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Religious sects as a threat to social security in the Republic of Armenia

Zarys treści: Artykuł prezentuje współczesną sytuację religijną w Armenii oraz wyjaśnia, dlaczego społeczeństwo ormiańskie postrzega członków kościołów mniejszościowych i różnych związków wyznaniowych jako wrogów kraju i jedności narodowej. Bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne Republiki Armenii opiera się na dwóch głównych filarach: kulturze narodowej i związanej z nią religii chrześcijańskiej, tradycji i duchowym dziedzictwie – wszystkie utożsamiane są ze Świętym Ormiańskim Kościołem Apostolskim (Armenian Apostolic Church – AAC). AAC jest więc głównym podmiotem walczącym z zagrożeniami kulturowymi i przeciwstawiającym się sekularyzacji. W tekście wskazano, jakie zagrożenia dla Republiki Armenii niesie szybki wzrost „sekt” religijnych – należy tu wyjaśnić, że AAC używa terminu „sekt” także w odniesieniu do innych kościołów i związków wyznaniowych. Szczególny nacisk położono na zbadanie związków między „sektami” religijnymi a światem polityki i biznesu. Omówiono również zaangażowanie „sekt” w wydarzenia polityczne w Armenii oraz podjęto próbę przedstawienia ich postrzegania przez społeczeństwo i władze państwowe. Autorka chce pokazać, w jaki sposób religijne „sekt” i AAC – walczące z nimi za pomocą nacjonalistycznych haseł – mogą przyczynić się do niepokoju społecznego. Chociaż Ormiański Kościół Apostolski eksponuje problem związany z obecnością sekt religijnych i zagrożeniem, jakie stanowią one dla kultury i narodu ormiańskiego, nie udało się znaleźć wystarczającej liczby respondentów do przeprowadzenia badania ankietowego dotyczącego obecności sekt religijnych w życiu społeczeństwa ormiańskiego. Najczęściej respondenci twierdzili, że są to grupy marginalne, o które nie należy się martwić. Dlatego analizę działalności „sekt” religijnych przeprowadzono na podstawie materiałów dostarczonych przez ormiańskie media (w tym media niezależne) oraz serwis informacyjny Ormiańskiego Kościoła Apostolskiego.

Content outline: The article presents the contemporary religious situation in Armenia. It explains why the Armenian society perceives members of minority churches and various religious associations as enemies of their country and national unity. It contributes to research on internal security, especially on social and cultural security. The internal security of the Republic of Armenia rests on two central pillars: national culture and related Christian religion, tradition and spiritual inheritance – all of which are equated with the Holy Armenian Apostolic

Church (AAC). Therefore, AAC is the primary entity fighting cultural threats and opposing secularisation. The text will show what threats to the Republic of Armenia are posed by the quick growth of religious “sects”. One thing that should be clarified at the very beginning is that AAC uses the term “sect” with reference to other churches and religious associations. Particular emphasis will be placed on investigating the relationships between religious “sects” and the world of politics and business. The author will also outline the involvement of religious “sects” in the political events in Armenia and attempt to present their perception by the society and state authorities. The author wants to demonstrate how religious “sects” and AAC – which fights against them using nationalistic slogans – may contribute to social unrest. Although the Armenian Apostolic Church exposes the problem caused by the presence of religious sects and the threat they pose to Armenian culture and nation, the author was unable to find a sufficient number of respondents to conduct a questionnaire survey on the presence of religious sects in the life of the Armenian society. Usually, respondents claim that these are marginal groups that we should not worry about. That is why the activity of religious “sects” was analysed based on the materials provided by the Armenian media (including independent media) and the information service of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Słowa kluczowe: Republika Armenii, Armeński Kościół Apostolski, sekty, bezpieczeństwo społeczne

Keywords: Republic of Armenia, Armenian Apostolic Church, sects, social security

One of the fundamental functions of the state is to provide security to its citizens. There is no plain and universal definition of security. The scope of its elements is defined by many fields of science and world views. It is created based on interests found in political science, international relations, law, economics, criminology, history, psychology, ethics and religion. According to one of the most prominent researchers of security issues, Barry Buzan, after the collapse of the bipolar world order, security should be treated holistically due to the internationalisation of threats.¹ There is no coherent definition of the concept of internal security, either. It depends on the level of civilisation development of a particular country, which, having a developed administration system and various services, accepts multiple obligations. Internal security – presented in a universal way – must be related to the state of undisturbed operation of the state, connected with the security of its agencies and stability of social life, resulting from personal security and the safe existence of its citizens. Internal security is closely associated with social and cultural security. These concepts have not yet earned a coherent definition. For this article, the author shall use the definition of social security, whose important pillar is the protection of national identity, understood as the ability to preserve culture, customs or language. Thus, the author refers to the Copenhagen school, which used the term “social security” in its socio-cultural meaning, which is characterised by

¹ R. Floyd, ‘Human Security and the Copenhagen School’s Securitization Approach: Conceptualizing Human Security as a Securitizing Move’, *Human Security Journal*, vol. 5 (2007), 38, 40.

a high degree of ties with an individual and society.² In the Republic of Armenia, the concept of social security has not found its way to the acts of law and public institutions that are important for national security.

Social security is greatly affected by religion (as it influences a person's life). This influence may be both positive (religious people are usually kinder to each other and take care of their own security) and negative (religious fanaticism). Threats to social security include, for example, cultural and religious biases, discrimination of cultural, national, ethnic, religious and language minorities, nationalism, chauvinism, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, and violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. In most societies, national identity and heritage play a vital role. Faith and religious life are among the most sensitive points to be attacked. The feeling that the spiritual and religious sphere is threatened may lead to conflict situations, which often end in physical violence and riots. In countries where religion plays a vital role, the weakening of religious institutions may weaken the society and even lead to its collapse. The factors contributing to the weakening of religious institutions comprise the post-modern information and globalisation culture, progress and unstoppable flow of information, and development of modern technologies. A significant role is played here by new religious movements, "sects", which change how people (especially young ones, susceptible to influences and manipulations) think, aiming at rejecting accepted values, models and authorities, believing they are ossified and backward.

Some researchers believe that the twenty-first century can be called the century of new religions, sects, cults and new religious movements, even though this phenomenon has accompanied the human race from the beginning of its history. The subject literature offers many definitions of a sect, which proves how difficult it is to provide an unambiguous description of this phenomenon.³ Source-related and methodological difficulties found in the area of sociology, science of religion or political science account for problems in analysing sects.⁴ Characteristic features of sects are a strong leader, rigorous moral requirements, isolation from the rest of the society and impossibility of conducting any dialogue with them. Since the concept of a "sect" has a negative connotation in everyday language, it is often replaced with a term – a new religious movement. New religious movements are treated as an alternative to official and institutional religions and the dominant culture.

² H.H. Hama, 'State Security, Societal Security, and Human Security', *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, no. 21(1) (2017), 5–6.

³ English-language literature uses two concepts: *a sect* and *a cult*. The difference between them stems from the origin of a given movement – a sect is a movement which separated from the previously existing movement, while a cult is a new movement, created from scratch; see M.B. Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion. Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives* (London, 2001), p. 252.

⁴ More on this topic in: J.R. Sielezin, 'Destrukcyjna rola sekt i związków wyznaniowych w XX i XXI wieku – problem cywilizacyjny i polityczny', *Wrocławskie Studia Politologiczne*, no. 13 (2012), 186–89.

In their structure, operations and ideology, new religious movements contain elements and characteristics of a sect. On one hand, they are of a theological nature concerning the cult and the revelation of the worldview. On the other hand, they have a sociological dimension – their specific structure, methods of communicating important content, attitude toward authorities, cultural values and society.⁵ An important feature of “sects”/new religious movements is that they act in a destructive way for their members and their surroundings. Sects are totalitarian in nature, as they organise the whole life of a person – they affect thinking, views on life, relations with other persons, social relations, and they shape the attitude towards the state and to matters related to death and eternal life. The organisational structure of sects and the hierarchical subordination of their members make such organisations potential structures used for committing crimes. The spectrum of criminal activity in which sects are involved is vast – from economic crimes (especially money laundering and fraud) to deprivation of freedom, rape, incest, urging someone to kill or commit suicide.⁶

One could mention several types of new religious movements: millenarianistic sects (for example Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Seventh Day Advent Church); sects inspired by the wisdom of the Far East (e.g. Hare Krishna); sects inspired by the wisdom of the West (the Baha’i Faith, the Mormons, Scientology). Defence reactions towards the sects, manifested by the society, have recently adopted the form of institutionalised and open fight. In Europe we can find many legal documents concerning the activities of the sects – new religious movements, which can be divided into those of international influence and local ones.⁷ It happens that the authorities have acknowledged doctrines of particular religious movements in some countries as violating the valid law and constituting a threat to public or even national order. Many European and international offices, organisations and institutions have reported the issue of religious movements operating in particular states. The threats that the activities of specific sects and religious movements pose may be generally classified along the following criteria:

- limitation of an individual’s freedom and identity (brainwashing);
- religion-related frauds (when ‘gurus’ obtain material benefits);
- financial exploitation and neglecting the well-being of the members;
- immoral and illegal activities;
- pushing the ‘faithful’ to deviation behaviour which can be dangerous to internal security (pushing them to suicide or ritual murders);

⁵ K. Jędrzejczyk-Kuliniak, *Religie świata a bezpieczeństwo* (Wrocław, 2013), p. 19.

⁶ M. Ratajczak, ‘Ekonomiczny wymiar zjawiska psychomanipulacji w sektach i możliwości jego kryminalizacji’, *Prawa Człowieka. Human Rights. Humanistyczne Zeszyty Naukowe*, no. 16 (2013), 75–76.

⁷ Some of them (the older ones) were discussed in detail by Maciej Szostak in his work *Sekty destrukcyjne. Studium metodologiczno-kryminalistyczne* (Kraków, 2001), pp. 76–115.

- conducting activities which are harmful to the state under the disguise of religious or educational activity (detrimental political and economic plans, links with criminal groups, corruption, attempts at exerting pressure on authorities, tax crimes).⁸

Sects are very talented in using the recession and the economic crisis; they often change their strategy and assure those with financial problems or who are unemployed that their financial issues will be overcome when they join the sect. To obtain financial benefits and gain new members (especially influential ones), many sects participate in political or business activities. Sects are particularly eager to seek new followers in the managerial circles of enterprises – they favour, in particular, personal assistants to bosses, HR managers, and organisers of vocational training, since thanks to information obtained from such people, they are able to control the enterprise. They are particularly willing to infiltrate specific enterprises or business sectors that are of key importance to the state economy (for example, Moon's sect or Scientologists).⁹ The sects/new religious movements, just like churches and associations, use legal forms, often hiding their religious face by running various foundations, schools and, education and upbringing centres, scientific institutes, organising courses and therapies. They are increasingly popular within political parties. Contacts with politicians are kept mainly by the Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Moon sect and the Mormons. The Jehovah's Witnesses, who receive material support from the US government and the Rockefeller family, are financially tied with other sects – Scientologists, Mormons and Moon Church.¹⁰ There is a lot of evidence to prove the international cooperation of sects and the support of politicians – one could mention here the fact that in 1995, the task of defending the members of the Supreme Truth (Aum Shinrikyo), responsible for the bomb attack in the Tokyo underground, by Galina Krylova, a lawyer representing the Jehovah's Witnesses, the moon sect and Hare Krishna in Moscow.¹¹

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Armenia has been an orthodox Christian country for over sixteen centuries. Since the Middle Ages, the Armenian Church has developed a specific feeling of religious identity through its language, tradition, and several national and religious myths. The national identity of the Armenians is strongly tied to Christianity and separate church structures.¹²

⁸ These criteria were developed by Dominika Karwoth-Zielińska, who based them on the report from the Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs, *ead.*, 'Działania prawne podejmowane przeciwko nowym ruchom i kultom religijnym w Europie. Charakterystyka wybranych nowych ruchów religijnych i sekt', *Zeszyty Naukowe – Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Krakowie*, no. 870 (2011), section 'Problemy społeczne, polityczne i prawne', p. 170.

⁹ Sielezin, 'Destrukcyjna rola sekt', pp. 190–91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 193–94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹² See K. Siekierski, 'Ormiański Kościół Apostolski – od wielkiej przeszłości do trudnej terażniejszości', *Spółczesność i Polityka*, no. 1 (2008), 27–45; *id.*, 'Współczesny dyskurs Ormiańskiego

This is influenced by the history of the country. The ties with Christianity allowed the Armenians to survive as a nation. The Armenians' religious resistance to their invaders – infidels (Zoroastrians, Muslims) was identical to the national resistance. The Armenians use the identification Hayk-k'ristonya – which means Armenian nationality and Christianity, which is understood as belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC).¹³ For many centuries this Church has been a strong, national institution. After Armenia lost its independence, the Church, apart from religious services, also played specific political and social roles: it cultivated national remembrance, guarded domestic traditions and culture. After the collapse of the communist empire and the establishment of the Republic of Armenia (Hajkakan Hanrapetutjun) with its capital city of Yerevan,¹⁴ the Church gained independence of activity. It turned from an object into a subject of the new reality. Over the past several years, it has managed to gain relevant provisions in acts of law that allow it to preserve its dominant role in the state. *The Act on Freedom of Faith and Religious Organizations* passed as early as 17 June 1991,¹⁵ protects the AAC. In the preamble, AAC is considered the national Church and an important institution shaping the spiritual life and preserving national remembrance. Article 8 of the Faith Act brings the ban on proselytism in the whole territory of the country. However, Article 17 specifies that the category of “proselytism” does not apply to the “traditional activity of the Armenian church”.¹⁶ The amendment to the Act from 2009 emphasised the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church as a state religion of Armenia.¹⁷

Kościola Apostolskiego’, *Pro Georgia. Journal of Kartvelological Studies*”, vol. 15 (2007), 241–57; id., ‘One Nation, One Faith, One Church: The Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Ethno-Religion in Post-Soviet Armenia’, in: *Armenian Christianity Today. Identity politics and Popular Practice*, ed. A. Agadjanian (Surrey, 2014), pp. 15–41; id., ‘Religious and National Identities in Post-Soviet Armenia’, in: *Religions and Identities in Transition*, ed. I. Borowik, M. Zawila (Kraków, 2010), pp. 149–62; L. Abrahamian, *Armenian Identity in a Changing World* (Costa Mesa, 2006); V. Guroian, ‘Religion and Armenian National Identity: Nationalism Old and New’, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1994), <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1841&context=ree> (accessed: 15 Apr. 2021).

¹³ Also the name Gregorian Church is used – after Armenia’s patron saint, Gregory the Illuminator. See Y. Antonyan, ‘Religiosity and religious identity in Armenia: Some current models and developments’, *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*, vol. 56 (2011), p. 318.

