
RELIGION AS A FACTOR OF ARMENIAN POLITICS

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the importance and specificity of the religious factor in the politics of Armenia after regaining independence in 1991. During the 70-year Soviet period, Armenia was subject to state secularization and the policy of atheizing society, and the national Church barely preserved its institutional existence. However, in the rebirth of the Republic of Armenia, the Armenian Apostolic Church very quickly regained its privileged position and rebuilt structures, becoming an important participant in politics and social dialogue. The national Church gained influence in public education as well as representation in the army. Religious issues were marked in the policy of the state, especially in the area of shaping the national ideology, legitimizing the state authority and stabilizing the internal political situation. It is noted that, despite the political and systemic changes in recent years, the position of the Church in the state, as well as the nature of the State-Church relationship, have not changed in any particular way.

Keywords: state, relations, South Caucasus, Armenia, Armenian Apostolic Church

1. Introduction

Political science has an objective of explaining political reality, the constituent element of which is to determine important factors shaping the correctness of social relations, including political relations. In general, one can distinguish two areas of these relations, political relations within a state and political relations beyond states' borders. It should be noted that in both cases the significant influence over their formation and implementation is played by religious factors. They are included in the main factors which determine the processes of international interactions, right next to geographical environment, demographic factors, national factors, and ideological factors [1]. It should also be considered as one of the main factors impacting political relations within a state. Attention is also drawn to the role of religious factor in the processes of shaping ethnic and national communities, mobilisation and political rivalry, emergence, execution and legitimisation of authority.

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Current civilizational transformations, popularisation of the notion of separation between state and religious institutions, trends secularising culture and societies could have given - in a global perspective - an impression of decay of the role of religion in political relations. Already at the beginning of the 1990s Samuel Huntington pointed out that drawing such conclusions regarding international relations was premature [2]. Experiences of the first two decades of the 21st century confirmed the relevance of religious issues in the political reality of many, seemingly secularized, states. By implication, recognizing the place of religion in political relations is an important element for explaining political reality on every level.

The Republic of Armenia (later as: RA) constitutes an exemplification of a modern state where - despite seven decades of secularisation and following the policy of atheisation of the society in the Soviet period - religion has once again become a significant factor in politics after the change in geopolitical determinants.

2. Denominational specificity of modern Armenia

Research on the correlation between religion and politics in Armenia requires to recognise the role of religion in the modern Armenian society. In overall perspective, it appears to be strongly connected to - or even 'integrated' with - one religion and Church. The Christian identity of Armenians is emphasised in the public and individual discourse, linking the ethnic (national) identity with the confessional one. In the internal narrative one indicates historical elements, in particular: 1) adoption of Christianity as the first nation of the world, 2) shaping of national culture through the Armenian Church, 3) existential threat from the non-Christian nations (Persians, Turks) - the perception of reasons for the threat to the existence of the nation in its Christian identity; as well as the contemporary denominational-ethnic image of the society, presented by i.e. the latest census of 2011. According to it, people of Armenian nationality constituted 98.1% of the residents of Armenia and people who declared to be Christian - 94.4% of the residents (92.6% of the total population declared to belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church [*Population Census 2011*, National Statistical Service of Republic of Armenia, <http://armstat.am/file/doc/99486278.pdf>].

These factors are the reason for the part of the Armenian society to refuse the adherence to the Armenian nation to people and groups who are of an Armenian ethnic origin but who profess a different religion or declare to be atheists, or to recognise them as 'full Armenians' [3]. It can be stated that the confessional or confessional-political structure of societies, entrenched in the cultural circle of the Middle East, is given a voice here. (The Armenian community in Lebanon has a right to i.e. seats in the parliament not as Armenians, but as members of religious groups, separately for the members of AAC (5) and ACC (1). Pursuant to Article 64 of the Constitution of Iran, 2 seats in the parliament are held by the Armenian Christians.)

Simultaneously it should be noted that the denominational image of the Armenian society is characterised by some diversity. The national Church, i.e. the Armenian Apostolic Church (later as: AAC) is divided into two catholicosates, of Etchmiadzin and Cilicia. This division, however, takes place first and foremost in the diaspora (and was politically conditioned) since the complete authority in Armenia is held by the Catholicos of the ‘Armenian Vatican’, i.e. of Etchmiadzin [4]. Apart from the AAC, there are structures of other Christian denominations in Armenia, although the number of their congregations is not significant. The second most numerous religious group were the Evangelicals, around 29 thousands (about 1% of the population). The Catholics consists of less than 19 thousand people and they associate mainly the members of the Armenian Catholic Church (ACC) [*Population Census 2011*, <http://armstat.am/file/doc/99486278.pdf>]. The majority of both the Armenian Protestants as well as the Armenian Catholics lives outside Armenia.

Apart from them, the communities of a few thousand people consist of the Orthodox Christians and Molokans. Since 1990s a significant progress has been made by the Church of Jehovah’s Witnesses, affiliation to which was declared by around 8.5 thousand people [5]. Moreover, the Yezidis (Shar-fadinian) are the largest group of around 25 thousand people [*Population Census 2011*, <http://armstat.am/file/doc/99486278.pdf>].

It should be noted here that in general the Armenian society is considered secularized. This phenomenon is to a large extent a result of the society’s atheization in the Soviet period and implemented by the Armenian Bolsheviks. Studies on religiosity indicate a high level of trust in religious institutions (in AAC in fact) and simultaneously a rather low level of religiousness [C. Robia, *Religiosity and Trust in Religious Institutions: Tales from the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia)*, <http://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/u4/2009-08-Charles.pdf>]. At the same time a high level of the so-called ‘privatized religion’ in Armenia is indicated, which proves a subjective significance of religion and denominational belonging. Analysing the phenomenon of desecularisation, Yulia Antonian points out that one of the two factors of increase in people regarding themselves as religious was the process of national restoration in the 1980s and 1990s, and the search for the ‘true Armenianness’ [6].

3. Factor legitimising state authority

In the period of the restoration of the Armenian independence in the 1990s, the rebuilding of the authority of state institutions became a challenge for its authors. In this period the national Church, considerably identified with Catholicos Vazgen I (1955-1994), was a force capable of supporting the emerging institutions with its own authority. The authority resulted from the role of AAC and the Catholicos, on the one hand in the struggle to restore the national memory which was ‘confiscated’ by the totalitarian state, and on the other hand in the commitment to try to alleviate the effects of current national

disasters, i.e. the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the earthquake in Armenia in 1988 [4]. At the same time, it should be emphasised that good relations between the Catholicos with the communist authorities built his negative image amongst some Armenians, particularly amongst the diaspora representatives.

Dramatic events that affected Armenian at the turn of decades engendered an impulse to bring closer the divided structures of the national Church. In 1989 the Catholicos of Cilicia officially visited Etchmiadzin for the first time on account of national celebrations commemorating the genocide of 1915, which was organised under the main heading 'One Church, One Nation, One Fatherland'. This phrase correctly illustrates the perception of the role the AAC had set for itself in modern Armenia, and simultaneously it identifies the objectives it had set, i.e. as the main factor of the national pan-Armenian unification. In 1995, the election of Karekin II, as Garegin I, the Catholicos of Cilicia, as a Catholicos in Echmiadzin was aimed at uniting the Armenians around the world. Additionally, it should be noted that his candidature was publically supported by the first president of independent Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan (also coming from the Syrian diaspora and a former teacher at the Seminary of Saint Echmiadzin) [7]. This activity also had a dimension of struggle between the presidential bloc and the opposing diasporic parties, in particular the party of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation 'Dashnaktsutyun' [8].

Obtaining the authority of Church for the legalisation of a new power has been taking place since the beginning of the political transitions. A custom of blessing the presidents of the RA by the Catholicos during the inauguration of presidency was initiated in 1991. An additional element of sacralisation of this act of 'anointing' the head of the state was an oath sworn on *Vehamor* Gospel, which was a medieval manuscript of the Gospel that belonged to the mother of Catholicos Vazgen I.

This custom was maintained even after the presidential system was changed into parliamentary one (in 2017), in which the president is elected by the parliament and holds a representative role. On the 9th of April 2018 during a solemn inaugural ceremony (in the auditorium of Karen Demirchyan Sports and Concerts Complex), Armen Sargsyan, elected by the parliament on the 2nd of March 2018, swore an oath on two books at the same time: the constitution of the RA and the *Vehamor* Gospel. It should also be added that they were solemnly presented in order to emphasise the equivalence of both books. After the oath, Catholicos Garegin II was the first one to speak and he congratulated and blessed the newly sworn president.

