media is. According to the respondents, the professional level of Georgian journalists, except some single cases, is very far from professionalism, especially when covering religious issues. Their main interest is to spread a sensation, even completely false one, in order to become a famous face and improve their material situation. Proficiency level of journalism in Georgia is quite low today, because in Georgian reality famous faces work as journalists who are mainly focused on making loud, sensational statements rather than be oriented on facts, the essence and analysis of the events.

When characterizing journalists, focus group participants appreciate their intelligence, courage, ability to ask the questions correctly and convey facts in an understandable manner. A journalist who has his hand on the pulse of public life and reflects everything that is happening, in many cases is an informational bridge between a person and the rest of the world.

According to the respondents, for the development of the media, it is necessary to solve important issues such as: professionalism of journalists, independence, fidelity to principles and immense love for the profession; improvement of the legislation in terms of coverage of religious issues; Loyalty to public interest. Majority of the population demands unbiased, balanced and objective reports from journalists, especially when the event is related to a very sensitive topic - religious issues. At the same time, the public wants to receive professionally prepared high-quality material.

The number of internet users is increasing in Georgia every day. Social media is gradually being taken much more seriously than electronic and/or print media. In terms of reporting information, and the form of conveying facts, and even in terms of reliability and professionalism, social media is more acceptable to a significant part of Georgian users than others. However, in the process of research, it was stated that social media tend to be more biased, since here the author has a greater degree of freedom and sets everything to his "own standard". Georgian society compared to television rarely uses other media, press and radio.

Print media has a more or less degree of credibility because it manages the most to remain independent, although there are often cases when the excessive desire to publish a scandalous article leads to a distortion of reality. Operativeness of televisions, which deserve criticism in terms of objectivity and reliability, is at appropriate level. Social media, which is now emerging, aims to spread information promptly, its income depends mainly on electronic and print media, and they need reliable information about the current facts. Therefore, the degree of reliability is relatively high.

66.7% of the participants note that there are many problems regarding the coverage of religious issues in the Georgian media. All people participating in the research consider rather low level of journalists' education as one of the main problems and note that religious issues are covered in a very unqualified and biased manner. According to the respondents, religion cannot be covered in the same way as politics and religion cannot be attributed to any nation.... The participants of the study claim that the Georgian media continuously insults Orthodoxy, violates the rights of religious believers, and no one reacts to it, the events are covered aggressively. The same attitude can be observed in case of coverage the issues of religious minorities. Some respondents point out that media do not show interest in covering religious issues, or if they are reported information is only based on unreliable sources, without confirmation. According to them, aggression is felt everywhere, which must be eliminated. This attitude is automatically transferred to the viewer. Both sides are constantly working in attack and defense mode, which is very annoying for the respondents.

When asked how focused different agencies are on increasing religious awareness in Georgia, the respondents declared that the Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church of Georgia (31.4% of the respondents) and the religious minorities in Georgia are more or less focused (30.6% of the respondents), while 41.2%

of the participants believe that the Georgian media are not focused on improving the quality of religious awareness. The people participating in the study unanimously agree that it would be beneficial if Georgian media' interest in the coverage of religious issues increases and more educational programs or television documentaries are prepared, which will serve to increase education and awareness about religions and which would help people to form the right worldview, values and worth. There was a desire expressed to prepare television documentaries and educational programs related to the history of religion and religious cult buildings, as well as television portraits of clergymen with special merits (regardless of religious confession). According to one of the respondents, "it is necessary to prepare an explanatory media product in the Georgian media, because unfortunately, people do not know even at the elementary level what is the religious doctrine of the faith they believe in (any faith) and are members of this or that religious organization by inertia". Respondents would be happy to see programs prepared even in the format of question-and-answer mode, in which various clerics will be invited to speak about Orthodoxy. The participants of the research note that the program of any format "should be academic but fast-paced, so that the audience does not get tired of listening to it."

The Georgian media should devote time and space to programs that are tailored to children's interests and whose purpose will be to teach children values, to acquire religious knowledge, as well as to talk about how to live with religious values in the 21st century, how big is a role of the church in moral education of a person, and what is the role of religion in modern times. It would be desirable to cover dioceses and their situation. It would be good to prepare educational programs, which will be focused on increasing public awareness about religious associations in Georgia, where it will be oriented on familiarizing the masses. It should also be possible for religious associations to present themselves. It would also be beneficial if the Georgian media provides a healthy debate between representatives of different religions in order to provide substantiated information.

On November 25, 1981, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Freedom of religion is recognized as a fundamental human right in the mentioned document.¹⁵

The Convention on Children's Rights is the most important document adopted by the international community regarding freedom of religion.¹⁶ Also, a 1993 statement by the United Nations Human Rights Committee noted that Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights "protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief."¹⁷ States signatories to the convention are prohibited from "using physical force or criminal sanctions to compel believers and non-believers" to renounce their beliefs. Despite this, persecution on religious grounds is still taking place in the world.

Georgia is an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse country. People of different confession lived and coexisted peacefully here for centuries. In Georgia, due to its geopolitical reality, cultures and religions of different content met each other since ancient times. Georgia, which existed at the crossroads of West and East, Christianity and Eastern religions (first Mazdean and then Muslim), always aspired to cultural West. By accepting Christianity, it finally determined its direction and development path. But Georgian people were always hindered on this way. Our nation did not fear that resistance and was looking for ways to the cultural-religious world to which it whom it assigned itself forever. Christianity, specifically Orthodoxy, has been the national religion of Georgians for almost 17 centuries. Fighting for

¹⁵ Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. United Nations, 25.11.1981; <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/religion.pdf>. [L.s. 13.11.2022].