¹⁴ The Polish name adopted by the Commission for Standardisation of Geographical Names Outside Poland, see *Nazwy państw świata, ich stolic i mieszkańców* (Warszawa, 2006), p. 5.

¹⁵ ‘Закон Республики Армения “О Свободе Совести и Религиозных Организациях”’, 17 June 1991, <http://www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=2041&lang=rus> (accessed: 28 Apr. 2021).

¹⁶ Ibid.; A. Curanović, ‘Rosyjsko-kaukaskie sąsiedztwo w kontekście stosunków międzywyznaniowych’, in: *Kaukaz w stosunkach międzynarodowych. Przeszość, terażniejszość, przyszłość*, ed. P. Olszewski, K. Borkowski (Piotrków Trybunalski, 2008), p. 381.

¹⁷ ‘Парламент Армении принял новый закон “О свободе совести и религиозных организациях”’, *Седмица.RU*, 20 March 2009, <http://www.sedmitza.ru/text/619096.html> (accessed: 28 Apr. 2020); ‘Парламент Армении принял поправки в закон “О свободе совести и религиозных организациях”’, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/592538.html> (accessed: 18 Apr. 2021).

The lawmakers also announced the tightening of the faith law. Following the motion of the Ministry of Justice of Armenia, in August 2011, amendments were introduced to the *Act on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations*, aimed at introducing criminal liability for forced involvement of people in non-traditional religious organisations – explicitly aimed at groups and “sects”, and also the concept of “soul hunters” was defined.¹⁸ The amendments were not passed by the National Assembly of Armenia, and the Venice Commission would declare that they would violate human rights.¹⁹ Work is still being conducted on some amendments to this act, and some provisions raise concerns among representatives of other churches and religious associations, especially the evangelical ones (most sects operating in Armenia come from them).²⁰

The Constitution of Armenia, enacted on 5 July 1995, guaranteed fundamental rights and freedoms (Articles 15, 23, 44). In 2005, it was amended to guarantee freedom to all religious organisations. It contained the following provision: “The Republic of Armenia recognises the special historical mission of the Armenian Apostolic Church as the national Church, in spiritual life, development of national culture and preserving national identity of the Armenian nation” (Article 8.1). This article enabled the legal regulation of the relations between the state and the Armenian Apostolic Church.²¹ The following amendment to the Constitution from 2015 confirmed the guarantee of freedom of religion (Article 17, points 1, 29, 41, 56) and the special role of AAC (Article 18). Religious organisations were guaranteed equal rights and autonomy (Article 41, p. 4). A new provision dealt with the right to do service instead of military service if the latter violates the religious values or convictions of a particular citizen (Article 41, points 3).²²

A special act of law is the Act on Relations between the Republic of Armenia and AAC from 2007,²³ in which the state acknowledges the autonomy of the

¹⁸ A. Мартиросян, ‘В Армении обнародованы поправки к закону “О свободе совести и религиозных организациях”’, *Кавказский Узел*, 26 Aug. 2011, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/191478/> (accessed: 1 Apr. 2020).

¹⁹ ‘В Армении обеспокоены нарастающей активностью сект’, 12 May 2012, <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/53478.html> (accessed: 16 Apr. 2021).

²⁰ ‘The Remarks And Recommendations of the Commonwealth of Churches of Evangelical Family of Armenia’, *Religions in Armenia*, 5 July 2017, <http://religions.am/en/article/the-remarks-and-recommendations-of-the-commonwealth-of-churches-of-evangelical-family-of-armenia> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2021).

²¹ ‘Constitution of the Republic of Armenia’, President of the Republic of Armenia, 27 Nov. 2005, <http://www.president.am/en/constitution-2005> (accessed: 24 Apr. 2020); P. Nieczuja-Ostrowski, ‘Religia w polityce w państwach Kaukazu Południowego’, in: *Religia i polityka na obszarze Europy Wschodniej, Kaukazu i Azji Centralnej*, ed. T. Stępniewski (Lublin–Warszawa, 2013), p. 288.

²² ‘Constitution of the Republic of Armenia’, President of the Republic of Armenia, 6 Dec. 2015, <http://www.president.am/en/constitution-2015> (accessed: 16 Apr. 2020).

²³ ‘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&lng=en> (accessed: 15 Apr. 2021).

hierarchical structure of the Church, which gained several benefits that are not available to other religious groups.²⁴

The role of AAC as the national church was also reflected in the security strategy for the Republic of Armenia from 2007. The document contains the provision stating that due to the historical mission of AAC, the state must support its spiritual, moral, social and cultural activity.²⁵ At the end of July 2019, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan established an interdepartmental commission to develop a new strategy for national security because it is necessary to develop a document which will be adjusted to the current needs and changes occurring in the country, the region and the world.²⁶ It was uncertain whether it would also apply to the AAC, as the new ruling elites who took power in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution are much more reserved in their relations with the national church. The AAC is discontented with government plans to revise the Armenian Apostolic Church History curriculum and possibly replace it with a broader History of Religion class. The heated debate that erupted in the media on this occasion made it clear that more traditional groups see those plans as an attack on Armenian identity and argue that the course is needed to stop the spread of “sects”. However, given the fact that Armenia’s socio-cultural system has been shaped based on one nation (Armenian) and one religion (Christianity and AAC), it could have been assumed that the document would also include provisions protecting AAC, in line with the slogan used for several years “one nation, one faith, one Church”. In the new strategy of July 2020, the Armenian Apostolic Church is listed as one of the national values, but it is already together with the Armenian Catholic Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church.²⁷

Armenia is a country that is homogeneous ethnically and religiously. As many as 98 per cent of the three-million population are ethnic Armenians, of whom in 2015 as many as 91 per cent considered themselves to be AAC congregation.²⁸ Other religious minorities included Catholics (taking into account Armenian Union Catholics), Yazidis, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Molokans, Mormons, Adventists, Pentecostals, Jews and Baha’i.²⁹ According to an International Republican Institute (IRI) poll released in 2018, 94 per cent of the country’s population identifies as Armenian Apostolic, 2 per cent as Catholic (includes all rites), 3 per cent as other

²⁴ See *ibid.*

²⁵ ‘Republic of Armenia National Security Strategy (approved at the session of National Security Council at the RA President office on 26 January 2007)’, http://www.mfa.am/u_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf (accessed: 14 Apr. 2021).

²⁶ ‘What will be new National Security Strategy of Armenia?’, *NEWS.am*, 26 July 2019, <https://news.am/eng/news/525880.html> (accessed: 1 Oct. 2021).

²⁷ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia. A Resilient Armenia in a Changing World, July 2020, <https://www.gov.am/en/National-Security-Strategy/> (accessed: 1 Oct. 2021).

²⁸ ‘Caucasus Barometer 2015 regional dataset’, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2015am/RELIGION/> (accessed: 1 Apr. 2021).

²⁹ Curanović, ‘Rosyjsko-kauskaskie sąsiedztwo’, p. 380.

religions, and 1 per cent identify as non-believers. According to members of the Jewish community, there are approximately 800 to 1,000 Jews in the country.³⁰

It is assumed that various churches, religious groups or new religious movements of *New Age* provenance began their activities in the former communist times after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, taking advantage of the spiritual void that emerged then. But in Armenia, this started after the deadly earthquake which destroyed the country in 1988. The circumstances of the earthquake allowed various religious associations and movements to gain supporters. This was facilitated by the terrible material situation of many people grieving the loss of their nearest and dearest and losing hope for a better future.³¹ The new religious movements used this situation to attract their future members with visions of satisfying a wide range of their needs (material, social, emotional). They present themselves as the only community that can guarantee security.³² The rapid quantitative growth of the sects is also determined by recruitment techniques based on psychological manipulation and indoctrination. Research shows that psychological manipulation is usually used with people who can provide the sect with precious resources (especially young people with financial means).³³ The activity of new religious movements can be observed also on the basis of their websites. The number of online churches grows as their preaching is connected with modern technologies. In Armenia, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints³⁴ and the Jehovah's Witnesses³⁵ have perfectly developed websites that meet all the requirements of modern times. One can find information on the organisation of the Church, principles of faith, doctrine, and history, all presented in a matter-of-fact, specific, and concise way. The education of the congregation and the humanitarian activity play a vital role. Having learnt the content uploaded on the Mormon or the Jehovah's Witnesses' websites, we can create their picture as friendly communities whose teaching, moral principles or ceremonies do not differ from the teaching of the Catholic Church or AAC, and all their initiatives are aimed at serving people and helping them reach happiness and salvation. What is important is the fact that some information has been omitted – for example, in the case of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, there are two contradictory principles which have not been verified – the obligation to care

³⁰ '2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Armenia', Office of International Religious Freedom, 10 July 2020, US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/armenia> (accessed: 11 Dec. 2021).

³¹ А. Бегларян, 'Секты в Армении: Разрушение "верой"', *Ереванский геополитический клуб*, 11 March 2016, <http://geoclub.info/sekty-v-armenii-razrushenie-veroj/> (accessed: 20 Apr. 2021).

³² More on motivation, see M. Wojtkowiak, 'Sekta jako środowisko realizacji potrzeb podmiotowych i społecznych', *Zeszyty Wszelchnicy Świętokrzyskiej*, no. 19 (2004), 153–62.

³³ H. Grzymała-Moszczyńska, *Religia a kultura. Wybrane zagadnienia z kulturowej psychologii religii* (Kraków, 2004), p. 133.

³⁴ More on this at : <https://www.mormon.am>; <http://www.mormonnews.am/>.

³⁵ More on this at: <https://www.jw.org/hy/>.

for one's well-being and to observe the rule of self-sufficiency and the declaration to provide financial assistance to members of the community who are in a crisis.

It is absolutely essential to take into account historical, cultural and political factors while analysing the activities of sects in various countries.

Along with religious freedom and the appearance of competitive religious groups, intense xenophobia was revealed in Armenian society. This is justified by the common belief that "Armenians have been born into Christianity".³⁶ The Church propagates the formula: "To be an Armenian is to be a Christian, and this means to be faithful to the Armenian Apostolic Church".³⁷ In the questionnaire survey conducted in Armenia in 2007, most respondents expressed their belief that "sect members" are the cause of all social, political and cultural problems in the country.³⁸ In the research conducted in 2015 (World Values Survey), 56.6 per cent of the questioned 1100 Armenian citizens showed intolerance to religious minorities.³⁹ New religious movements that appeared in Armenia were named sects – *aghand*, and their followers – *havatats'yal* (believers⁴⁰).⁴¹

For a long time, organisations protecting human rights classified the Republic of Armenia as one of the most discriminating to the country regarding religious freedom. The report published in 2011 by the US Department of State on freedom of religion shows that the government of Armenia generally did not enforce the official restrictions concerning freedom of religion. Some abuses and signs of discrimination on the societal side were reported concerning belongingness, beliefs or religious practices.⁴² According to the Religion and State (RAS) project implemented by Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel, in a 2014 study on state discrimination against religious minorities, Armenia was ranked 18th among 253 countries surveyed, putting it at the top.⁴³ Recently, the situation has improved significantly. However, some observers claim that the Armenian society still demonstrates a negative attitude toward all religious minorities, which is a manifestation of the

³⁶ Quoted after Siekierski, 'Współczesny dyskurs', p. 251.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 252; H. Hovhannisyan, 'The Contemporary Problems of Armenianness in the Religious Dimension', *21st Century*, no. 1(11) (2012), 25, 35.

³⁸ И.В. Меликян, Е. Мкртчян, 'Республика Армения. Религия', *Центральная Евразия. Аналитический ежегодник* (2007), <http://www.ca-c.org/annual/2007/09.shtml> (accessed: 1 Apr. 2021).

³⁹ М. Григорян, 'Армения: Церковь и государство объединили усилия против западных протестантов?', *Eurasianet*, 30 Nov. 2015, <http://russian.eurasianet.org/node/62681> (accessed: 8 July 2021).

⁴⁰ There has been the identification: believers = sect members, whereas people devoted to God are called in Armenian language *astvatsapasht* (pious), *havatov* (faithful), *surb* (saint).

⁴¹ Y. Antonyan, 'Religiosity and religious identity in Armenia: Some current models and developments', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*, vol. 56 (2011), 320.

⁴² 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2011: Armenia', United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, pp. 3–4, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/192993.pdf> (accessed: 18 Apr. 2021).

⁴³ 'Armenia', the Arda – Association of Religion Data Archives, https://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_12_1.asp (accessed: 1 Oct. 2021).

generally expressed “fear of strangers”. The media also contributed to this attitude, as their publications and programs also label churches and religious groups other than AAC as “sects”.

The fear of religious minorities and, most of all, the aversion to various “sects” led to the establishment of the Centre for Aid and Rehabilitation to the Victims of Destructive Cults (CARVDC), headed by Aleksandr Amaryan.⁴⁴ In Europe in 1993, the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism – FECRIS – was opened in Paris. The federation is a forum of European initiatives counteracting adverse movements.⁴⁵

According to the data from April 2017, over 65 religious organisations operate in Armenia, of which 54 are “sects”, and an additional two hundred operate in a hidden form through biological revival, sports, culture clubs, as well as social and non-governmental organisations.⁴⁶ One of the most disturbing methods of recruiting young people is by promising them the possibility of going to the USA and paying for their further education there.⁴⁷ According to Aleksandr Amaryan, the above clubs are visited by 300 to 350 thousand citizens, which accounts for 10–15 per cent of the country’s population.⁴⁸ The above data, however, is inflated, as it also includes Catholics, Orthodox Christians of Greek and Russian Church, the Yazidis – and, as we have already mentioned, AAC treats all other churches and religious associations as “sects”.

The Armenians feel threatened seeing how quickly the sects gain new followers. They have supporters in practically every larger city and in many rural areas. The territories where 30 per cent of the population is involved in a sect’s activities are known as “lost cities”. Such cities include Charentsavan, dominated by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Mormons, the Pentecostals or the “Word of Life”. Other endangered cities include Vanadzor, Stepanavan, Ashtarak and Artashat. The capital city – Yerevan, is where all “sects” observed in Armenia operate. Experts estimate that every year, from five to seven thousand citizens join various religious movements,⁴⁹ which is very disturbing for such a small country as Armenia (nearly

⁴⁴ ‘В Армении обеспокоены нарастающей активностью сект’, *Pravoslavie.ru*, 12 May 2012, <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/53478.html> (accessed: 16 Apr. 2021).

⁴⁵ See www.fecris.org.

