

## SAMEGRELO AND ZUGDIDI IN THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SYSTEM OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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**ABSTRACT:** *First half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is a very interesting period to study the foreign policy of Odishi Principality which had been having close relationship with Western Europe. Head of Odishi Principality, Levan II Dadiani (1611-1657) coherently pursued a European policy for 35 years supported by catholic missionaries who had arrived in Samegrelo. In Georgian historiography, there are several scientific works and researches about European catholic missionaries who carried out their activity in the late feudal age in Georgia. Great interest is taken in their life and activity today as well. These people were sent by the Pope and they were well-educated in different fields of science and art. They were writers, artists, doctors and people with secular education. Missionaries in Georgia also had the function of political emissaries. They can be considered the first political and cultural representatives of Catholic Europe. They linked the Georgian political leaders with Europe to learn about the achievements of civilized world, to request help and support and express their loyalty to the European policy. Dadiani's trade and economic project, which aimed to establish future economic ties with Europe, is linked to the concept of modernity and can be compared to the restoration of the Silk Road. The presented article shows the European foreign policy of the Odishi Principality in the first half of 17th century and the measures taken in this direction.*

**Keywords:** *Levan II Dadiani, Georgia-European relations, Vatican*

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Georgia's contacts with European countries originates from centuries past. „Close relations were established between Georgia and Greece, Pompey brought Rome to Georgia, and Christianity entered Georgia in the 1st century...“ writes the well-known lawyer in Europe, professor Mikheil Muskhelishvili in his article „Georgia and Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Four centuries ago, at the court of the great Prince of Odishi, Levan II Dadiani (1611-1657), clergymen (monks), doctor-healers, writers, and painters from Italy-one of the most educated countries in civilized Europe-gathered. According to foreign historical sources, it was Dadiani's desire to bring them to Georgia. The wise prince properly evaluated the situation. Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Moskheli M. 1953.

Georgia was facing the threat of Islam; Iran was threatening to destroy Kartli and Kakheti. The Ottoman Empire gave no respite to the western Georgian kingdoms and principalities, demanding hundreds of captives in exchange for an imaginary peace. The principality of Odishi, like the rest of the Georgian kingdoms and principalities, was trapped in complete political, economic, and cultural isolation. The educated prince of Odishi intended to break this political and economic isolation through European clergymen and missionaries and to establish connections with the advanced European world.

Using skilful diplomacy, Dadiani tried to maintain a peaceful policy with the suzerain-the Ottoman Empire. He reached out to the Ottoman Empire's relentless enemy-Persia-and established trade, economic, and political connections and tried to strengthen these relations. The foreign policy directions of Levan II Dadiani can be outlined as follows:

1. The Ottoman Empire
2. The Persian Empire
3. The Russian Empire
4. Western Europe (Italy, the Vatican).

Among the above-mentioned directions, Western Europe was focused on the development of the country and it entered under the name of Christianity and gave hopes for political, economic, and cultural development. By 1639-1640, the European missionary in Samegrelo was already well established, and was steadily conducting religious-diplomatic correspondence with Europe.

The first half of the 17th century was an exceptionally active political period not only for the Principality of Samegrelo but for the whole of Georgia, with a special emphasis on relations with Europe. The main focus of these relationships was on Samegrelo. The aggressive policy of Persia blocked this opportunity for Kartli and Kakheti. By creating a calm and stable internal environment, Levan Dadiani established favorable conditions for the development of the principality and it became a center for the development of Georgian culture-literature, history, and goldsmithing. The country became peaceful and flourished. The center of Samegrelo, Zugdidi, developed, and a new trading city, Rukhi, was established nearby, which was supposed to be included in the international transit trade network. After the collapse of the unified Georgian monarchy, the stronghold of Georgian culture-the Jvari Monastery in Jerusalem-was thoroughly renewed for the first time.

Zugdidi became a center for active connections with Europe. Italian missionaries working here left unique historical material for studying the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions of the region. It is difficult to imagine Georgian historiography without Archangelo Lambert's „Description of Samegrelo“ and „Holy Colchis“, Giuseppe Giudice's published letters about Georgia, Maria Maggio's grammar, Clemente Galano's history, Antonio Giardina's works, Don Cristoforo de Castelli's writings, and other works of the mentioned period.