Further strengthening of relations between the state and the Church was to a great extent influenced by the change in the political situation in 1998-1999, the resignation of the first president and coming into power of the so-called Karabakh faction [9], as well as the death of Catholicos Garegin I in 1999. Just as in the past, the leaders of the state - a new president, Robert Kocharyan, and a prime minister, Vazgen Sargsyan - also now actively supported the only

candidate, Archbishop Garegin Nersesyan, a vicar general of the Araratian Diocese and Karekin II's opponent in the previous elections. After the rival candidates had withdrawn, he was elected a new Catholicos as Garegin II. Thus, the mechanism of exerting influence by the state authorities over the election of the head of the national Church was reinforced [7].

Levon Petrosyan points out that after regaining the independence in 1991, the Armenian Church became “the social, political, and economic partner of the Armenian state”, and throughout the magistracy of Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008), “the relationship between the presidency and the patriarchal rule of Garegin II transformed into a conglomerate relationship” [7, p. 159].

This relationship, between the state and Church, became even tighter during the presidency of Serzh Sargsyan (2008-2018), the successor of R. Kocharyan. Petrosyan speaks directly of a ‘hypostatic union’ [7, p. 163]. The AAC actively supported the external affairs of the state through its foreign outposts and Garegin II acted as an active member of the diplomatic service of Armenia. Renata Król-Mazur points out that the amalgamation of Church and state became symbolically sanctioned on the 28th of September 2008 by President Serzh Sargsyan [10]. The President, while participating in religious ceremonies, stated: “For centuries without having statehood, the church has led our nation to the 21st century. It is the duty of every public servant to give back to the church for its further strengthening and for our faith to guide us to a better future.” [3, p. 31]

4. Stabilising factor of state authority

Garegin II carried out the notion of Church as an enhancement of state authority and a factor for stabilising the state. He reacted towards important political events in the country, speaking publicly. He emerged as a mediator of conflicts between those holding power and those who were being ruled. Amongst other things, in 2018 the Catholicos tried to alleviate tensions associated with the crisis stemming from the social protests after the presidential elections and the victory of the candidate from the ruling camp of Serzh Sargsyan. On the 1st of March clashes started between law enforcement forces, i.e. the police and the army brought to the city, and the protesters, during which water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets were used. Due to the incidents, around 8 people died and 130 were injured. A state of emergency was imposed in Yerevan, which was cancelled only on the 21st of March. Ban on public assemblies and censorship was instituted; numerous representatives of the opposition were detained and imprisoned [11].

On the 3rd of March Catholicos Garegin II issued a message to the nation, speaking rather generally about intolerance and the need for stability: “Our dear and pious Armenians, our souls are filled with sorrow today. My Armenian nation mourns the loss of its children. During the presidential electoral process, the spirit of intolerance led to disorder, to sad and tragic clashes and confrontations.” [*Message of Catholicos of all Armenians Karekin II on*

occasion of March 1 events, 4.03.2008, Armenpress, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/522195/.html>]

However, speaking already on the 9th of April - at a special inauguration session of Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan on the presidency of the republic - he said: “along with many worthy sons of the nation, have brought your commendable contribution to the liberation of Artsakh and the stability and reinforcement of Armenia’s statehood. [...] Honourable Mr. Kocharian, today when you conclude your term as president of the Republic of Armenia, we offer our sincere prayers to the Almighty, asking Him to bless your life and grant you success in your future endeavours. The economic growth and efforts aimed at improving societal life and the tangible results, which occurred during your presidency, will guide our country to increased fundamental improvements and new advances.” [Special Session of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, 09.04.2008, archive: National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, www.parliament.am]

A decade later he undertook the appeasement of tensions associated with the ‘velvet revolution’. The election and adjuration of the former president, Serzh Sargsyan, to the Prime Minister of the country on the 17th of April 2018 triggered a widespread social resistance and demonstrations of a few thousand people. On the 19th of April 2018 Catholicos Garegin II issued an address on the recent rallies in Armenia, in which he stated: “We express our concern on the situation, which disrupts the normal process of public life. Any [citizen] has its vision out of love towards the fatherland, for which it can express approaches and perceptions through peaceful means – by freely exercising civil rights.” [*Catholicos addresses Yerevan demonstration in plea for common sense and lawfulness*, 19.04.2018, Armenpress, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/930584.html>]

On the 23rd of April Serzh Sargsyan gave in to the escalating social pressure and stepped down from the office of the Prime Minister. However, the opposition and Nikol Pashinyan, leader of the Armenian protest movement and an Armenian parliamentarian, demanded a thorough transmission of power and not just a replacement of the member of the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) in the office of prime minister. In the following days, further negotiations between the parties were at a dead end [*Opposition movement leader MP, Catholicos of All Armenians hold talks*, 28.04.2018, news.am, <https://news.am/eng/news/448715.html>].

On the 28th of April Nikol Pashinyan - the opposition’s candidate for a new Prime Minister, went to talk with the Catholicos. On *Facebook* Pashinyan noted: “I met with Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II in Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. We discussed the current situation in the country and ways of resolving it” [*Catholicos of All Armenians, Armenian protest leader discuss ways of resolving crisis in country*, 28.04.2018, interfax, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14281>].

Simultaneously, talks with the leaders of the RPA were undertaken by President Armen Sargsyan. The President's press office also informed that "the President welcomes the Catholicos of All Armenians' talk with Pashinyan" [*Armenia President meets with ruling party leader, acting PM*, 28.04.2018, news.am, <https://news.am/eng/news/448759.html>]. In the evening that same day the RPA announces that it will not nominate a candidate for Prime Minister in the upcoming election. Thus, Pashinyan advanced as the only candidate for the office of prime minister. A day later, on the 29th of April 2018, a delegation of the ruling PRA and a parliamentary faction leader, Vahram Baghdasaryan, went to the Catholicos for a talk. On the 8th of May 2018 Nikol Pashinyan was elected as the Prime Minister of the RA. (Garegin II paid him a visit on the 25th of May when the latter was the Prime Minister.) On the 14th of November Pashinyan visited the Catholicos before the early parliamentary elections scheduled for the 9th of December 2018. One day after the parliamentary elections in December 2018 Garegin II issued a message to the nation: "On December 9, snap parliamentary elections were held in our Homeland, becoming an important milestone in the recent internal political developments in Armenia. We convey our blessings to our beloved people and the parties, who participated in the parliamentary elections with the sense of responsibility towards the future. We extend our congratulations and best wishes to the 'My Step' alliance; 'Prosperous Armenia' and 'Bright Armenia' parties, which deserved the trust of our people, bearing responsibility for the future of our country. We pray that the Almighty Lord grant successes to the newly elected Parliament activities, for the sake of strengthening our Homeland and building a better future." [*His Holiness Garegin II considers snap parliamentary elections key milestone of domestic political developments*, 10.12.2018, Armenpress, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/957686.html>]

The election of Nikol Pashinyan as the Prime Minister of the RA on the 8th of May and then the election from the 9th of December, in which Pashinyan's faction won, opened up a new chapter in the internal affairs of Armenia. Nevertheless, the 'velvet revolution' and political transformation did not change substantially in role assumed by the Catholicos.

After the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, called the citizens on the 19th of May 2019 to block the courts all over the country from the early morning of the 20th of May, as a method to influence the last authority which did not yield to the process of democratisation of the country. Garegin II sent out a message to the nation, in which expressed deep concern over the situation in the country and appealed: "to all the children of our nation to show calmness, to avoid violence and to put every effort through peace, spirit of national unity and love for each other to overcome the challenges facing us" [*His Holiness Garegin II addresses message on current situation in Armenia, calls on citizens to show calmness, avoid violence*, 20.05.2019, Armenpress, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/975367.html>].

Thus, despite the far-reaching political transformations in Armenia in recent years, the Church with its leader remained present in the Armenian politics.

5. Factors shaping patriotic attitudes

The news elites of the state perceived the national Church as a significant factor of a spiritual and moral revival of the nation, its involvement in the national values, prevention of various sects which flooded the country, and finally, instilling the spirit of true patriotism [8]. Reconstructing the national state gave the AAC an opportunity to create new relations with the state authority and, simultaneously, institutional restoration.

On the 23rd of August 1990 the Supreme Council of the Armenian SRR adopted the declaration of independence in which the guarantees of freedom of conscience and equality regardless of religion, amongst other things, were also adopted. However, less than one year later, in the Act on the freedom of conscience and religious organisations adopted by the parliament on the 17th of June 1991, provisions were included which assured a special place of the national Church in the country, as was stated in the justification: “accepting the Armenian Apostolic Church as the national Church of the Armenians, an important bastion for building its spiritual life and protection of nationality” [<http://www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=2041&lang=arm&enc=utf8>]. Proselytism was banned (indicating which activity was not recognised as such) as well as financing religious organisations by their foreign centres and political organisations.

While defining the principle of separation between the Church and state - the foundation of which includes the lack of interference in the internal affairs of religious organisations (as long as they follow the law) and the ban of the Church’s participation in the state administration - privileges regarding the Armenian Church were also written down:

- freedom of spreading its faith in the RA,
- right to recreating historical traditions, structures and communities,
- building of new churches,
- possibility to participate in a spiritual formation of the Armenian nation (also as part of the national educational institutions),
- improving the moral quality of the nation,
- carrying out philanthropic and charitable activities,
- the RA’s protection of the Church’s activity conducted abroad [<http://www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=2041&lang=arm&enc=utf8>].