⁴⁶ ‘Бороться с сектами в Армении нужно законодательными механизмами – эксперт’, *АМИ Новости-Армения*, 20 Apr. 2017, <http://newsarmenia.am/news/society/borotsya-s-sektami-v-armenii-nuzhno-zakonodatelnyimi-mekhanizmami-ekspert/> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2019); Бегларян, ‘Секты в Армении: Разрушение “верой”’.

⁴⁷ K. Hairabedian, Y. Hairabedian, ‘Wolves among us’, http://www.armenianchurchlibrary.com/files/wolves_among_us_frkrikorandyeghiahairabedian.pdf (accessed: 1 July 2021).

⁴⁸ Бегларян, ‘Секты в Армении: Разрушение “верой”’.

⁴⁹ А. Гукасян, ‘НКО и религиозные секты в Армении и практика законодательного регулирования их деятельности’, *kavkazoved.info*, 21 July 2017, <http://www.kavkazoved.info/news/2017/07/21/nko-i-religioznye-sekty-v-armenii-i-praktika-zakonodatelnogo-regulirovaniya-ih-deyatelnosti.html> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2021).

three million citizens). Experts claim that one of the reasons for this interest in “sects” is poor knowledge of their own religion, for which the “Soviet times” are largely to blame.⁵⁰ There have been proposals to create some centres in the most threatened areas, where laity and AAC priests would cooperate to protect the faith.⁵¹ For a large group of Armenian citizens, AAC is too old-fashioned (it does not catch up with the ever-changing world) and frequently disgraced – the best example was the July protests in Armenia against the Catholicos Karekin II.⁵²

The most active “sects” operating in Armenia include the Jehovah’s Witnesses, “The Word of Life”, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) or the Pentecostals. According to CARVDC data, “sects” penetrated all spheres of life – from business to politics. They are involved in network marketing, publishing and educational activities, construction or communication. They are financed from abroad – annually, they receive around half a billion US dollars – and there is no possibility of checking what they allocate this money for.⁵³ For example, the Armenian Evangelical Church alone receives three million US dollars for charity aid for Armenia (and an additional two million US dollars for Nagorno-Karabakh). However, out of this sum, only expenses for the amount of 800 thousand dollars could be documented. The government of the Republic of Armenia does not have any information on what purposes this huge amount of money is spent. According to CARVDC head Aleksandr Amaryan, Armenia is used as a country where money is laundered.⁵⁴

It is the West, and especially the USA, which is deeply interested in the development of “sects” and religious associations in post-soviet countries. They use the necessity to adjust to European standards (freedom of religion, freedom of opinion), and if a country does not adjust, it lands on the list of countries with religious discrimination.⁵⁵

Researchers dealing with the issue of “sects” in post-soviet countries point at the participation of sect members in colour revolutions (in Georgia and Ukraine), as well as at attempts at using them during the presidential election in Armenia in 2008.⁵⁶ The riots in March 2008, in which over twenty people died,⁵⁷ led to the

⁵⁰ ‘Если в семье один мормон, другой – “свидетель Иеговы”, представляете, что там творится?! – эксперт’, *Tert.am*, 30 March 2012, <http://www.tert.am/ru/news/2012/03/30/charencavan/471071> (accessed: 18 Apr. 2021).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² The connection between the increasingly compromised AAC and the outflow of the believers to sects is also perceived by Armenia’s neighbours, see R. Shirinov, ‘Armenians prefer sects to Church’, *Azernews*, 21 Dec. 2016, <https://www.azernews.az/aggression/106799> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2021).

⁵³ Бегларян, ‘Секты в Армении: Разрушение “верой”’.

⁵⁴ ‘Религиозные секты в Армении заняты отмыванием денег – эксперт’, *REGNUM*, 6 Feb. 2014, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1763640.html> (accessed: 18 Sep. 2021).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Peace protests against rigged presidential elections met brutal interventions of the police and special forces.

regulation issued by the authorities, forbidding the rental of hotels and sports halls to religious associations and non-governmental organisations for their meetings.⁵⁸ Also, the ties between particular politicians and new religious movements are analysed. Such relations can be found, among others, in Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia. It is emphasised that President Levon Ter-Petrosyan was a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The participation of the “sects” was also observed in the events of the Velvet Revolution, which took place in Armenia in April 2018. Some traditional and social media published comments that Nikol Pashinyan enjoyed the support of the Word of Life “sect” (which belongs to the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement). What is important is that the movement is one of the biggest communities in the post-soviet space. Apparently, its leader, pastor Arthur Simonyan, was to give his support to Pashinyan and to build an atmosphere of solidarity with him. It was pointed out that just like in Pashinyan’s speeches, his passionate performances were devoted to fighting corruption. One could find many online interviews with experts dealing with religious organisations and cults, who spoke about the same issue, as well as there were ties between the Word of Life and the “New Armenia, new Catholicos” movement, responsible for opposing Catholicos Karekin II and demanding his resignation. It should be assumed, however, that the allegations of the participation of the Word of Life in conducting the Velvet Revolution and in the activity aimed against Catholicos are to provoke hostility between AAC and evangelicals.⁵⁹ It should be remembered that the Word of Life has many wealthy and influential supporters and that their teaching is called “the Gospel of Wealth”.⁶⁰ It is widely believed that private individuals associated with the previous government used various websites, controversial blogs, local troll factories, fake Facebook groups, and false stories to promote the idea that the Velvet Revolution was carried out by minority religious groups – “sects”.⁶¹

The leading advocate of the Mormons’ interests in Armenia was the minister of foreign affairs for many years (1998–2008), Vartan Oskanian, then a member of parliament connected with the opposition party Prosperous Armenia. In 2012, Armenian security services proved that his foundation, Civilitas, was used for money laundering by the Mormons and that the money from selling shares of “Huntsman Building Products” company operating in Armenia was to be donated to charities in return for payment of the tax, in fact, was transferred to Oskanian’s

⁵⁸ S. Danielyan, V. Vardanyan, and A. Avtandilyan, *Religious tolerance in Armenia* (Yerevan, 2009), p. 10, <http://www.osce.org/yerevan/74894> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2021).

⁵⁹ Р. Лункин, ‘Позиция протестантских церквей во время политического кризиса в Армении’, *Научно-аналитический вестник ИЕ РАН*, no. 6 (2018), 182–87.

⁶⁰ ‘Секты в Армении формируют электорат, влияют на прессу и идут во власть: интервью иерея Есаи Артепяна’, *REGNUM*, 6 Oct. 2011, <https://regnum.ru/news/1453116.html> (accessed: 18 Apr. 2021).

⁶¹ ‘2019 Report on International Religious Freedom’.

account.⁶² There were some allegations that this money was to finance the election campaign of Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the Prosperous Armenia party.⁶³ Its confirmation was to be an agreement concluded on 30 January 2013 (a few weeks before the presidential election) between Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisyan and the head of the Yerevan United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Karen Hillard and the US ambassador to Armenia, John A. Heffern. The agreement stipulated that by the end of March, “unprecedented” development programs for Armenia were to be signed – concerning the development of democracy and the management sector. The USAID was to pay Armenia \$32 million within five years. It is emphasised that these American investment programs are politically motivated, as the USA has no other interest in investing in the economies of post-soviet countries.⁶⁴

According to AAC representatives, the ties between the sects, the world of politics, and the media are increasingly worrying. There are ties between the “Word of Life” sect and the youth structure of the Armenian National Congress and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation.⁶⁵

The head of CARVDC, Aleksandr Amaryan, is particularly concerned by the talks that are held before parliamentary elections between leaders of some political parties – usually opposition ones – and members of “sects” (the sect leader’s decision is binding to all sect followers). He claims it is frightening to see that along with the continuous decline in the population of Armenia (due to mass emigration), the number of followers of various sects grows, and they, as voters, will soon have their representatives in the National Assembly.⁶⁶ He also points out the fact that some sects try to merge to create larger structures, and soon, there might be a sufficient number of people in the parliament to create a strong interest group.⁶⁷

⁶² А. Араратян, ‘Роберт Кочарян и “грязные” деньги “Хантсман интернешнл”, пожертвованные фонду Civilitas’, *Первый армянский информационный*, 14 June 2012, <http://ru.1in.am/18514.html?fullsite> (accessed: 11 Apr. 2021).

⁶³ ‘Иностранные секты как фактор дестабилизации Закавказья’, *POLITUS.RU*, 14 May 2015, <http://politus.ru/v-mire/223-inostrannye-sekty-kak-faktor-destabilizacii-zakavkaza.html> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2020); ‘Мормоны профинансировали предвыборную кампанию партии “Прцветающая Армения”? – газета’, *REGNUM*, 13 June 2012, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1541342.html> (accessed: 11 Apr. 2021).

⁶⁴ ‘Иностранные секты как фактор’.

⁶⁵ ‘Секты в Армении формируют электорат’.

⁶⁶ ‘Секты активнее привлекают молодежь в свои ряды’, *Еркрасас*, 9 Nov. 2017, <http://www.yerkramas.org/article/127494/sekty-aktivnee-zavlekeyut-molodezh-v-svoi-ryady> (accessed: 1 May 2021); ‘Религиозные организации могут оказать серьезное влияние на внутреннюю политику Армении’, *Еркрасас*, 13 Feb. 2018, <http://www.yerkramas.org/article/131460/religioznye-organizacii-mogut-okazat-serieznoe-vliyanie-na-vnutrennyuyu-politiku-armenii> (accessed: 10 May 2021).

⁶⁷ More on religious communities as interest groups, see M. Marczevska-Rytko, ‘Wspólnoty religijne jako grupy interesu’, in: *Grupy interesu. Teorie i działania*, ed. Z. Machelski, L. Rubisza (Toruń, 2003), pp. 288–309.

Particularly worrying is the “outflow” of young AAC members to “sects”, it is among the youth that “sects” are particularly active. Over two thousand young people are among followers of the “Word of Life” sect (a faction of Protestantism). Young people are drawn into the sect thanks to its attractive offer directed at them – for example, the organisation of concerts of famous rock bands, summer camps, projects of mobilisation of the youth and youth parties. In rural areas, the youth receive clothes and everyday use items, and some events and games are organised for them. The “Zoom” project, implemented by the Word of Life since 2014, has been directed at the rural youth.⁶⁸ The “sect” is very popular in Russia, where it is perceived as leading very expansive activities. As it uses occultist methods in its meetings, as well as various means of controlling minds and mass persuasion, it is believed to be particularly dangerous to people, the society and the state.⁶⁹

According to Vardapet Komitas Hownanyan, head of the Centre of Children and Youth at Holy Etchmiadzin, the most dangerous sects are believed to be Family, known as Christian Mission, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons.⁷⁰ According to AAC priests and the head of CARVDC, the Mormons’ goal is to conduct American intelligence activities. According to them, in 2011, 70 US citizens were among the Mormons in Armenia. They learn the Armenian language, learn the culture and customs of the Armenians, and, following a two-year internship, they return to their country to start working in special services. The list of Mormon leaders in Armenia includes staff from the US embassy. Aleksandr Amaryan also pointed out that the biggest communities of the Mormons are located near the state borders (for example, Artashat, which is 3.5 kilometres east of the Aras River, which constitutes a border with Turkey) and in places where army bases are located (Armenian and Russian).⁷¹ The Mormons have eight large information centres in the territory of Armenia, of which five are located in Yerevan. Researchers observe their interest in genealogical research on Armenians living both in the country and in the diaspora. The data are kept in the Mormon archives in Granite Mountain in Utah. The American intelligence actively uses this genealogy database.⁷²

⁶⁸ А. Бегларян, ‘Секты в Армении: вербовка молодежи’, *Ереванский геополитический клуб*, 20 March 2016, <http://geoclub.info/sekty-v-armenii-verbovka-molodezhi/> (accessed: 18 Sep. 2021).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ А. Бегларян, ‘Разврат под прикрытием веры’, *Голос Армении*, 26 Oct. 2013, <http://www.golosarmenii.am/article/20473/razvrat-pod-prikrytiem-very> (accessed: 18 Apr. 2021).

⁷¹ ‘Армении угрожают мормоны-розведчики и депутаты-сектанты’, *AYSOR*, 27 May 2011, <https://www.aysor.am/ru/news/2011/05/27/mormon/290431> (accessed: 11 Apr. 2021).

⁷² М. Барсесян, ‘Чем на самом деле занимаются мормоны в Армении?’, *Еркрас*, 18 Feb. 2012, <http://www.yerkramas.org/article/28176/chem-na-samom-dele-zanimayutsya-mormony-v-armenii> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2021); А. Никишин, ‘Война против России перешла на новый уровень’, *Русская народная линия-информационно-аналитическая служба*, 1 March 2017, http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2017/03/01/vojna_protiv_rossii_pereshla_na_novuyj_uroven (accessed: 1 Aug. 2020); Арапатьян, ‘Роберт Кочарян’.

At the end of 2013, Armenia was appalled by the information on the US ambassador, John A. Heffern's visit to one of Yerevan's kindergartens. The visit was combined with a charity event organised by the Mormons, during which they handed out the CDs and books published by them.⁷³

The Mormons were promoted in Armenia by one of their American leaders, John Huntsman. In 1988, he donated 18 million dollars to the earthquake victims, for which he was later awarded by President Robert Kocharyan with one of the most prestigious state awards, the Order of Saint Mesrop Mashtots. Huntsman is a patron of a school and a street in Gyumri. In 1990, Huntsman established "Huntsman Building Products" in Yerevan, a company that produces roof and wall tiles. His influence might have allowed the Mormons to obtain official registration as early as 1992. His business flourished best during the presidency of Kocharyan – he received permission to open healthcare and education centres in Armenia. When, in 2005, the president visited the Armenian diaspora in Los Angeles, he stayed in Huntsman's house in Utah for a few days. What was particularly outrageous was that he went there without any accompanying people.⁷⁴

The activities aimed against the sects are eagerly joined by AAC priests, who lead people's protests against members of other religious associations. This is particularly visible in smaller towns.⁷⁵ AAC also publishes information materials and brochures aimed at protecting the Armenians against the influence of "sects". One of them, titled *Wolves Among Us*, begins with the statement that the contemporary world is a battlefield and the war is waged for people's minds and hearts. The brochure describes the activities and the doctrines of the best-established "sects" operating in Armenia, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the Moon sect, transcendental eastern meditations, and Hare Krishna. The brochure also demonstrates the differences between them and the faith and the doctrine of AAC.⁷⁶ Researchers point out that both the activity of the "sects" and the "tolerance play" used by the West are aimed at attacking AAC – "the bastion maintaining national identity" and depriving it of its status as the national church.⁷⁷ AAC insists on attracting the youth to help it fight the "sects". On 9 September 2013, at a press conference, the AAC priest Komytas Hovnanyan and the leader of the Great League of the Youth spoke against religious minorities, claiming that there are over 215 "sects" in Armenia and that they obtain money from abroad to destroy Armenia.⁷⁸

⁷³ 'Иностраннные секты как фактор'.

⁷⁴ Араратян, 'Роберт Кочарян'.

⁷⁵ 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2011: Armenia'.

⁷⁶ See Hairabedian, Hairabedian, 'Wolves among us'.

⁷⁷ Бегларян, 'Секты в Армении: Разрушение "верой"'.

⁷⁸ 'Armenia 2013', International Religious Freedom Report, United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, p. 6, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/222399.pdf> (accessed: 18 Apr. 2021).

The issue of religious minorities is also used in political fights – the opposition criticises the political role and status of AAC. This criticism usually intensifies in the period before the election. Before the parliament election in 2012, the leader of the governing Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) stated publicly that “sects” are more dangerous to Armenia than the threat of war with Azerbaijan. Another member of parliament, Hovhannes Sahakyan, emphasised that the Jehovah’s Witnesses use the most destructive policy for Armenia. Another MP, Mkrtich Minasyan, even demanded that their activity be banned. Secretary of the Armenian Security Council, Artur Baghdasaryan, announced that an interdepartmental commission would be established to work on the strategy of fighting the “sects”.⁷⁹ The leader of the parliament faction of RPA, Vahram Baghdasaryan, confirmed that through the “sects” and “under the disguise” of fighting for democracy, large sums of money are sent from the West. On 7 August, one of the prominent RPA representatives demanded that the parliament should engage state television and radio in the fight with the “sects”. The Armenia Public TV and Radio Council expressed its readiness to develop a special program. This was strongly criticised by the leader of the Helsinki Committee in Armenia, Avetic Ishkhanyan.⁸⁰ Even before this, many TV stations broadcasted current affairs programs in which AAC representatives and other guests defined members of national and religious minorities as enemies of the country and national unity.⁸¹ More clerics are publishing articles on the websites of both the official AAC and individual dioceses, calling the followers of other religions “sectarians” and stressing the threat to Armenian society from them. On November 26, an AAC priest published an article entitled “Sects” on the website of one of the churches of the Araratian Pontifical Diocese, where he discussed several religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Protestants, and others, referring to them as “sects”. According to the priest, “Sectarian organisations hurt our nation by creating divisions among our people, removing it from our Holy Church and the true faith of our ancestors”.⁸² In November 2019, an AAC priest published an article on an AAC website where he discussed The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Protestants, and others, referring to them as “sects.” He stated, “Sectarian organisations hurt our nation by creating divisions among our people, removing it from our Holy Church and the true faith of our ancestors”.⁸³ The accusation made in September 2018 by an AAC cleric who blamed the “evangelical sect” for the country’s loss of statehood in the past and

⁷⁹ ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2011: Armenia’.

⁸⁰ Григорян, ‘Армения: Церковь и государство’.

⁸¹ ‘Report on International Religious Freedom: Armenia’, United States Department of State, 17 Nov. 2010, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148908.html> (accessed: 5 Apr. 2021).

⁸² ‘2019 Report on International Religious Freedom’.

⁸³ Ibid.

accused it of collaborating with the country's historical enemy, the Turks and stated that it should be considered very dangerous for social security. This cleric also urged youth in schools not to attend Sunday schools organised by evangelical Christian churches.⁸⁴

The activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses were the subject of various "round table" discussions devoted to threats to the national security of Armenia.⁸⁵ At the meeting in September 2011, it was observed that under the disguise of their preaching, the Jehovah's Witnesses aimed to gain political influence and began to file petitions to government agencies and TV companies. It was feared that in the forthcoming parliament election in 2012, they could become politically involved, which is highly likely if we take into account the participation of various "sects" in "colour revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine. The Jehovah's Witnesses are also dangerous because they enjoy the support of the "Western forces" and organisations protecting Human Rights.⁸⁶ On 2 October 2014, a round table was held in Yerevan. The subject of its talks was "the role of sects in geopolitical, cultural and political processes". We could conclude from the speeches of experts from Armenia, Ukraine and Serbia that they blame the West and the United States for the popularity of "sects" in their countries and that they finance them to destroy all orthodox and Christian churches which preserve national identity. The Armenian representatives claimed that the American promotion of "sects"⁸⁷ is aimed at destabilising the geopolitical situation in regions close to Russia.⁸⁸ The AAC uses the American embassy's activities to spread religious tolerance as confirmation of the thesis of the invasion of religious sects instilled and promoted in Armenia by the West. The embassy conducts its activities in this direction both through the social networks of Facebook and Twitter, as well as field activities. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with minority religious groups, including evangelical Christians and other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ More on their activities, see R. Król-Mazur, 'Świadkowie Jehowy jako najbardziej zwalczana sekta w Armenii', *Wschodnioznawstwo*, vol. 10 (2016), 101–17.

⁸⁶ 'Секты угрожают национальной безопасности Армении. Считают участники круглого стола "ГА"', *BlogNews*, 30 May 2013, <https://blognews.am/rus/news/57597/sektiy-ugrozhayut-nacionalnoiy-bezopasnosti-armenii.html> (accessed: 16 Apr. 2021).

⁸⁷ Specialists from Criminal Information Centre of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs at the beginning of the 21st century confirmed that the invasion of foreign sects and cults was strictly planned and was one of the elements of the psychological war with Russia, aimed at destabilising the country. In 1997, Boris Yeltsin approved the national security doctrine in which the activities of sects was perceived as a threat to national security; G. Górny, 'Nowe kulty i sekty w świecie postsowieckim', *Teologia Polityczna*, vol. 2 (2004/2005), 50–56 (p. 56).

⁸⁸ In April 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation declared the Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist organization and forbade their activities in the territory of the country; 'Сąd najwyższy Rosji uznał Świadków Jehowy za organizację ekstremistyczną', *Sputnik*, 20 Apr. 2017, <https://pl.sputniknews.com/swiat/201704205295244-sad-najwyzszy-rosji-swiadkowie-jehowy/> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2021).

Jesus Christ, Yezidis, the Jewish community, Apostolic Assyrians, Pentecostals, and Baha'is, as well as with individual Muslims, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country.⁸⁹ The head of the Armenian Parent Committee, Arman Boshyan, confirmed what was frequently manifested in the statements of experts, AAC representatives and some politicians, that in Armenia, “sects” operate “in the disguise of various European organisations dealing with human rights”.⁹⁰

Experts also examine the ties between the sects and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). There are around 4 thousand of them in Armenia. Many of them have the same source of financing as the “sects” and actively defend religious minorities, for example, Eurasia Cooperation, Open Society Support Fund, Helsinki Cuvuc Assembly, Non-Governmental Humanitarian Organization “New Generation”, Society Without Violence, Public Information and Need of Knowledge (PINK). Many of them coordinate their actions with the US Department of State. There is an investigation into ties between one NGO and the attack of “Daredevils from Sasun” on the police station in Erebuni (a district of Yerevan) and the riots that followed the attack in July 2016.⁹¹

The Armenians’ fears concerning the activities of non-governmental organisations in Armenia were confirmed on 26 February 2015 in an interview given by Paul Craig Roberts, a well-known American economist and political scientist, to the Yerevan geopolitical club. Roberts stated that, especially after Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union, “the reason why America finances non-governmental organisations is to have groups which can be sent to the streets to provoke riots and to have politicians who will serve Washington and the US aims at organising the same coup in Armenia as the one in Ukraine”.⁹²

Amaryan even ventured to say that some higher-level officials in Armenia accept bribes from the USA to promote development and freedom of activity for religious “sects” in Armenia.⁹³ He demanded some legal solutions which would prevent the financing of “sects” from abroad since out of 54 “sects” operating in Armenia, 53 are financed in this way.⁹⁴

Some link the activities of sects to the tragic events of January 2015, which took place in Gyumri. Valeriy Piermyakov, a soldier of the 102nd military base located there, who killed an Armenian family consisting of seven people, is the son of the leader of the charismatic sect “Faith, Hope, Love”, which operates in Russia. Amaryan

⁸⁹ ‘2019 Report on International Religious Freedom’.