The missionaries arrived in Georgia in July 1632. Soon after, they moved from Gori to Guria, and then to Samegrelo to carry out their work. Dadiani created favorable conditions for them to live and work. As mentioned, Dadiani aimed to establish connections with the Western world with their help, and several international-scale economic projects were planned that would

bring great profit to the principality. The above-mentioned individuals were Levan II Dadiani's diplomatic representatives in Italy, at the Pope's court. They kept Dadiani informed about the political processes occurring in Western Europe. He was well aware of the Pope's great influence and authority within Europe's powerful circles. While completing various tasks for Levan Dadiani, the missionaries frequently faced significant risks, as traveling abroad and fulfilling diplomatic missions was a highly dangerous task in those times.

Despite the support provided by the local authorities, it was difficult for a foreigner to come to and stay for a long time in late-feudal Samegrelo. The missionaries clearly wrote about the challenges they encountered here. Despite great obstacles, they managed to learn both Georgian and Megrelian languages and performed various jobs among the people. The Theatine monks, to whom the missionaries in Samegrelo belonged, were highly educated. With their broad spectrum of knowledge, they were clearly distinguished from the representatives of other orders. Many of them were doctors, writers, artists and the people educated in secular knowledge.

After the Reformation of the Church, the leadership of Catholic Rome paid great attention to the activities of missionaries in Eastern countries, particularly in Georgia. Special college was established in Rome to prepare the missionaries in order to educate Georgian youth. a Georgian-Italian dictionary was prepared in Rome in 1627 by the Italian Stefane Paolini and Nikifor Irbach, the ambassador of the Kartl-Kakheti king Teimuraz I. This dictionary was supposed to help missionaries coming to Georgia to learn the Georgian language. The missionaries had a great interest in our country, its culture, and its history. Accordingly, they gathered extensive information about our country, studied Georgian ecclesiastical services, hymns, and way of life, and recorded local customs, traditions, and beliefs. They often pointed out gaps and proposed ways to address them. Their uncompromising position against the slave trade is well known. The missionaries, as Catholic priests, conducted services according to Catholic rites, and in this regard, they did some propaganda, but we must not forget that they were Catholic monks and they were responsible for the propaganda of Catholicism. Their sharp remarks were sometimes beneficial for society, serving as a wake-up call.

Dadiani's pro-European political course is clearly reflected in his words spoken to Dominican Giovanni Giuliano and Luca: „I am pleased to see an Italian priest, whose nation I consider to be the most talented and educated in the world. Our ancestors always wished to see and be with the representatives of this nation.“<sup>2</sup> In 1615, he states to Jesuit priest Louis Granje that he „greatly respects the Roman Church and its head—the Pope... and as the Pope is the father of the believers, everyone should obey him.“<sup>1</sup>

It is known that the latest edition of the current constitution of Georgia includes the issue of constructing a deep-sea port in the Anaklia Special Economic Zone, which is one of the most important conditions for the country's development (Constitution of Georgia, Article 7: Paragraph 5). An interesting point is that this project is not only caused by current geopolitical necessity but also has its roots in the past.

In the early 17th century, throughout the lengthy conflicts between Persia and the Ottoman Empire, an interesting trade-economic project was developed in Persia (presumably based on joint

consultations with Europeans—specifically Italians). This project connected the Principality of Odishi with Persia and Europe, acquiring a transit function.

According to the famous Italian missionary and public figure Pietro della Valle, Persian silk could be brought to the European market without any contact with Turkey. Della Valle considered Persia's interest in avoiding Turkish transit for trade goods, and therefore did not allow Turkey to gain economic benefits from the customs duties on Persian goods. This was a highly convenient process which could be carried out in 10-20 days via the Odishi Principality and the Black Sea transport, compared to the 2 to 3 months required for transport across the Mediterranean Sea and 10 to 11 months for ocean transport<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the mentioned project, the Theatine missionary Don Giuseppe Giudice specifically states: Dadiani „always wanted to attract merchants and settle them in the principality. He was very eager to bring in merchants and trade goods from distant states... He brought one hundred Armenian and Jewish merchants to Samegrelo... He also persuaded many Turkish merchants under the same conditions”<sup>2</sup>. Dadiani also desired to bring wealthy merchants from Constantinople, whom he would require to buy silk from his principality, as well as to sell Persian goods to them.”...merchants involved in silk trading across the Black Sea would have the opportunity to obtain silk in Odishi from Persian and Armenian merchants for less than half the usual price.“ Thus, those merchants who sold goods from the prince's customs would have real profits, as well as the French who would transport the goods purchased here by sea to France“<sup>3</sup> Iranian goods could easily reach Poland via the Black Sea and the Dnieper, and from there to other European countries.