¹⁶ Religious Rights – International Legal Instruments, unesco.org, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/international-standards> [L.s. 13.11.2022].

¹⁷ Freedom of religion | Religious discrimination, CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion), UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), 30 July 1993, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fb22.html> [L.s. 13.11.2022].

Christianity also meant fighting for Georgian ethnic unity and its survival. But historically other religions had complete freedom and independence in Georgia. No one, not a single religious movement was persecuted and today is still the same condition.

The majority of respondents (17.6%) believe that religious values are protected in Georgia, and 11.8% believe that they are very protected. Only 2% of the research participants believe that religious values are not adequately protected in Georgian reality. The research revealed a tendency that (in the opinion of 53% of the research participants) Georgian media rarely adheres to ethical standards when covering religious issues (not only about Orthodoxy, but also about the religions in Georgia). The respondents believe that the violation of consumer rights by journalists is very common when reporting on religious issues and believe that (33.3% of respondents) the Georgian consumer is not at all protected from receiving incorrect information about religious issues through the Georgian media.

75-78% of the respondents believe that the Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church of Georgia and the religious minorities in Georgia must necessarily cooperate with the media and note that people are extremely unknowledgeable in religious matters and if a qualified person does not explain the topics related to religion, then they become easily vulnerable and follow the trend that Media creates, and that stream is mostly very biased. According to 51% of the respondents, the clergy, especially a high-ranking clergyman, must make a public statement through the media in accordance with their education and competence, and they claim that the hierarch is also a member of a society and expressing his position is important. The participants of the study believe that the more often and argumentatively the explanations are made, the better it is for society.

Conclusion

The recommendation No. 1720, 2005 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which is about education and religion, states that the religion of each person, including non-religiousness, is a strictly defined personal right. However, this does not contradict with the idea that a general knowledge of religion and a sense of tolerance are vital factors for a democratic society. The above-mentioned recommendation assigns a decisive role to the family in the process of raising a child, including the choice of religion. Today, religion and the related issues are interesting for many families, due to that a part of young people do not have the necessary knowledge and information about religions, which the Assembly considers as a problem and points out that the media can play a positive role in this regard. In general, politics and religion should be separated from each other. However, democracy and religion should not be incompatible. On the contrary, both of them should work and fight together for common benefit. The government, by solving social problems, can alleviate such situations which may contain the danger of turning into religious extremism. Education related to religion is necessary to eliminate or prevent conflicts, stereotypical reasoning and misunderstandings. The authorities of various countries should do their best to guarantee the freedom of religion and conscience, and also inter-religious dialogues should be encouraged.

The Media always change their shape and take the hue of the social and political structures in which they must function. The degree of media freedom in any system is depended on power distribution in a society, especially when it comes to political and economic redistribution. Commercial mass media in Western countries are more pluralistic because capitalist society implies decentralization of power, but in third-world countries the "market" model of mass media smoothly coexists with dictatorship. According to the media tradition of Eastern European and Asian countries, the ruling political power maintains a significant subsidizing role of mass information. One of the reasons for this is that individual television stations cannot achieve financial profit. The integrated political-economic "elite" imposes a political task on TV companies, instead it guarantees its economic activity. Accordingly, media owners, high-ranking managers care less about achieving financial independence and purposefully serve the financiers.

Nowadays, there is a great demand for real, objective, unbiased and reliable information in Georgia. This can be achieved by strong sense of required journalistic ethics and the responsibility of the media owners before the public. In order to create healthy media environment and improve media condition, public discussions are necessary so that information about the problems and trends in the working environment of journalists could be available to the public. The tendency revealed by media owners to achieve the goal does not coincide with the main function of the media - to provide balanced, unbiased and objective information to consumers, especially when religious issues are on focus. We can think of media as a stage of events that has a large audience and it clearly has a great impact on the viewer, listener or reader. The media has a direct influence on formation of a person's reasoning, vision, and perception. It is an influential part of society. The media can absolutely control the processes if it is independent and reports the truth. The media brings information to the public, therefore a lot depends on it, how the public will accept the mentioned processes, whether there will be panic or more or less calmness.

In terms of coverage of religious issues, there are many problems in the Georgian media today. As the research revealed, one of the main problems is the incompetence of journalists and extremely low level of education. When covering religious issues, the Georgian media does not focus on an in-depth analysis of religious event, but the main orient for journalists is only scandals and ratings. Accordingly, when media product on religious topics is being prepared, the issue is not studied in depth. In general, Georgian media is not interested in preparation of religious-cultural educational programs and unfortunately, religious topics have become the best source of manipulation and scandals for the media, which is, of course, unethical. Nowadays, the media mainly covers only conflicts arisen on religious grounds, the rest are either not covered at all or are covered insufficiently and biasedly, the events are covered aggressively,

the Georgian media constantly insults Orthodoxy, violates the rights of the confessors, and actively carries out a campaign aimed at discrediting the clergy. Hostility and general bias towards religion is felt, it is considered as a residue of darkness and the past and is presented as the enemy of civilization and progress.

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