⁹⁰ ‘Деятельность иностранных НПО и религиозных сект в Армении должна быть запрещена – эксперты’, *Livejournal*, 22 X 2014, <http://armenian-church.livejournal.com/23423.html> (accessed: 1 Apr. 2021).

⁹¹ Гукасян, ‘НКО и религиозные секты в Армении’.

⁹² П.К. Робертс, ‘В Армении готовится переворот’, *Ереванский геополитический клуб*, 26 Feb. 2015, <http://geoclub.info/pol-krejk-roberts-v-armenii-gotovitsya/> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2021).

⁹³ ‘Иностранные секты как фактор’.

⁹⁴ ‘Бороться с сектами в Армении’.

implies that these events were inspired by the West, which aims at destabilising the situation in the post-soviet countries through the activities of the “sects” – following the principle – “if we cannot control the government, we need to wreak havoc”. As a result of these events, huge anti-Russian riots broke out in Gyumri and Yerevan – and protesters demanded the closing down of the Russian base. Also, some groups of Ukrainian “Maidan activists” wanted to get to Gyumri, calling for revolution in Armenia – they were deported from the country by Armenian security forces. The same slogans appeared on various social media portals.⁹⁵ The tragedy provoked a nationwide debate on the legitimacy of the Russian troops in Armenia and the format of relations between Armenia and the Russian Federation. The head of the Armenian Center for National and Strategic Studies, Manvel Sargsyan, confirmed that the tragic events in Gyumri had a political background.⁹⁶

Armenia’s National Security Service conducts surveillance of representatives of other religions. In 2017, they illegally wiretapped Edward Manasyan, a prominent member of the Baha’i community. The information collected in his home and the community’s office served as the basis for his arrest and imprisonment for eight months (he was eventually released on bail). According to documents provided to the Baha’i community, surveillance permits were approved based on claims that Manasyan was the head of a “religio-sectarian” organisation and was “hunting souls”, but no charges were filed on that basis.⁹⁷

Abstract

As the research conducted all over the world proved, the activity of sects/new religious movements constitutes a serious threat to family, society⁹⁸ and state institutions. Especially alarming are the ties between the sects and the world of politics. Some leaders of the new religious movements (sects), in spite of their declaration of political neutrality, in reality, gain benefits from their privileged position in relations with the political and economic world. They are either partners or financial representatives of politicians, and they also gain personal benefits connected with protection from influential people. This is in return for the power of their influence over people and their contribution to establishing or legitimizing political power by using fragments of the Bible referring to this issue.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ ‘Иностраннные секты как фактор’.

⁹⁶ Д. Степанян, ‘Взгляд из Еревана: Валерий Пермяков имеет не самое принципиальное отношение к гюмрийской трагедии’, *ArmInfo*, 15 Jan. 2015, <http://www.arminfo.info/index.cfm?objectid=B5D203D0-9C94-11E4-A3930EB7C0D21663> (accessed: 1 Jan. 2021).

⁹⁷ ‘2019 Report on International Religious Freedom’.

⁹⁸ At the beginning of 1990s, there were 40 suicides per year in Armenia, now the number of suicides has grown to 800 per year, of which 350 have religious background (connection with sects); Л. Мшецян, ‘Под колпаком’, *Еркрас*, 2 March 2017, <http://www.yerkramas.org/article/116917/pod-kolpakom> (accessed: 1 July 2021).

⁹⁹ This was noticed, among others, by Willy Musitu Lufungula and Willy Kitoko Matumona while conducting their research in Africa, see ‘Nowe ruchy religijne a tożsamość kulturowa’, *Dialogi Polityczne. Polityka. Filozofia. Społeczeństwo. Prawo*, no. 9 (2008), 232.

The experience of Armenia confirms the thesis put forward by Meredith B. McGuire that religious movements are potential sources of social transformation. In some social situations, religion possesses significant potential for action aimed at change. "The theories of interest explain that religion often supports interests of dominant social classes, legitimizing their dominance, socializing believers to subordinate to it and using religious means of social control [...] religious groups, leaders, ideas and images may encourage activity aimed at change".¹⁰⁰ This is particularly applicable in the Caucasus, where, as Wojciech Górecki observes – "there are practically no atheists. Even if someone declares to be an atheist, they usually mean the lack of institutional ties with religion. Atheism is considered to be a kind of a disease, similar to colour blindness: it is the inability to perceive something obvious".¹⁰¹ As a result of the complicated geopolitical situation and serious economic and emigration problems, Armenia has become an attractive area where religious "sects" ("imported from the West") can develop their activity. This is also encouraged by progressing globalization. Corruption, so typical to former soviet republics, helps religious sects to penetrate the world of politics and business. International ties of the "sects" and their financing (mostly illegal) from the West constitute a serious threat to the internal security of Armenia – one could quote here examples of anti-government demonstrations following the 2008 election or everlasting disputes over the amendments to the *Act on Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations*. Recent accusations against Word of Life of supporting the Velvet Revolution and the "New Armenia, New Catholics" movement demonstrate that the Armenians believe that riots, protests and destabilization of the situation in the country are caused by religious "sects" usually financed by other countries. Many opinions expressed in the media are nothing but gossip, which only exacerbates the relations between AAC and other churches and religious associations. AAC, whose position in the state has been historically and legally confirmed, feels threatened by the inflow of new religious movements (usually well supported financially by foreign countries) to Armenia, as they preach values that are foreign to Armenian culture, nation and religion. AAC feels obliged to guard the cultural and social security. The identification of AAC and the Armenian nation and state does not encourage religious tolerance. In its rhetoric and sometimes in its behaviour (individual activity of some priests), stopping at nothing – for example, by calling all other Churches and religious associations "sects" – the Church exacerbates the situation in Armenian society. Its activity in this field is perceived outside as religious nationalism. AAC identifies the whole evil which came to Armenia with the West and fights other religious associations as foreign to the Eastern Church – which puts it in a position of an ally to the Russian Orthodox Church. This constitutes one more confirmation of the strong Russian influence on Armenia. The speed of changes taking place in the contemporary world, the globalization processes, and maybe the will of the Armenian society, which, as the events of the Velvet Revolution showed, believed that it could mobilize and affect events, may contribute to increased unrest in the country, unrest with a religious background. As a result we should expect that discussion and research on security will explain the undergoing changes and predict future threats, referring thus to the occurring cultural and demographic transformations and growing social inequalities.

¹⁰⁰ M.B. McGuire, *Religia w kontekście społecznym*, transl. S. Burdziej (Kraków, 2012), p. 331.

¹⁰¹ W. Górecki, 'Gwiazdozbiór Kaukazu', in: P. Brysacz, *Patrząc na wschód. Przestrzeń, człowiek, mistycyzm* (Białystok, 2013), pp. 182–83.

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