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## US Department of State Report: Freedom of Religion in Georgia

ON JUNE 10TH, THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE RELEASED A REPORT ON THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD IN 2019.



BY ANASTASIA SOKHADZE

The U.S. Department of State's annual report examines the situation in terms of freedom of religion in all countries. The document includes government policies in the field of religion, the state of religious groups, and the US policy to promote religious freedom in the world.

16 pages of the report is dedicated to Georgia. In the section The Status of Respect for Religious Freedom by the Government, special attention is paid to the privileged role enjoyed by the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country. The report emphasises that on the basis of a constitutional agreement, the Concordat has granted SME rights that are not available for other religious groups.

These include the legal immunity of the SME Patriarch, the dismissal of SME clergymen from military service (although, as the authors of the report note, clerics of all religious groups are legally exempt from compulsory military service), and the SME government has an advisory role, especially in education.

The report also reviews the economic benefits of SME. For example, unlike other religious groups, only the SME Patriarch-

ate is exempt from tax on profits from the sale of crosses, candles, icons, books, and calendars. Only SMEs can purchase non-agricultural land directly from the state, while religious groups must participate in a public tender to purchase such land. Only SMEs have the right to receive agricultural land free of charge from state property. Other religious groups have to pay for it.

The report also discussed the issues of religion in prison. According to the State Department's report, prisoners were allowed to use the chapels of the Georgian Orthodox Church during the reporting period, but there was no room for other religious practices in penitentiary institutions.

Special significance is drawn to the case of Vitaly Safarov. The sub-chapter, which examines the attitude of the authorities towards religious issues, has a prominent place in the notorious criminal crime of 2018 - the murder of Vitaly Safarov, a 25-year-old human rights activist. The report draws attention to the court's finding that Safarov, who was of Jewish and Yazidi descent, was not killed on the grounds of "racial, religious, national or ethnic intolerance." It also said that hu-

man rights activists thought that Safarov's killers belonged to neo-Nazi groups and were carriers of ultranationalist ideas.

"The parliament has discussed several times last year a law that puts the Georgian Orthodox Church in a superior position over other religious groups and gives them privileges in matters of taxation and private property. In 2018, the Constitutional Court ruled that the SMEs subject privileges were unconstitutional and demanded legislative changes that would either abolish these privileges or grant them to all other religious groups," the report stated.

General courses on religion give preference to Orthodox theology, praying in the classrooms in an Orthodox manner. The document also states that icons and religious symbols are publicly displayed in schools, even though the law prohibits proselytism.

The Georgian Orthodox Church does not offer official religious lessons to students in public institutions. Nevertheless, the report reads that during the year in question, SME clergymen visited public schools during school hours, which is allowed by law only in the after school hours. This was often done at the initiative of

individual teachers or the school administration. The meeting of the Orthodox clergyman with the teachers, in which he spoke mainly about the importance of Christianity in Adjara, which is predominantly Muslim, is mentioned for the sake of visibility. After the meeting, the principal of one of the high schools said that it was the duty of education specialists to 'return the students to their old faith.' The human rights activists' complaint regarding this issue went unanswered.

The 2018 report of the Council of Europe on the Status of Respect for Religious Freedom by the Community states that after LGBT people in Georgia, Jehovah's Witnesses are the group most likely to be discriminated against.

The report concludes with the Public Defender's Office's Tolerance Center that the belief that religious minorities are a threat to the Georgian Orthodox Church and the country's cultural values is widespread in the country. The report of the Council of Europe for 2018 states that 36% of citizens think that diversity has a negative impact on the country and harms its culture and traditions.

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# US congressmen's National Security Strategy mentions Bidzina Ivanishvili

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

On June 11th, US Ambassador Kelly C. Degnan visited the Red Cross Society Georgia's office in Gori and met with Red Cross Society Georgia president Natia Loladze and Red Cross and Red Crescent Society International Federation office head in South Caucasus, Olga Jumaeva.

They met with volunteers and discussed Gori's office's response to COVID-19. The three guests also met with the beneficiaries living in Gori to deliver food and hygiene packages. The Red Cross Society is enabled to support local communities during the COVID-19 pandemic through USAID financial aid.

As part of a trip to Gori, Ambassador Degnan discussed the effect of COVID-19 on the city and the region in general, as well as preparations for the upcoming elections and the effect on local communities of the continued illegal borderization activities along the Administrative Boundary Line with Gori Mayor and the Governor of Shida Kartli.

During her visit, the ambassador was asked about the document prepared by 13 Republican congressmen, which was recently published and said that 'the richest man in Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili is a close ally of Putin'. Degnan said she was not yet aware of the document, due to her visit, however, she argued that this letter speaks of Congress's high interest in Georgia and there is no doubt that the US-Georgia strategic partnership is as strong as ever.

