

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**Waiting the upcoming high level negotiations**

In early April, a delegation from Armenia comprising Archbishop Pargev Martirosyan, Head of the Armenian Diocese in Nagorno-Karabakh and member of the ecclesiastic counsel, Bishop Yeznik and Professor Rafael Papyan, in charge of the department of inter-confessional relations, will travel to Georgia to discuss the problems connected to Norashen - and not only those.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tbilisi counted 29 active Armenian Churches, today a mere two are left. Eight Armenian Churches have undergone appropriation efforts and were turned into Georgian ones, in addition thereto frescos, khatshkars and all Armenian references have systematically been destroyed. The fate of five churches, including Norashen, currently lies in the hands of the Georgian patriarchate. And this is just in Tbilisi. The destruction and appropriation process of the Armenian spiritual and ecclesiastical heritage continues throughout Georgia. Many historians already refer to it as the genocide of the Armenian cultural heritage in Georgia.

The Armenian delegation furthermore intends to discuss the status of the Armenian Diocese in Georgia, an unresolved problem which affects not the Armenian Church alone, as the only religious group included in the Georgian legislative framework today, is the Georgian Orthodox Church.

A draft law is apparently in the making which will enable religious groups to register as legal persons of private law. However, the Armenian Apostolic Church can look back on a centuries old historical presence in Georgia, and declares that it has no intention of registering as a person of private law, since the Church, in essence, is of societal nature.

The Armenian Diocese in Georgia hopes that the upcoming negotiations will settle the outstanding problems, including the one connected to Norashen, the appropriation of which continues as of now, despite counter-declarations that the resolution of the question would be left to be dealt with on the highest level.

Today, construction works of a new wall around the Armenian Church Norashen were undertaken under the supervision of Georgian priest, Father Taniel (the same who destroyed in 1994 Armenian khatshkars and frescoes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the Hovnatanyan school and whose actions were labeled by the Georgian patriarch Iliad II as “his own”, while in turn Father Taniel cites orders from above). And all this only a mere hundred meters away from the administrative building of the Georgian Orthodox Church’s patriarchate.

After the meeting, the representatives of the Armenian clergy will hold a press conference, the details of which will be announced at a later time.

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