The guarantee of the fundamental rights and freedoms - including freedom of religion - was confirmed in the RA Constitution adopted by the Supreme Council of Armenian on the 12th of May 1995. However, it did not contain any provisions regarding the Church or religious organisation, as well as the separation between the Church and state. A decade later, an amendment to the

constitution adopted in 2005 included - along with a provision on the separation between the Church and state - a recognition of a “particular historical mission of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church as the national Church in a spiritual life, development of the national culture and preservation of the national identity of the Armenian nation” [<http://www.president.am/hy/constitution-2005/>], ability to define mutual relations within a separate act, as well as freedom of activity of all the religious organisations. Relations between the state and Church institutions were defined by the Act on the relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church from 2007. The state pledged in it to protect the Church in the countries where it was active, to financially support the Church institutions of a cultural nature, and to exempt from taxes on production and sales of sacral items [*The Law of the Republic of Armenia Regarding the Relationship Between The Republic of Armenia and the Holy Apostolic Armenian Church, The Armenian Church, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin*, <http://www.armenianchurch.org/index.jsp?sid=3&nid=724&y=2007&m=4&d=5>].

Legal provisions in the independent Republic of Armenian not only appreciated a unique role of the Armenian Church and its representatives in the history of the nation, but they also defined its unique place in the modern Armenian state. The Church was recognised as the main - along the sovereign state and equivalent to it - pillar of survival and national development. Progressing ‘connexion’ of both institutions turned it in fact into the state Church.

In the new post-Soviet reality, the state Church won an opportunity to rebuild its influences in the society. In the 1980s the number of active AAC churches in Armenia was around 30 and the religious education was not carried out [12]. In the period of three decades of independence, the number of churches active in the territory of the RA increased to around 400 [Information of the Service Department of The Mother See on the 29th of April 2020]. The act on mutual relations from 2007 granted the Armenian Church the right “to have its permanent spiritual representative in hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military bases and penal institutions, including investigative isolation cells” [<http://www.armenianchurch.org/index.jsp?sid=3&nid=724&y=2007&m=4&d=5>]. The army and school became the main areas for implementing the formative role.

6. Army

The army was an important area in which the presence of the Church was stressed. It got involved in pastoral ministry already during the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Instances when priests were taking up arms on the frontline prompted to recognise it as a highly patriotic institution. Pastoral ministry in the army became to be shaped by a combined initiative of Catholicos Garegin I and Minister for Defence Vazgen Sargsyan on the 13th of November 1997 when they signed a memorandum of mutual understanding in 1997 which specified the

activities of the service, its structure, issues, and objectives. The program the the Armenian army chaplains was created by Garegin I, but together with Garegin II the service assumed an institutional nature. The number of military chaplains increased to 38 in 2010 [7]. According to the Ministry of Defence: “Clergymen make lectures, make conversations with soldiers, encourage them during border post rotations with their prayers, visit border outposts, and organize featuring of educational movies, pilgrimages, liturgies and other religious ceremonies. Armenian soldiers experience a spiritual awakening and move toward the doctrines of the mother church.” [*The spiritual service*, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, <http://www.mil.am/en/libraries/23>].

In 2018, in the interview given for the 26th anniversary of the foundation of the Armenian Army, the Spiritual Leader of the Armenian Armed Forces, bishop Vrtanes Abrahamyan, answered the question on pastoral service in the army as follows: „It is not a secret that we are army-nation, army from infancy to the elderly men, and this was imposed by our complicated long history, so we have to be vigilant, never diminishing our belts. In times of statehood and army, the Armenian Church kept its constant spiritual care always standing by soldiers’ side in the battlefield. The most recent examples are Sardarapat and Artsakh wars. In Sardarapat alongside the military there was a separate unit consisting of clergymen [...] The aspiration to keep the army awake, in prayer, and in the blessing of the Lord make the Armenian clergyman be in the armed forces for already twenty years, with the help of his daily service to the soldier and the officer. Besides the spiritual service, our clergymen carry out a very important public function, and today soldiers are hardly able to serve without their prayers and blessings, their words of Bible-based wisdom. During the four-day war in April [2016], many of our courageous boys said that they were ready to give life not only for ‘homeland’ but also for ‘faith’. This kind of slogans and beliefs testify the full presence of the Church in the life of the army. And this is mutual.” [*The Spiritual Leader of the Armenian Armed Forces: The Aspiration to Keep the Army Awake, in Prayer and in Blessing, Make the Armenian Clergyman Be in the Armed Forces*, 01.30.2018, armedia, <https://armedia.am/eng/news/56970/the-spiritual-leader-of-the-armenian-armed-forces-the-aspiration-to-keep-the-army-awake-in-prayer-and-in-blessing-make-the-armenian-clergyman-be-in-the-armed-forces.html>]

