

# THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS FACTORS ON CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL PROCESSES IN GEORGIA

GIORGI PARESHISHVILI

PhD candidate in Political Sciences,  
Advisor to the Rector at Caucasus International University  
E-Mail: giorgi.pareshishvili@ciu.edu.ge  
ORCID: 0009-0006-0485-0880

**Abstract:** This article examines the complex interrelationship between religion and politics in contemporary Georgia. Situated at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, Georgia's political landscape has been significantly shaped by religious factors, particularly the Georgian Orthodox Church. This paper analyzes how religious institutions influence policy formation, electoral politics, and social cohesion in Georgia, while also examining the challenges that arise from the intersection of religious tradition and democratic governance. Through an exploration of church-state relations, religious minority rights, and the impact of religious identity on foreign policy, this study demonstrates the multifaceted nature of religion's role in Georgian politics and society.

**Key words:** Georgian Orthodox Church; religious minorities; politics; national identity; secularism.

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**Introduction.** Georgia, located at the intersection of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, possesses a rich and extensive history shaped by diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious influences (Suny, 2020). Throughout its history, religion – particularly the Georgian Orthodox Church – has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's identity, social structures, and political landscape (Grdzeldze, 2010; Metreveli, 2016). This intricate relationship between religion and politics continues to influence contemporary Georgian society, affecting everything from domestic policy to international relations (Serrano, 2018).

The significance of religion in Georgian politics cannot be overstated. As one of the world's oldest Christian nations, having adopted Christianity as the state religion in the early fourth century, Georgia's national identity has been inextricably linked with its religious heritage (Rayfield, 2012; Rapp, 2016). The Georgian Orthodox Church has served as both a religious institution and a symbol of cultural and national continuity, particularly during periods of foreign domination (Jones, 2015). Even during the Soviet era, when religious expression was severely restricted, the Church remained an important, if underground, institution that helped preserve Georgian national identity (Pelkmans, 2006; Dragadze, 1993).

In the post-Soviet period, the Georgian Orthodox Church has reemerged as a dominant force in public life, reclaiming its position as a central institution in Georgian society (Chitanava, 2020; Kekelia, 2014). This resurgence has had profound implications for Georgia's political development, influencing the direction of policy on numerous issues and helping to shape public discourse on matters of national importance (Gavashelishvili, 2012). Understanding the role of religion in Georgian politics is therefore essential for comprehending the country's political dynamics and predicting its future trajectory (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2018).

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the influence of religious factors on contemporary political processes in Georgia. It examines how the Georgian Orthodox Church shapes policy decisions, affects electoral politics, and influences public opinion (Zedania, 2011). Additionally, it explores the status of religious minorities in Georgia and how religious diversity impacts social cohesion and political stability (Funke, 2014; Reisner, 2010). The paper also investigates how Georgia's religious

identity intersects with its geopolitical position and foreign policy objectives, particularly its aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration and its complicated relationship with Russia (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015).

By examining these various dimensions of religion's influence on Georgian politics, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between religion and politics in post-Soviet states and highlights the challenges and opportunities that arise when religious tradition meets democratic governance (Crego, 2014; Ladaria, 2012).

**Methods.** This research employs a qualitative analytical approach to examine the influence of religious factors on contemporary political processes in Georgia (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study is based on comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources, including official documents, statistical data, policy papers, and academic literature (Bowen, 2009; Flick, 2014). A historical-comparative method is utilized to trace the evolution of church-state relations in Georgia from the Soviet period to the present day, providing essential context for understanding current dynamics (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; Smith, 2008).

To analyze the Georgian Orthodox Church's influence on political processes, this study examines key legislative developments, public statements by religious and political leaders, and policy outcomes in areas where religious perspectives have significantly shaped debate (Fairclough, 2013; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For assessing the status of religious minorities, the research draws on demographic data, legal frameworks governing religious organizations, and documented cases of religious discrimination or accommodation (Karpov & Lisovskaya, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2017).

The analysis of religion's impact on foreign policy considers Georgia's strategic positioning between Russia and the European Union, examining how religious identity factors into diplomatic relations and integration processes (Katzenstein & Byrnes, 2006; Leustean, 2018). Throughout the study, particular attention is paid to the tensions between traditional religious values and liberal democratic norms, and how these tensions manifest in Georgia's political landscape (Berger, 1999; Casanova, 2011).

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: RELIGION AND GEORGIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY**

### **The Historical Role of Christianity in Georgian Identity**

Christianity has been a cornerstone of Georgian identity for nearly two millennia (Lang, 1976; Toumanoff, 1963). The conversion of Georgia to Christianity in the early 4th century CE, traditionally attributed to Saint Nino, marked a pivotal moment in the country's history (Braund, 1994; Rayfield, 2012). By embracing Christianity, Georgia aligned itself culturally and politically with the Byzantine world rather than with its Persian neighbors, a decision that would have lasting implications for Georgian civilization (Rapp, 2012; Suny, 1994).