"I have not seen the letter, I was in Gori, I do not know the details, but I will say from past experience, communication from the Congress means that they are very interested in Georgia, they recognise the importance of Georgia and they want its success," said the ambassador.

Degnan explained that the



► Ambassador Kelly Degnan: "I have no doubt that the strategic partnership with Georgia remains strong."

authors of the document are a legislative branch.

"I represent another branch, this question is more addressed to Congress, but on behalf of the United States I can tell you that we continue and seek opportunities for cooperation with Georgia and have many initiatives because we believe in Georgia's future and its success," she stated, adding that being on the administrative dividing line here is a demonstration that the US supports Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The diplomat spoke in general about the relations between the 2 countries.

"The strategic partnership we have between Georgia and the United States is extremely important for both countries.

We have invested heavily in building partnerships with each other in many areas," she said, emphasising that collaboration around Covid-19

serves as a good example of this. Ambassador praised Georgian government's efforts to manage the crisis, expressing pride for cooperation with Georgia



► U.S. Republican Investigative Committee publishes National Security Strategy, discusses Georgia.

through help of the Red Cross and other agencies.

Note that the aforementioned document is signed by 13 republican members of the US House of Representatives, including Johnson, Wilson, Whitman, Wagner, Mooney, Bacon, Bergman, Danny, Higgins, Norman, Cranshaw, Steele, and Waltz.

In the part of the document that addresses the need for continuing sanctions against Russia, Republican lawmakers point out that the sanctions have not sufficiently affected Putin's foreign policy, and that his friends are violating the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics. According to the document, the congress should mandate sanctions on Russian propaganda chiefs and those undermining U.S. partners from the former Soviet Union and direct the Department of State to produce a report on Kremlin-connected oligarchs who finance Russian military aggression.

In this context, it is said that Bidzina Ivanishvili, the richest man in Georgia, is a close ally of Putin and is involved in destabilizing Georgia in favor of Russia.

The letter was assessed by the members of the ruling Georgian Dream party, chairman of which is Ivanishvili.

Irakli Kobakhidze, one of the leaders of the parliamentary majority and former chairman of the parliament, believes that the report of 13 congressmen is the result of the payment made by the United National Movement to specific lobbyists, the money that was allocated at the expense of corruption.

According to Kobakhidze, the phrases in the 'low level' document are "the merit of the money that the National Movement gained at the expense of the people, at the expense of corruption and then paid to specific lobbyists."

He states that "a few months ago there was a scandalous information that the vice-president of the IRI board had received money from the United National Movement and, naturally, such funds are yielding results."

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| <b>FRIDAY</b>   | <b>JUNE 12</b>                    |
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| <b>Night</b>    | Cloudy<br>Low: <b>18°C</b>        |
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| <b>Day</b>      | Mostly Sunny<br>High: <b>32°C</b> |
| <b>Night</b>    | Cloudy<br>Low: <b>19°C</b>        |

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## How does ADB help Georgia overcome the crisis caused by Covid-19?



► The COVID-19 Active Response and Expenditure Assistance Program (CARES) will provide budget assistance to the government and fund its complex anti-crisis plan.

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

How the Asian Development Bank is helping Georgia to overcome the crisis caused by Georgia's Covid-19 is the headline of a news published by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on its website.

According to the information, the Asian Development Bank has approved a \$ 100 million loan to finance the Georgian government's complex anti-crisis plan. This amount will help the country to overcome the crisis caused by Covid-19.

The Asian Development Bank has approved a \$ 100 million loan to finance the Georgian government's complex anti-crisis plan, which will help the country overcome the crisis caused by Covid-19. Support from the ADB

will help strengthen Georgia's healthcare system and support the government's social protection mechanisms. ADB funding will help the Georgian government support small and medium-sized businesses affected by the pandemic.

The \$100 million loan is intended to help the Georgian government stop the spread of the new coronavirus pandemic, and mitigate the negative impact on business. The ADB loan will also help maintain the livelihoods of the most vulnerable in society by funding a number of ongoing government anti-social protection and anti-poverty mechanisms.

"The Covid-19 Active Response and Expenditure Assistance Program (CARES) will provide budget assistance to the

government and fund its complex anti-crisis plan," the ADB said in a statement.

Shane Rosenthal, Director of the Permanent Representation of the Asian Development Bank in Georgia says that Georgia, as an international trade hub and tourist destination, has been vulnerable to the pandemic of Covid-19 in the first place.

According to Rosenthal, the timely and effective steps taken by the government to stop the spread of the infection have paid

off. He reported that the crisis has severely damaged Georgia's economy and left 400,000 people, or a quarter of those employed across the country, at risk of losing their jobs.

He underlines that ADB has been a reliable partner of Georgia for 10 than ten years and 'we will be by his side during the restoration of economic activity'.

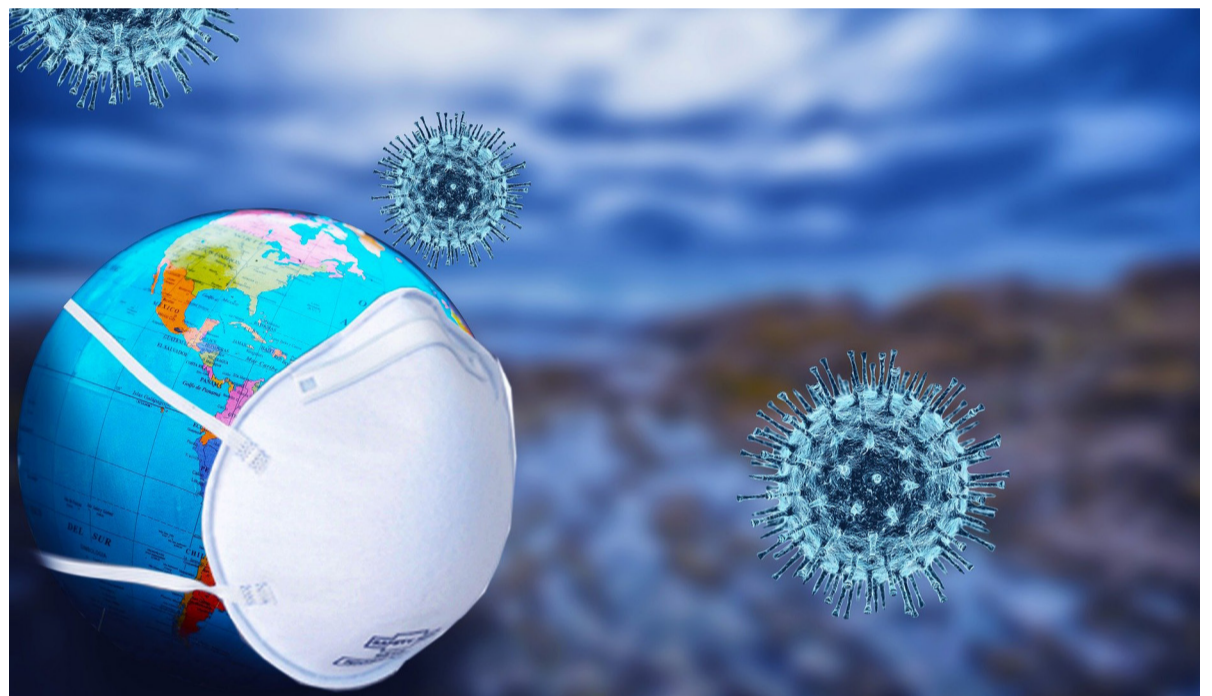
Rogério de Almeida Vieira de Sa, head of the \$ 100 million loan project approved for Georgia says that project will be implemented

through a complex anti-crisis plan by the government.

"First of all, the government provides free diagnosis and treatment of the disease through loans," he emphasised.

According to him it will be possible to supply doctors with protective equipment working on the front line of the pandemic.

The loan will indirectly help thousands of small businesses involved in tourism by funding the government's current tax deferral plan.



► \$3.1 trillion is the total amount announced by ADB's developing members to combat the COVID-19 pandemic as of June 1

## US Department of State Report: Freedom of Religion in Georgia

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The report examines statements of religious intolerance made on television, the Internet, and the print media. Their number has decreased compared to the previous year (148), in 2019 there are 55 such incidents. The words of Archpriest Davit Isakadze that Catholicism is the greatest deviation from Christian dogmas and heresy are especially noteworthy.

In a 2019 report by the State Department, a separate section is devoted to violations by 'foreign and non-state actors.'

Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be persecuted in occupied South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, in some cases they are able to rent buildings for religious gatherings.

"Representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church have not been able to travel or worship in Abkhazia, which has been occupied by Russia, including in the Gali district, which is populated mainly by ethnic Georgians. According to the State Agency for Religious Affairs, ethnic Geor-



gians in the district were forced to move to areas controlled by Tbilisi to celebrate religious holidays," the report states. Amnesty International stated in July 2019 that Jehovah's Witnesses in and around occupied South Ossetia could not walk in churches near the administrative border with the rest of Georgia from fear of being captured by Russian troops.

The document also cites Freedom House's February 2019 report that South Ossetian de-facto authorities are increasingly forcing Orthodox churches in its territory to join the Russian Orthodox Church.

According to the report, non-Orthodox religious organizations continued to face opposition from the government as they tried to obtain building permits for buildings intended for worship. Among the specific cases, special attention is paid to the construction of a mosque in Batumi. The report cites the position of members of the Muslim community that there is not enough transparency with regard to the government policy on the construction of mosques.