Even more significant is that during an annual procession celebrating the independence of Armenia, the chaplains’ march as a separate formation of the Armenian Army, carrying a national flag. On the 25th anniversary of independence, 21st of September 2016, this formation consisted of more than 64 chaplains marching in eights in seven rows, led by seven different chaplains, including an ensign.

7. Education

Education is another area in which the presence of the state Church was revealed. Since 2002, due to the agreement between the government and Church,

classes in the history of the Armenian Church have become compulsory as part of public school teaching curriculum for grades 5 to 10 (students aged 10-16) [3]. In 2007, the act on mutual relations ensured the right to the Church to „participate in the preparation of the scholastic curriculum and textbooks for ‘Armenian Church History’ courses within state educational institutions, the defining of minimum requirements of instructors of said subject, and to present prospective instructors to the schools” [<http://www.armenianchurch.org/index.jsp?sid=3&nid=724&y=2007&m=4&d=5>].

Petrosyan points out that the seven-years programme of teaching history of the Armenian Church includes not only education on the history, doctrine and moral aspects of this religious community, but also a study of the Armenian Church’s ritual elements [7]. In reality, it is the Church that decides who teaches this subject although teachers are the state’s employees. Attention is also drawn to inequalities in the access to the public establishments because the state granted the right to organise optional extracurricular activities in the state’s educational institutions to the AAC, but not to other religious groups (they can give religious lessons to their members in their own institutions).

The Armenian Church also runs the Youth Centres, referred to as Hayordyats toun (*Հայորդյաց տնիւ*), which are centres for children’s creativity, situated all over Armenia and supported by the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU). The programme was initiated in 1993 by the current Catholicos, Garegin II, then a vicar of the Araratian Diocese and AGBU. At present there are 7 such centres in the country. They are regularly attended by 3500 students and the number of instructors and administrative staff exceeds 300 people. The students enroll in classes of various specializations, including art, crafts, painting, sport, computer science, journalism and foreign languages. There are also classes in dancing and circus (acrobatics, gymnastics). All the students of the Armenian Church Youth Centers are provided also with a religious education as part of the standard teaching curriculum [Youth Centers, The Armenian Church Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, <https://www.armenianchurch.org/index.jsp?sid=1&id=98&pid=21&lng=en>].

8. Conclusions

Recognising the place of religion in the politics of the Republic of Armenia, it can be noticed that a unique role is played in it by the Armenian Apostolic Church. Ascribing to it a particular significance for the maintenance and development of the nation - both in the past as well as nowadays - by the authorities and society, granted it numerous privileges and a place of an actual ‘partner’ of the state. Therefore, in the politics of Armenia it plays a significant role as a factor:

- 1) legitimising the state authority - the Church sanctions, in a symbolic dimension, a chosen the superior authorities of the state by the act of a distinctive ‘anointment’ of the head of the state, providing this authority with characteristics of God’s origins, and carried out by His grace and will.

Simultaneously, the Church's role in the functioning of the state's institutions is its strengthening in the eyes of the citizens of its strong foundations as they are based on the oldest national institution which represents the nation, deriving from the very Creator.

- 2) stabilising the state authority and internal political situation - the Church gets involved in conflicts between the state authority and society, trying to alleviate public sentiments and supporting the authority's stability in the name of preserving the nation's safety, threatened by external factors,
- 3) creating the citizens - through its institutions development, joining the education process of children and youth, but also its own service in the armed forces, the Church gained extensive opportunities to influence the society, becoming a channel for the distribution of national attitudes and values shaped by the official state and church factors.

Generally speaking, it can be stated that in modern Armenia the relations between religion and state took a form which gives it the characteristics of a religious state, including - due to the subject of dominance - a model of the supremacy of the state over religion (when religion is treated as a tool serving the interests of the state, and - due to the degree of intensity - a model of a modernised religious state (when the guarantees of religious freedom are granted with the official recognition of one religion as the religion of this society) [13, 14].

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