
CHURCH OF GEORGIAN-ARMENIAN DISCORD

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On Sunday evening, the situation in the Kumurdo village of the Akhalkalaki district has somewhat stabilized after the turbulent events, which started on Saturday, when local Armenians broke into the courtyard of the nearly destroyed 10th century church, trying to prevent the employees of Georgia's Ministry of Culture from starting restoration work. First, the security at the object, which is a valuable heritage site of the country, kept the troublemakers from coming, but they broke into the territory, breaking the fence, and then resisted the police, throwing atones at the police cars. They also threw stones at special forces, which arrived at the scene following the order of the Interior Minister Georgy Mgebrishvili. The minister himself also flew to Kumurdo, held a meeting with concerned people, asked them not to break the law and promised to settle up the matter.

Armenian villagers complained that the restorers "do not respect the burial places of Armenians in the church yard." However, a source in Georgia's Ministry of Culture told the Vestnik Kavkaza that statements about the graves excavated by Georgian restorers are "malicious lies". Restorers do not dig out, they are just trying to restore the church and the wall inscriptions. The Ministry of Internal Affairs opened criminal files on several articles of the country's Criminal Code: "hooliganism", "property damage" and "disobeying police orders." The Caucasus scholar Mamuka Areshidze told Vestnik Kavkaza about the Kumurdo church and the acuteness of this problem for the Georgian-Armenian relations.

Q: Nothing of this kind had occurred in the past 25 years, that is, after gaining independence by Georgia and Armenia - there were disputes, but not clashes, especially with the involvement of special forces. Were you surprised by what happened in Kumurdo?

A: I wasn't surprised. This is a very old story. Armenians have claimed for decades that the Kumurdo church is an Armenian cultural heritage. Back in 1987, when I was there as part of an archaeological expedition, there were similar complaints. Someone convinced local Armenians that this is an Armenian church, so restorers from Georgia's Ministry of Culture have nothing to do in Kumurdo.

Q: What is the basis of this belief?

A: Someone told them that the Georgian inscriptions in the church were written in Armenian. The ancient Georgian and Armenian alphabets look similar. Many villagers do not know how to read ancient texts, but they are convinced that these are Armenian inscriptions. It is impossible to

persuade them. That's why such a serious incident happened eventually. It must be borne in mind that only the skeleton of the wonderful Kumurdo church has reached us. However, this is a unique church with amazingly beautiful architecture. Local Armenians constantly said that Kumurdo is an Armenian, not a Georgian church, and the Tbilisi restorers came to "destroy the traces of Armenians and erase the evidence of the belonging of this cultural object to Armenians." Previously, restorers were not allowed to go there at all - only scientists from Tbilisi visited it to study wall inscriptions. The local residents threatened them, harshly said that it is the Armenian church and "others have nothing to do here", but it never actually came to fights and pelting rocks. Now the situation has changed dramatically. And for the worse - even the police and special forces were pelted with rocks.

Q: Maybe someone provokes these people?

A: Without a doubt. This issue requires serious study and attention. The village of Kumurdo is a phenomenon even for the Javakheti region, where Armenians make up the majority of the population. Even the Armenians of Javakheti think that the Kumurdo people are "problematic". Their reputation is not the best one. Kumurdo is a very criminogenic village. There are many weapons. And natives of this village, living in Moscow, for example, do not get along very well even with other representatives of the Armenian diaspora. I do not exclude that the excessive "passionarity" of the Kumurdo people is used by someone to worsen the situation and ignite the confrontation, using claims about the church. However, the Armenian Apostolic Church does not openly claim this church. For the simple reason that everyone knows perfectly well that it is a Georgian 10th century church.

In the evening, Georgian TV channels broadcast an interview with the head of the working group on the restoration of the monument, who said that the restoration work "will be continued." The church is guarded by a small police squad, while nobody's trying to prevent the restorers, but the tension remains and it has left us with an unpleasant after-taste for a long time.

Kaynak/Source: