

RELIGION'S ROLE IN FOREIGN POLICY: THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND MINORITIES

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Abstract

Since its independence in 1991, the Georgian Orthodox Church has become an integral part of both the country and Georgian identity in Georgia. It is considered the most trusted institution in the country according to opinion polls today and many experts attribute this to the fact that the Georgian Orthodox Church has assumed the role of the protector of Georgian national identity throughout different periods in history (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, *The Orthodox Church in Georgia's Changing Society*, 2021) (Gegeshidze, et al., 2017). In addition to this popularity, the Georgian Orthodox Church has a special constitutional status in the country which gives several important privileges to conduct its religious and economic activities. However, this public popularity and autonomous status enjoyed by the Georgian Orthodox Church allows the Church to express its views on many political issues and involved in political agenda. In this context, this case-study aims to find out the historical significance of the GOC, why the GOC is deeply rooted in Georgian national identity, the influence of the GOC on social and political issues in the country, and finding out to which extent the GOC's views are compatible with Georgia's European reform process using qualitative research methods. To this end, the study utilizes a wide variety of primary and secondary sources to describe the phenomenon observed in Georgia. Finally, the results of this study are important in terms of understanding the church-state relations in Georgia, showing what the Church can do to protect its interests and what obstacles the Church's views can create in Georgia's European integration process.

Introduction

In recent years, Georgia has carried out important reforms within the scope of agreements with the EU such as the Association Agreement, which includes Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, and visa-liberalization and has become the leading country within the scope of Eastern partnership. With such reforms, Georgia has shown that it has both capacity and will to become a European aspirant country in a region that has been marred by post-Soviet conflicts after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, one powerful institution in Georgia remains a challenge, even though the EU has granted Georgia a European perspective and announced that the country will get an EU candidate status once it meets the necessary conditions.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has been a significant cultural and spiritual institution in Georgia, with a long and rich history dating back to the 4th century. It has played a central role in the development of Georgian identity and culture and has been a source of national unity and pride for centuries (Bogishvili, Osepashvili, Gavashelishvili, & Gugushvili, 2016, pp. 122-123). The church has also been closely tied to the political and social life of Georgia and has often wielded significant influence in the country. As an autocephalous religious institution, The Georgian Orthodox Church stands out in Georgian society and politics, as it is one of the most respected institutions in Georgia. The Church is often associated with the Georgian national identity and culture. This significant identity of the Georgian Orthodox Church comes from two main sources: History and tradition. Today the Church enjoys constitutional protection, does not pay taxes, and has a saying in the educational system. Due to its significant place in Georgia's history and national identity and its respectable status in Georgian society, the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the institutions that have considerable weight in Georgian politics.

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The Georgian Orthodox Church's stance on the reforms initiated by Georgia after its involvement in the Eastern Partnership Initiative has consistently raised concerns, given the Church's conservative ideology in contrast to the progressive reforms aligned with Georgia's commitment to European integration. In this context, it is a fact that the law regarding the protection of vulnerable minorities, which was introduced in 2014 within the scope of EU reforms, remains in conflict with the ideology of the church and its view of traditional Georgian family values. While the Church supports Georgia's struggle to become a Western democracy, it also clearly reveals its opposing stance on the issue saying that Georgia should not abandon its traditional values or replace them with others in this process.

To this day, the Georgian political leadership has refrained from a direct confrontation with the Church, even in the face of the Church openly criticizing the government's reforms linked to its commitments to European integration. Given the Church's significant popularity and sway over Georgian society, politicians in Georgia typically strive to garner the Church's support as a means of legitimizing their political initiatives in the country.

In this context, the main objective of the paper is to find out whether the Georgian Orthodox Church constitutes a significant obstacle for Georgia's European reform agenda. Secondly, the paper also aims at exploring the historical and cultural significance of the GOC, its interwoven relation with Georgian identity, how the GOC has become so influential in Georgia's social and political affairs and how it interacts with the political establishment in Georgia. Moreover, the study's endeavor to address the research questions also adds value by making a meaningful contribution to the existing literature on the political and societal role of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in Georgia.

The study consists of three sections and it is structured as follows. In the first part, we introduce the study and its aims and objectives in addition to the relevant research questions and follow with research design, methodology, theoretical framework, and relevant literature review. The second part of the study will focus on the historical analysis of the GOC and its significance and role in Georgia's society as well as domestic politics in which we try to understand how the GOC has become the symbol of Georgian national identity. In the third part, we will examine the attitude of the Georgian Orthodox Church towards the reforms carried out by Georgia in line with its aims of improving its bilateral relations with the EU in the past decade, and we will analyze the dilemma created by this ideological incompatibility in Georgian politics and society. Lastly, the study will be concluded with our findings and recommendations regarding the GOC's future conflicting role in Georgia's politics and its recently confirmed European path by the European Union.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study derives from the influence of religious beliefs on political decision-making: Religion can shape the values and priorities of policymakers, influencing how they view and approach foreign policy issues. A theoretical framework for examining the role of religion in foreign policy could be based on the idea that religion plays a significant role in shaping international relations and that it can serve as a source of conflict or cooperation.

The impact of religion on politics, particularly its involvement in foreign policy, has been a widely debated topic in the realm of international relations. According to Warner & Walker (2011, p. 120), religion is generally recognized as one aspect of culture, and thus in the international relations literature, its influence is theorized in the context of culture. The main proponents of culture as a variable in international relations have been constructivist theorists who consider the religion in a country's national identity, including its religious beliefs, influences its foreign policy interests and actions in the international arena. The identity of a state determines its preferences and resultant actions (Hopf, 1998, p. 175). Apparent historical experiences and religious and cultural influences within a state can result in diverse intellectual and political perspectives on the global community and allow for a more nuanced and unique understanding of a particular issue (Ozkan, 2021).

According to Fox & Sandler (2004, p. 58) there are two ways that religious beliefs can affect international politics. The first is by influencing the perspectives and actions of policymakers. Therefore, religiously inspired views held by politicians and the policies based upon them may lead to changes in foreign policy. The second way is through the impact of widely held beliefs on the actions of policymakers, even in autocratic governments, as policymakers may be hesitant to make decisions that go against the deeply held beliefs, morals, or values of the people they represent (Fox & Sandler, 2004, p. 59).

In Georgia's case, the Georgian Orthodox Church is embedded in the Georgian national identity and the influence of the Church on politics and political actors is a generally accepted fact by many scholars who have worked on the subject. Thus, we can say that Georgia falls in the second category according to Fox & Sandler's theory. As one would expect, this phenomenon observed in Georgia creates an incompatibility in Georgia's foreign policy goals and its aspiration of becoming a member of the European Union, considering the attitude of the Georgian Orthodox Church towards some of the reforms towards European integration and Government's unwillingness to confront the Church.

Research Design and Methodology

We have approached this study as a single case study research based on qualitative research methods while analyzing the reasons behind the significant role of the GOC in Georgia's history, society, and politics. To this end, identification of the factors that have contributed to the powerful image of the GOC in the post-Soviet period remains an important objective in order to understand how the GOC asserts its influence in the political establishment and society in Georgia. Additionally, studying the past actions of the GOC over controversial topics will highlight its ideological incompatibility in a country that has been determined to reform and progress according to European and Euro-Atlantic democratic norms.

During research we have identified three main pillars that support the dominance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgia, these are; overwhelming support from the public, the arrangements between the government and the Church that regulates the special status of the Church in the country, and the economic activities conducted by the Church which ensures that the GOC does not solely rely on the government funding. Thus, the study will focus on these issues as they contribute to the GOC's ability to interfere in politics and foreign policy in Georgia.

To explain the complexity of the Georgian Orthodox Church's importance and influence in Georgia and provide detailed descriptions, data collection, interpretation and in-depth content analysis of the collected data has been crucial from a research design perspective. Throughout the study, we have utilized numerous primary and secondary sources such as articles, news articles, electronic sources, dissertations, interviews, opinion pieces, agreements, and so on. Additionally, we also utilized the readily available secondary quantitative data gathered by NGOs and their contracted survey companies regarding the GOC's respectability and popularity in Georgian society, as these sources helped us to give a clearer picture of the public opinion in Georgia as well as saved us time and effort which would otherwise have to be collected directly. Finally, during the literature review, we tried to include discussions, which are most up-to-date and relevant to the aims and objectives of the paper and tried to stay within the requirements of the publication.

Debates on the Georgian Orthodox Church's Political Influence in Georgia

When it comes to how the GOC has achieved becoming the most respected institution in the country, the majority of the researchers do seem to agree that popularity primarily stems from the historical role of the GOC in preserving Georgian national identity and values. According to Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili (2021) the prestige and the popularity of the GOC in Georgia, today stems primarily from the exceptional historical role it played in the formation of Georgian statehood and the preservation of Georgian cultural and spiritual identity. The historic role played by the GOC in different periods in preserving Georgian national identity and values is often emphasized by many scholars as well. For example, Gegenava (2020, p. 170) claims The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) played a significant role in shaping the nation's identity and providing a sense of unity for the people. It also served as a source of resistance against hostile empires that surrounded Georgia during different periods.

Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili (The Orthodox Church in Georgia's Changing Society, 2021) also argues that geography and history played a key role in shaping the ideology of the GOC today. The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) remains a conservative institution that was not influenced by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, like Western churches. When Georgia regained independence in 1991, it did not go through a process of post-totalitarian reforms. The GOC's conservatism is primarily based on its Orthodox doctrine, but this does not

necessarily conflict with the goal of modernization and alignment with European values, as demonstrated by other European Orthodox countries like Bulgaria and Greece. However, the GOC sees itself as the protector of Georgia's national values, which are difficult to define, and as a result, the church has not been able to clearly outline the ideology behind its conservatism (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, *The Orthodox Church in Georgia's Changing Society*, 2021).

Today the church's unique position is reflected in Georgia's constitution, which allowed for the signing of a special concordat that defines relations between the state and the GOC. The 2002 agreement granted the GOC special rights in the fields of education and cultural heritage as well as privileges including exemption from taxes (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, *The Orthodox Church in Georgia's Changing Society*, 2021). Gegenava (2020, p. 171) argues that even though there is legislation guaranteeing religious freedom and neutrality towards other faiths, the GOC is the dominant religious entity in Georgia and any other religious organizations' power is too weak both socially and legally compared to the GOC.

The political influence of the Church in Georgia is another much-debated issue among scholars. Minesashvili (*Can the Georgian Orthodox Church Contribute to the Democratization Process?*, 2016) argues that the GOC has the ability not just to expand its presence in various sectors of society, but also to exert some degree of influence on political agenda by actively participating in current processes, either by supporting or opposing certain movements and legislation. It has also been known to make direct attempts at influencing the political agenda on multiple occasions. Additionally, Minesashvili (*The Georgian Orthodox Church as a Civil Actor: Challenges and Capabilities*, 2017) adds that the GOC is a significant civil actor not only because of its historical experience or significance but because of its present status and influence. Despite being financed by the state, the GOC due to its high reputation retains autonomy and often positions itself separately from the government and it is not accountable to the Government.

The GOC's attitude towards the European integration of Georgia is significant as it represents the possible divergence between the GOC and the country's foreign policy goals. Crisis in Tbilisi in July 2021 when far-right protesters, including several priests, attacked and injured more than fifty journalists covering Tbilisi Pride events. In another study, Gegeshidze emphasizes that the GOC is able to mobilize the masses for the sake of protecting and promoting its own interests (Gegeshidze, et al., 2017). Reformation of the GOC remains highly unlikely due to its popularity among the Georgian public. According to Chedia (2021), some people in Georgia are calling for reform within the Church, but the political leaders in the country are hesitant to criticize the Church or the Patriarchate because they are both very popular among the general population.

While Chedia (2021) claims that under the Georgian Dream, the reputation of the Church has declined to its lowest, others claim that these declines are only temporary based on the previous scandals the GOC was involved (Gilbreath, 2020). Chedia also claims that the government deliberately trying to diminish the GOC's power to interfere in political affairs by discrediting the Church over scandals and at the same time turning a blind eye to legal violations by the clergy (Chedia, 2021). However, the future role of the GOC in Georgia's European path remains challenging for political actors. Menabde (2019) even argues that due to its significant political and social influence, the direction of the Church may have an impact on whether the pro-Western orientation of Georgia can be preserved or not.

Overall, although the GOC's influence in Georgian society and politics has been studied in detail, insufficient attention has been paid to the role of the GOC in European integration considering the fact that Georgia has been given a new European perspective with potential candidacy status. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing literature in that regard.

History of the Georgian Orthodox Church

The GOC has a long and rich history dating back to the 4th century AD. The country's dominant religious confession Orthodox Christianity had been granted autocephaly – self-governance – by Antioch in 457, and it had preserved this status for a long time even though Georgia is invaded and occupied by various foreign powers, until it was abolished in 1811, following Georgia's forceful incorporation into the Russian Empire. In 1811 the Russian Empire annulled the autocephaly of the Georgian Church which was strongly opposed in Georgia.

The post of Patriarch was ceased and the Georgian Church turned under the rule of the Synod of the Russian Church.

After the October Revolution in the Russian Empire, Georgia, like other Caucasus states, declared independence from Russia. In this way, the Georgian Orthodox Church regained its autonomous status. However, the Republic of Georgia, which was declared in 1917, did not last long. After the Bolsheviks defeated the whites in Russia, Georgia and the Caucasus region again came under the yoke of Moscow, this time under the Soviet Union which was ideologically anti-religious (Chitanava, 2015, p. 41).

In this period the Soviet law did not ban religion or going to church to take part in services however communists knew that they cannot be seen praying to cause some people to go to church secretly and the names of those who went to church were put on a list and those people did not get good jobs and some of them even fired from their positions (Andre, Rousseau, & Abid, 2021). During this period number of the active churches in Georgia decreased from 2455 to only 80 churches by the 1980s (BBC, 2013). This period remains important for the GOC's post-Soviet restoration because many scholars claim that this era of repression against the GOC played a crucial part in GOC's leading role in the early independence period and cemented its inseparable place in Georgian national identity.

Post-Soviet Resurgence of the GOC

During the Soviet period, the church had been suppressed and heavily controlled by the state, and many of its leaders and members had been persecuted. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Georgian Orthodox Church played a significant role in the country's post-Soviet development. In this period, the church was able to reassert itself as the protector of the Georgian identity and Orthodox faith and regain its independence. In the early years, the Church took the lead and the political forces in the country were vying for its support. Active usage of religious-messianic rhetoric by the politicians in this period further strengthened the mass ideological recognition of the Church (Chitanava, 2015, p. 41). After the independence, the GOC became the backbone of the Georgian identity and state-building consolidating its influence over Georgian Society and Politics.

One of the key ways in which the Georgian Orthodox Church exercised its influence in the post-Soviet period is through its role in promoting and preserving Georgian culture and national identity. The church has worked to rebuild and restore its many monasteries, churches, and other cultural sites that were destroyed or damaged during the Soviet period, and has played a key role in the preservation and promotion of Georgian Orthodox liturgical traditions. The Georgian Orthodox Church has also been active in political and social life in the post-Soviet period. The church has often taken positions on political issues and has been involved in various social, charitable, and economic activities.

In this context, one of the most significant documents showing the role of the GOC in Georgia's state-building, society, and politics in the post-Soviet period is the Concordat signed between the Georgian Government and the GOC in 2002. The constitutional Agreement between the State of Georgia and the Georgian Apostolic Autocephaly Orthodox Church that defines the relations between the state and the GOC has granted special rights to the GOC in certain fields such as education and culture as well as exemption from taxation (Constitutional Agreement between the State of Georgia and Georgian Apostolic Autocephaly Orthodox Church, 2002).

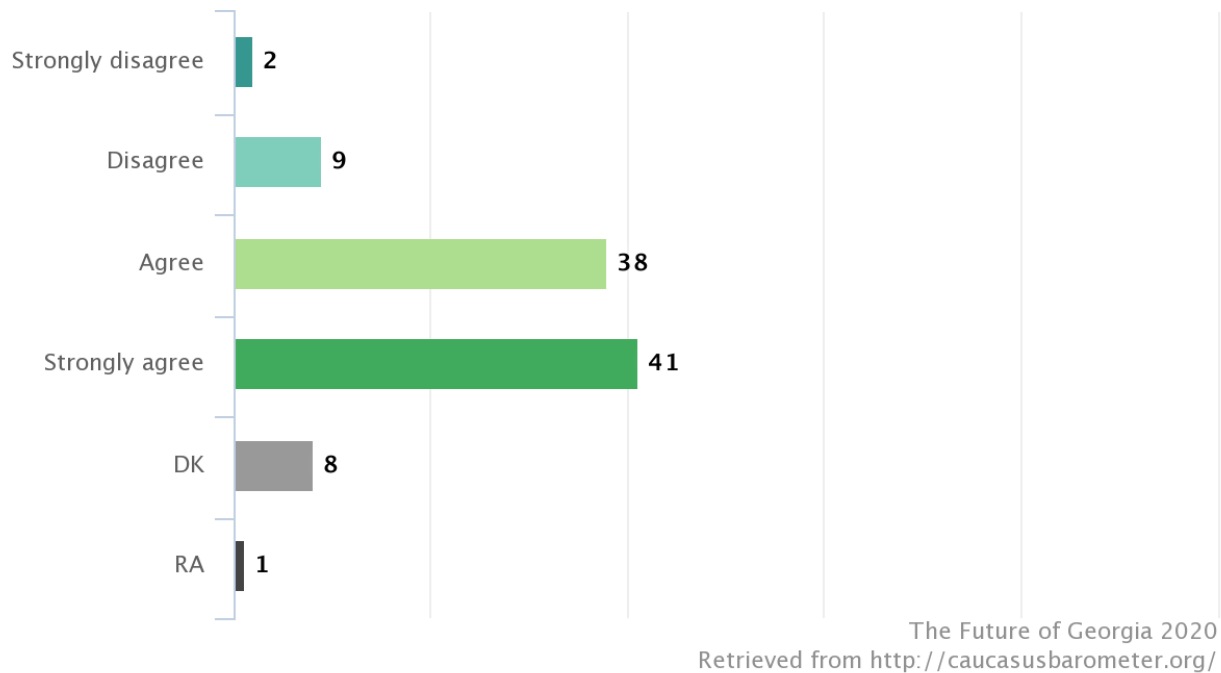
Overall, the Georgian Orthodox Church has played a significant role in the post-Soviet period as a cultural and spiritual institution, as well as a political and social actor. This period is of great importance in terms of showing how the Georgian Orthodox Church has become such a significant institution in Georgia. Its influence has been felt across many aspects of Georgian society, and it continues to be an important and influential institution in the country.

Significance of the GOC for Georgian Society

The majority of Georgians have a strong attachment to the Church even though they don't practice faith regularly. The Georgian Orthodox Church is widely seen as a symbol of national identity and unity. Due to its large support base in Georgia, the GOC is able to mobilize the masses to promote its interests and sometimes

influence the political agenda in the country. Moreover, the Georgian Orthodox Church is also an important social and charitable institution in Georgia. It operates a range of social and charitable programs, including education and healthcare services, and is often involved in disaster relief and other efforts to help those in need (Transparency.ge, 2014).

FOUNDIDNTT: Agree/disagree: Georgian Orthodox Church is the foundation of our identity (%)



As with many other religious institutions, the name of the Georgian Orthodox Church has been involved in many scandals in recent years, including murder and sexual abuse (Gilbreath, 2020). For example, in 2017, Georgia was shaken by the cyanide case in the Church. An Archpriest named Giorgia Mamaladze was arrested for plotting to assassinate Patriarch Ilia II with cyanide poison. In 2019, one of the Church's top Clerics Archbishop Yakob Iakobishvili accused the Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia and the former PM Bidzina Ivanishvili of plotting to murder Patriarch Ilia II of Georgia to replace him with another cleric (Eckel, Kevanishvili, & Khunculia, 2019). Even though these scandals may have hurt the image of the Church in the eyes of the public in the short term the Church still manages to preserve its top place as the most trusted institution in the country.

Despite the positive image of the Church in the Georgian public, the GOC has a complex and sometimes fraught relationship with Russia, which occupies the two breakaway regions of Georgia. Historically, the two countries have had a close and intertwined relationship, with Georgia being a part of the Russian Empire for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries and later being part of the Soviet Union. The Georgian Orthodox Church was also closely tied to the Russian Orthodox Church during this period, and many Georgian clergies received their education in Russia.

In the post-Soviet period, the relationship between the Georgian Orthodox Church and Russia has been marked by both cooperation and tension. On the one hand, the two churches have maintained close ties and have worked together on a range of issues, including the restoration and preservation of religious and cultural sites in Georgia. On the other hand, there have also been periods of tension between the two churches, particularly in the wake of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, when the Russian Orthodox Church accused the Georgian Orthodox Church of siding with the Georgian government and declared that it would no longer recognize the Georgian church's authority.

In this context, the close ties between GOC and Russia are another problematic issue when we consider the GOC's position as the most respectable and influential institution in the country. While this might seem only natural from a religious perspective since both churches represent Orthodox Christianity and have a shared past, one can argue that this is an irritant issue for Georgian society as well as politics since more than 20% of Georgia is currently under occupation by the Russian Federation. For example, GOC's invitation of Russian parliamentarian Sergei Gavrilov to an inter-parliamentary assembly on Orthodoxy triggered an outcry in Georgian society and the initial demonstrations were violently cracked down by law enforcement (Menabde, 2019).

Overall, the relationship between the Georgian Orthodox Church and Russia has been complex and multifaceted, with elements of both cooperation and tension. The two churches have a shared history and cultural heritage but have also sometimes been at odds with one another over political and other issues however there are those who think that Russia might use the GOC's power to manipulate the Georgian public in its information war (Catcarth, 2021).

Economic Activities of the GOC

Interestingly, the GOC's business activities in Georgia are another controversial topic in the country. Even though the GOC receives a yearly share of the state budget it is not accountable to the Government or any other institution as the 2002 agreement between the state and the church bars auditing agencies from checking the financial activities of the GOC. There is a clear non-transparency regarding how the GOC spends this public fund in addition to how it conducts business activities in the country (Maisuradze, 2017). Remarkably, the GOC considers the funds it has received from Georgia's state budget as compensation for the damages it sustained from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (Constitutional Agreement between the State of Georgia and Georgian Apostolic Autocephaly Orthodox Church, 2002).

Furthermore, in addition to non-profit educational and charitable activities, the GOC is also quite active in the business. Between 1997-2017 the Church founded 40 companies and acquired stakes in four companies and registered 105 non-commercial organizations. Business areas of commercial companies include energy, construction, agriculture, healthcare, food production, media, and so on (Maisuradze, 2017). Naturally, it is a controversial issue that the Church, which has such a commercial enterprise, has privileges such as being exempt from taxes.

Consequently, in 2018, the Georgian Constitutional Court ruled that the privileges given to the GOC were unconstitutional and instructed parliament to make necessary legislative changes to either abolish the privileges or grant them to all religious organizations no later than December 31, 2018. Georgian Parliament has failed to amend the law granting the GOC tax and property privileges, despite the Constitutional Court ruling in 2018. The Constitutional Court's ruling was legally binding, the Constitutional Court had no power to ensure that parliament followed it (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Overall, the Georgian orthodox church has been heavily involved in business activities in the country and probably employs thousands of people in the commercial businesses it owns and operates, in addition to the priests and clergy it currently employs and does not report its spending to any authority even though it receives yearly payments from the state budget.

Role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Politics

Another factor contributing to the church's power is its close relationship with the Georgian state. The Georgian Orthodox Church has a special status within the country, and the government has historically supported and promoted the church as an important cultural and spiritual institution. The Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church commands a significant influence on the country's politics, and the government has often turned to the church for guidance and support on a range of issues. The Georgian model of Church-state relations has many systemic flaws. In Georgia, a form of collaborative secularism exists, allowing religious communities to engage in various forms of cooperation with the state. This arrangement occurs in a country without an official state religion and where freedom of religion is ensured. However, it is noteworthy that

this cooperative dynamic primarily takes place between the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the state (Gegenava, 2020).

In addition to its immense role as a civil actor in Georgian society, the GOC has also a considerable authority in Georgia's political establishment regardless of the ideologies of the political parties or Governments. In this regard, the GOC continues to be the source of political legitimization frequently used by Georgian politicians. Political parties avoid any kind of open and direct confrontation with the GOC (Minesashvili, *The Georgian Orthodox Church as a Civil Actor: Challenges and Capabilities*, 2017, p. 2). For example, current PM Irakli Garibashvili's remarks highlight the importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church for Georgia's history and state-building. He specifically emphasized the role of the GOC in passing down core values from generation to generation that were related to Georgia's statehood, culture, and faith (Agenda.ge, 2022). Consequently, as a Georgian politician, it is an important part of the job not to criticize the position of the GOC even on political matters, on the contrary, most politicians seek the GOC's blessing as a tool to legitimize their political cause.

However, there is also evidence of suspicion towards the GOC by the Georgian government. In 2021, the leaked documents on the internet showed evidence of widespread surveillance by the State Security Service of religious leaders, including their interactions with political leaders, journalists, and foreign diplomats. While the government and ruling party denied the validity of these documents, other organizations, journalists, and religious leaders stated that many of the documents were accurate. This caused concern among political and civil society leaders, as it appeared that the State Security Service was monitoring private conversations with religious figures and potentially restricting religious freedom. (U.S. Department of State, 2021). This shows that the Georgian government hardly trusts the GOC or its interactions with the opposition or foreign delegations.

One of the main political divergences between the GOC and the government is the attitude toward European integration. Of course, the GOC officially supports Georgia's integration with the EU and its aspirations of becoming a Western democracy, however, the GOC insists that Georgia should not lose its customs and tradition or replace them with those of others in this process.

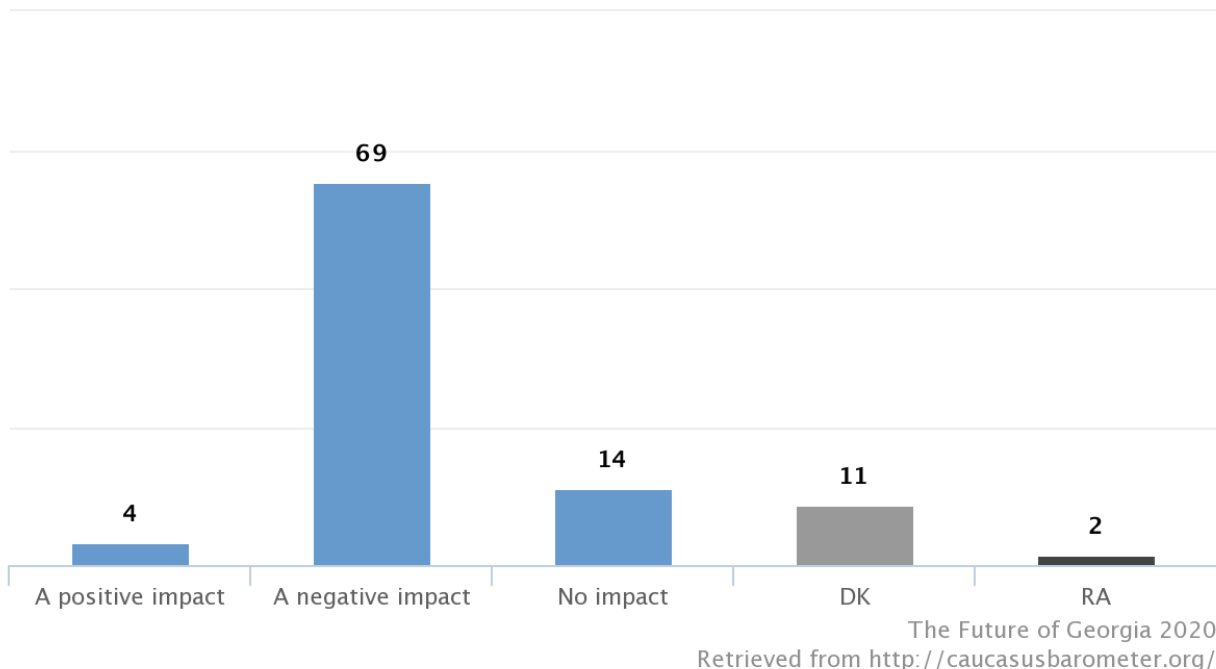
The GOC's Attitude towards European Integration

The GOC's controversial attitude towards western integration, in general, is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the anti-Western attitude of the Georgian Orthodox Church, unlike Georgian governments, is a well-known phenomenon since the late 90s and the beginning of the 2000s, when Georgia started to turn its face to the west. In this period the Church openly demonized the West and called for a neutral foreign policy and better relations with Russia (Chitanava, 2015, p. 43). However, it is not accurate to say that the Georgian Orthodox Church is uniformly opposed to European reforms in Georgia. While the church has at times expressed concerns about certain aspects of European integration and reforms in the country, it has also supported and participated in many European initiatives and projects. One of the main concerns that the Georgian Orthodox Church has expressed concerning European reforms is the potential impact of these reforms on traditional Georgian values and cultural practices. The church has argued that some European policies and initiatives, such as those related to LGBT rights and gender equality, may conflict with traditional Georgian values and could undermine the country's cultural and spiritual heritage. Therefore, the anti-Western attitude of the church is mostly discussed over the rights given to sexual minorities in Georgia. The Georgian Orthodox Church has a very conservative stance on minority rights whether it is related to sexual or religious minorities in the country. Determined to maintain its special status in the country, the Church has even opposed the government's bills in the past granting equal rights to other religious groups (Mamiashvili, 2011).

Nevertheless, this opposition to vulnerable minority rights mainly stems from the GOC's self-produced ethnoreligious role. The Georgian Church sees itself as responsible for the protection and well-being of the entire Georgian nation and places a strong emphasis on Orthodox Christianity. This broad responsibility extends to all aspects of society and supersedes the idea that individuals can achieve salvation on their own. The GOC frequently uses collective concepts in its teachings and views the concept of the family as the foundation of the Georgian nation. As a result, the GOC views ideas such as gender equality and equality for sexual minorities as potentially harmful to the nation (Minesashvili, *Can the Georgian Orthodox Church Contribute to the Democratization Process?*, 2016, p. 4).

As part of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) agreed upon with the EU, Georgia committed itself to protecting vulnerable minorities under the new legislation. 'Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination' entered into force officially on May 7, 2014. Nevertheless, the so-called Anti-Discrimination Law raised controversial voices in Georgian society, especially from the Patriarchate of Georgia and traditionalist/conservative segments of the society. During the sessions of the draft law in the Georgian Parliament, 'sexual orientation' expression, followed by the other forms of discrimination such as gender, sex, age, and language, stated in Article 1, led to a momentous turmoil both in political and public discourses. The expressions of 'sexual orientation' and 'gender' were interpreted as the legalization of 'sodomy' by the clerics of the Patriarchate of Georgia; they also warned MPs of losing public support if they voted for the Law in this form (Karadag, 2019, p. 159).

LGBTMPSIMP: What kind of impact would it have if there were more LGBTQ people in parliament? (%)



In 2021 the GOC's opposition to the rights of vulnerable minorities took a deadly turn. The church has been accused of inciting violence against the Tbilisi Pride participants on July 5, 2021 in Tbilisi where a journalist covering the parade died and numerous others were injured by a violent mob. According to Tbilisi Pride Co-founder Giorgi Tabagari, that day around four thousand people have been mobilized by the Church for peaceful anti-LGBT protests and around one thousand protesters took part in violent attacks which were aimed at liberal-minded societies in Georgia (Andre, Rousseau, & Abid, 2021). The government's response to the violence was also controversial and accused the organizers of being backed by the opposition figures and framed the parade as unacceptable for a large segment of the Georgian Society (Mackinnon, 2021). Unsurprisingly, in 2022, after the war started in Ukraine, Georgia also applied for EU candidacy status, but the EU Commission's final evaluation stated that, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, the candidacy status will be granted to Georgia only after the completion of 12 conditions. One of these conditions is 'move swiftly to strengthen the protection of human rights of vulnerable groups, including by bringing perpetrators and instigators of violence to justice more effectively' (European Commission, 2022).

Overall, the GOC's controversial attitude towards some aspects of EU integration is well-known and documented. At the same time, the Georgian Orthodox Church has also supported and participated in many European initiatives and projects, mostly related to cultural preservation and education. The church has also

generally supported the country's integration with the European Union and has recognized the benefits that European integration can bring to Georgia, such as increased economic development and improved standards of living.

Conclusions

It is an accepted fact that the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the most influential institutions in Georgia. The Georgian Orthodox Church's power in Georgia can be attributed to its deep roots in the country's history, culture, and society, as well as its close relationship with the state. With the financial independence of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the overwhelming support it receives from the public, it seems possible for the Church to present its views and occupy the country's political agenda, even on issues that do not directly concern it.

It might be true that the Georgian Orthodox Church was bypassed by the enlightenment of the renaissance period compared to the Western Churches. However, today the Georgian Church frames itself as the guardian of the Orthodox Georgian national identity, morals, and values. Due to its high respectability and popularity in Georgian society, the Church also has considerable influence in politics. Due to the past arrangements with the Georgian Governments, it enjoys a wide variety of privileges in education and economic activities in Georgia.

As we have seen from numerous examples, the GOC is willing to preserve and promote its interests by any means necessary, even risking direct confrontation with the Georgian Government, even though it is partially financed by the state budget. There are several reasons for the GOC's apparent interference in politics where it deems its interests should be preserved and upheld, despite the conflicting nature of those interests. First and foremost, the GOC enjoys overwhelming support from the Georgian public, and any kind of politician willing to risk a political confrontation with the Church faces an uphill battle from a basic political perspective. Secondly, the autocephaly of the Church in Georgia is not symbolic in contrast to the other countries. In fact, it is quite substantial in Georgia due to the privileges the Church received under the constitutional agreement with the Georgian government in 2002. This agreement basically eliminates any dependence on the state from the Church's perspective. It does so, by exempting the Church from taxation, allowing it to conduct business activities, and getting compensation from the state budget for eternity for the damages sustained under the authority of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Additionally, the Church is not accountable to any kind of institution for spending this 'compensation' from the state budget.

The problem lies in the fact that in order to protect these Georgian values the GOC is ready to mobilize the public, as witnessed in numerous occasions, which usually incites people to resort to violence against vulnerable minorities. Therefore, for Georgian governments who have EU aspirations and struggled for European integration for years, the Georgian Orthodox Church represents a significant incompatibility in foreign policy-making due to its inseparability from the Georgian national identity. However, the opinion of whether the GOC might have an impact on Georgia's current orientation towards the West in the future remains questionable. As long as there is overwhelming public support for Georgia's European path, the GOC's ability to reverse the reforms that it deems incompatible with Georgian or Christian values remains highly unlikely.

Overall, the Georgian Orthodox Church's stance on European reforms in Georgia is quite complex due to its self-portrayal as the guardian of Georgian identity and Orthodox values in the country, however, it is not accurate to say that the church is uniformly opposed to European integration. Isolated cases of sermons and preaching by clerics that criticize the European integration reforms and vilify the European values should be addressed (Narsia, 2018). The GOC should be able to refute these sermons or clerics, which gives critics a basis to claim that GOC officially supports this position despite the fact that the Church has recognized the benefits that European integration can bring to Georgia and has supported and participated in many European initiatives and projects. Additionally, the Church has at times expressed concerns about certain aspects of European integration not only because of the ideological incompatibility but also because some of the reforms may reduce its influence and income.

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