The mentioned global project for international trade was to be implemented with the involvement of Iran and Italy. The Shah was interested in the project and designated a salary of one thousand Tumans per year to Dadiani for cooperation and support. Dadiani was minting an analog of Iranian currency in the trading town of Rukhi, near Zugdidi, which was intended to facilitate trade operations. The Italian missionary and public figure Pietro Della Valle provide us with interesting information about this significant project.<sup>4</sup>

The prince highly valued the Europeans at his court. „Dadiani regarded the Patras as highly precious for his principality.“ When a foreigner visited him, he would immediately take them to meet the patras and say that he had no one better than them in his principality”<sup>5</sup>.

It is interesting to note Levan Dadiani's attempt to establish connections with the wealthy Duchy of Tuscany, which aimed to send healers and medical supplies to Samegrelo. This line of communication was to be established through missionaries, specifically Archangelo Lambert, who had returned to Italy<sup>6</sup>.

1 Kortua, Z. 2012: 59-63.

2 Giudice, G. 1964:55.

3 Giudice 1964: 59,64,55.

4 Kortua, Z. 2012:59-63.

5 Tamarashvili, M. 1902: 196

6 La gloriosa impresa, Palermo 1990; Majorana B. 1990:135.

As reflected in the numismatic materials obtained from Western Georgia, the political units of Western Georgia had active relations with countries in Europe and Asia during the first half of the 17th century. Russian ambassadors Tolochanov and Ievlev mention the European coins-Ducats and Thalers-circulating in Imereti, alongside Abazians and Halfabazians<sup>1</sup>. These coins were minted in the Principality of Samegrelo, modeled after Iranian coins. Lambert writes that the Megrelians „value foreign money more, such as Hungarian, Tsekino and Spanish reales“.<sup>2</sup>

In the first half of the 17th century, alongside other European coins (Venetian, Dutch, Austrian, Hungarian, Spanish, and others), coins from the United Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania and Brandenburg-Prussia also entered Georgia. They firmly established themselves in the monetary circulation of Georgia and facilitated international and domestic monetary transactions.”<sup>3</sup>

After the death of Levan II Dadiani, the situation in the principality changed significantly. In 1672, Joseph Maria Zampi, the Prefect of the Theatine missionaries in Samegrelo, wrote to his leadership in Rome that the king’s (prince’s. Z.K) minister, Katsia Chikovani, had seized power in Samegrelo and committed many injustices, causing hardship among the people.<sup>4</sup> Samegrelo became a target for the raids of feudals from Imereti and Abkhazia. The security system established by Levan II Dadiani collapsed. In conditions of widespread fear and anarchy, the European orientation turned out to be without a basis in reality. The Samegrelo mission of the Theatines, as the only means of connection with Europe, ceased to exist in 1701. Many of the missionaries died, while others either moved to another place or returned to their homeland.

Consequently, Levan Dadiani’s attempts to connect with Europe ended unsuccessfully. The feudal anarchy that arose in Samegrelo and the intensified pressure from mountain tribes, being at a low level of development, put the country into an unbearable social, political, and economic situation, which delayed the opportunity for connection with the progressive world for a long time.

The restoration and renewal of political and cultural links between the Principality of Samegrelo and Europe, specifically France, only became possible 150 to 200 years after the described events, during the final period of the principality’s existence.

Thus, at the present stage, when our country is on the path of political, economic, and cultural integration with Europe, it is highly relevant to study examples of the European policies of the medieval Principality of Samegrelo, which once again confirm our country’s organic and genetic connections with the advanced European world and its values.

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1 Kortua, Z. 2012: 59-63  
2 Lambert 1990:143  
3 Kebuladze, R. 1971:135  
4 Tamarashvili 1902: 204.

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