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**NATIONALISM AND THE VULNERABILITY OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES
IN GEORGIA**

The contemporary position of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia must be understood within the broader historical relationship among Georgian national identity, Orthodox Christianity, state institutions, and religious minorities. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian Orthodox Church has acquired an exceptionally prominent position in the country's social and political life. Georgian Orthodoxy is widely associated not merely with personal religious belief but with the historical survival of the Georgian nation, the preservation of Georgian language and culture, and resistance to foreign domination. This close association between religion and national identity has contributed to an environment in which religious communities existing outside the dominant Orthodox tradition may be perceived not simply as theologically different, but as alien to Georgian history, culture, and national interests. Jehovah's Witnesses are particularly vulnerable within this environment because their distinctive religious practices, international organizational identity, political neutrality, and conscientious objections to military service may conflict with nationalist conceptions that associate patriotism with adherence to Orthodox Christianity and loyalty to traditional institutions.

This historical relationship has important political consequences. In Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Church occupies a privileged position that distinguishes it from minority religious communities. Although Georgia formally recognizes freedom of religion and has undertaken legal reforms intended to protect religious pluralism, formal legal equality has not always translated into equal treatment in practice. Non-Orthodox religious communities have

reported difficulties involving the construction of places of worship, access to property, religious education, the importation of literature, and the effective implementation of protections for freedom of religion or belief. Local opposition from Orthodox clergy and congregations has at times been followed by decisions of municipal or state authorities that obstruct minority religious communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants. This interaction between social hostility and institutional accommodation of majority religious preferences is particularly significant because it can transform private intolerance into a broader structural problem affecting the practical exercise of religious freedom.

Jehovah's Witnesses occupy an especially sensitive position within this religious and national framework. Historically, members of the community have frequently been characterized by hostile actors as adherents of a foreign "sect," or *sekta*, rather than as members of a legitimate Christian denomination. In the post-Soviet cultural context, this terminology often carries implications extending well beyond theological disagreement. The label may suggest religious illegitimacy, foreign manipulation, social danger, disloyalty to national traditions, or involvement in an organization supposedly threatening the cohesion of society. Consequently, hostility toward Jehovah's Witnesses cannot always be understood as an isolated disagreement over religious doctrine. It may reflect a broader conception of national belonging in which Georgian identity, Orthodox Christianity, patriotism, and loyalty to the state are treated as closely interconnected. The pacifist teachings and political neutrality of Jehovah's Witnesses can further intensify these suspicions. Their religious objections to military participation have historically been interpreted by some Georgian nationalists as evidence of insufficient patriotism or unwillingness to defend the country. Such perceptions have particular significance in Georgia because modern Georgian political identity has developed against the background of armed conflicts, territorial disputes

involving Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the August 2008 war with Russia. In this historical setting, refusal to participate in military activity may be interpreted by nationalist actors not simply as a matter of individual conscience but as rejection of an important civic and patriotic obligation. The resulting stigma can reinforce the portrayal of Jehovah's Witnesses as outsiders whose religious commitments supposedly conflict with Georgian national interests.

The vulnerability of Jehovah's Witnesses is not merely theoretical. Georgia has a documented history of physical attacks, threats, obstruction of religious activities, destruction of religious literature, and attacks against property belonging to Jehovah's Witness communities. During the second half of 2010, human-rights advocates documented seven attacks attributed to religious hatred, six of which reportedly targeted Jehovah's Witnesses. In 2013, the Georgian Public Defender received thirty-four complaints concerning incidents involving Jehovah's Witnesses, while the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Centre subsequently documented 122 hate crimes against Jehovah's Witnesses during 2013–2016. These incidents frequently occurred in public places or during religious activities and sometimes involved destruction of religious literature.

Individual incidents illustrate the seriousness of this hostility. In October 2013 in Batumi, approximately thirty young men reportedly attacked and severely beat three Jehovah's Witnesses while objecting to their distribution of religious literature. In Oni in 2014, a fourteen-year-old Jehovah's Witness girl was reportedly subjected to continuing humiliation by peers and a teacher and was forcibly baptized by a local Orthodox priest; according to the account cited in the materials, she subsequently attempted suicide. Jehovah's Witness places of worship have also been targeted. On May 16, 2018, unknown individuals reportedly fired at a Kingdom Hall in Gori and spray-painted the words "believe in our God" on the building. The same Kingdom Hall

had reportedly been subjected to earlier attacks in the summer of 2015, December 2016, and February 2017. These incidents demonstrate that hostility has at times extended from verbal stigmatization and interference with religious activity to serious physical violence and attacks upon religious property.

Of particular importance from a human-rights perspective is the effectiveness of the state response. Violence committed by private individuals becomes substantially more consequential when victims cannot reasonably expect prompt investigation, accountability, or effective protection. The Georgian Public Defender identified inadequate investigation of offenses motivated by religious intolerance as a systemic problem during the period covered by its reporting. Other sources cited in the materials similarly describe instances in which attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses or their property produced limited investigative progress or inadequate accountability. The significance of these institutional shortcomings is considerable: repeated failures to investigate religiously motivated attacks can contribute to a perception of impunity among offenders while reinforcing the belief among victims that reporting abuse may not provide meaningful protection.

The problem therefore extends beyond individual acts of hostility. When religious minorities encounter obstruction from municipal authorities, unequal access to religious property, difficulties constructing places of worship, interference with religious literature, or inadequate implementation of legal protections, the cumulative effect may substantially restrict their ability to practice their religion openly and safely. The materials identify continuing concerns involving building permits for non-Orthodox houses of worship, religious property, unequal legal privileges, religious instruction favoring the Georgian Orthodox Church, and other institutional practices affecting minority denominations. Such conditions reinforce the dominant institutional

position of Georgian Orthodoxy while placing minority communities in a comparatively vulnerable position.

These concerns acquire additional importance in the context of Georgia's broader political development. Increasing concentration of political power, pronounced polarization, concerns regarding institutional independence, and pressure upon civil society can weaken mechanisms that ordinarily protect vulnerable minorities. Where courts, law-enforcement institutions, civil-society organizations, independent media, and other accountability mechanisms face political pressure, members of unpopular minority groups may have fewer effective avenues through which to challenge mistreatment or obtain protection. For Jehovah's Witnesses, therefore, the broader deterioration of institutional safeguards may compound preexisting religious hostility. The relevant danger does not depend upon the existence of an explicit governmental policy directing violence against Jehovah's Witnesses; it may also arise when longstanding societal hostility operates in an environment where state institutions respond inconsistently or inadequately to abuse.

Recent developments indicate that the underlying ideological environment remains relevant. In 2026, public rhetoric by influential Orthodox religious figures continued to portray non-Orthodox religions as morally destructive, socially dangerous, or fundamentally incompatible with Georgian national values. One particularly severe example cited in the materials characterized Protestantism, Catholicism, and non-Christian religions as contributing to moral corruption and as constituting an attack upon Georgia. Such rhetoric is important not simply because of its theological content, but because statements by influential religious authorities can contribute to the social construction of minority religions as dangerous outsiders. When minority faiths are portrayed as threats to morality, family, national tradition, or the

survival of the country itself, hostility toward their adherents can acquire an ideological justification that extends beyond ordinary religious disagreement.

At the political level, the growing emphasis on “traditional values,” national identity, and the Georgian Orthodox Church has further strengthened the connection between religion and political conceptions of Georgian identity. The materials describe a political discourse in which the Georgian Orthodox Church, traditional values, and national identity are increasingly presented as mutually reinforcing institutions requiring protection, while critics, civil-society organizations, and actors associated with foreign influence may be portrayed as hostile to those values. This discourse is particularly consequential for Jehovah’s Witnesses because they have historically been stigmatized as a *sekte* and portrayed as culturally foreign. Within such an ideological environment, an already marginalized religious identity may become associated not merely with religious difference but with foreign influence, rejection of national traditions, and insufficient loyalty to the Georgian state.

Recent reporting also indicates that hostility toward Jehovah’s Witnesses has not disappeared. According to the materials, OSCE ODIHR reporting for **2024** documented anti-Christian hate incidents and noted threats involving Jehovah’s Witnesses while they engaged in religious activities in public spaces and private residences. Religious-freedom reporting published in **2025** likewise identified Jehovah’s Witnesses as a frequently targeted minority religious community and included incidents involving physical violence. These more recent reports are significant because they demonstrate continuity between Georgia’s historical record of hostility toward Jehovah’s Witnesses and present-day concerns. The contemporary risk therefore cannot be assessed solely by reference to the particularly violent episodes of earlier

decades; it must also account for the persistence of threats, intimidation, obstruction, and physical attacks in the current period.

The treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia can thus be understood as the product of several mutually reinforcing factors: the historically privileged relationship between Georgian Orthodoxy and national identity; persistent social suspicion toward religious communities characterized as foreign or "sectarian"; nationalist expectations concerning patriotism and military obligation that conflict with Jehovah's Witness teachings; institutional inequalities affecting minority religions; documented episodes of threats and violence; and recurring deficiencies in the state response to religiously motivated abuse. Jehovah's Witnesses establish a social and institutional environment in which openly practicing Jehovah's Witnesses remain distinctly vulnerable to hostility, intimidation, interference with religious activities, threats, physical attacks, and inadequate protection.

Accordingly, the contemporary position of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia should not be evaluated exclusively through the formal guarantees of religious freedom contained in Georgian law. A meaningful assessment requires consideration of how religious freedom operates in practice, including the social power of the Georgian Orthodox Church, the continuing stigmatization of minority denominations, the historical record of violence against Jehovah's Witnesses, the effectiveness of law-enforcement responses, and the increasingly prominent political discourse linking national identity with Orthodox Christianity and "traditional values." Viewed within this broader historical and institutional context, Jehovah's Witnesses remain a particularly exposed religious minority whose members may encounter serious obstacles to openly practicing their faith and may face intimidation, threats, violence, interference with

religious activity, and other forms of mistreatment without consistently effective protection from state institutions.

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