Throughout the medieval period, the Georgian Orthodox Church served as a repository of Georgian culture, language, and literature (Eastmond, 1998; Thomson, 1996). Monasteries functioned as centers of learning and artistic production, preserving Georgian cultural heritage during times of foreign invasion and occupation (Mgaloblishvili, 2014; Tuite, 2011). The Church's use of the Georgian script for liturgical and literary purposes helped maintain the unique Georgian language and fostered a sense of cultural distinctiveness (Rayfield, 2000; Wardrop, 2010).

The Church's role in preserving national identity became even more pronounced during periods of foreign rule (Gachechiladze, 2014; Parsons, 1987). Under Ottoman and Persian domination, the Georgian Orthodox Church acted as a unifying institution that kept alive Georgian cultural traditions and national consciousness (Jersild, 2002; Pelkmans, 2006). Similarly, during the Russian Imperial period (1801-1917), the Church, despite losing its autocephaly and being subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church, remained an important symbol of Georgian distinctiveness (Jones, 2005; Suny, 1988).

### **Religion During the Soviet Period**

The Soviet era (1921-1991) presented a significant challenge to the Georgian Orthodox Church and religious life in Georgia more broadly (Ro'i, 2000; Suny, 1994). Soviet authorities implemented

aggressive anti-religious policies aimed at eliminating religious belief and practice (Ramet, 1998; Froese, 2008). Churches were closed, clergy were persecuted, and religious education was prohibited (Corley, 1996; Vashakmadze, 2012). The Georgian Orthodox Church, like other religious institutions throughout the Soviet Union, faced the threat of extinction (Grdzeldze, 2010; Jashi, 2013).

Despite these pressures, religion persisted in Georgian society, albeit in a diminished and more private form (Dragadze, 1993; Pelkmans, 2009). Many Georgians maintained their religious beliefs and practices discreetly, passing them down through families (Kotkin, 1995; Jones, 2015). The Church, though severely weakened, continued to function in a limited capacity (Crego, 2014). This persistence of religious identity during the Soviet period underscores the deep-rooted nature of Christianity in Georgian culture and society (Suny, 1988; Werth, 2006).

### **Religious Revival in Post-Soviet Georgia**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia's subsequent independence in 1991 triggered a dramatic revival of religious life in the country (Agadjanian et al., 2017; Kalatozishvili, 2011). The Georgian Orthodox Church rapidly reclaimed its position as a central institution in Georgian society, with church attendance and religious observance increasing significantly (Kalatozishvili, 2015; Sarkissian, 2008). The Church regained its properties, rebuilt its infrastructure, and reestablished its presence in public life (Crego, 2014; Metreveli, 2016).

This religious revival was closely intertwined with the resurgence of Georgian nationalism in the post-Soviet period (Crego, 2014; Wheatley, 2005). The Church became a symbol of Georgian national identity and historical continuity, providing a sense of stability and direction during a period of profound political and economic upheaval (Ladaria, 2012; Grdzeldze, 2010). Political leaders, recognizing the Church's popularity and moral authority, sought to align themselves with it to bolster their own legitimacy (Serrano, 2010; Zedania, 2011).

The 2002 Constitutional Agreement between the Georgian state and the Georgian Orthodox Church formalized the Church's special status in Georgian society, granting it privileges not extended to other religious groups (Papuashvili, 2008; Serrano, 2010). This agreement reflected the Church's unique historical role in Georgian society but also raised questions about religious equality and the secular nature of the state (Corso, 2009; Tokhtassynov, 2013).

The post-Soviet religious revival in Georgia illustrates how religion can serve as a source of national identity and social cohesion during periods of transition and uncertainty (Karpov, 2010; Kunovich & Hodson, 1999). It also demonstrates how religious institutions can rapidly reclaim public influence when political circumstances change, particularly in societies where religious identity remained strong despite official suppression (Stan & Turcescu, 2007; Tomka, 2011).

## **THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS**

### **Institutional Influence and Public Authority**

The Georgian Orthodox Church is widely regarded as the guardian of national identity and moral authority in contemporary Georgia (Chitanava, 2015; Gurchiani, 2017). It plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and societal values, with polling consistently showing it to be the most trusted institution in the country (Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2018; International Republican Institute, 2019). The Church's patriarch, Ilia II, who has led the Church since 1977, enjoys immense public respect and wields significant influence over public discourse (Metreveli, 2016; Vashakmadze, 2012).

The Church's authority extends beyond purely religious matters to encompass a wide range of social and political issues (Chitanava, 2020; Funke, 2014). Its teachings and positions frequently influence political discourse, particularly on matters related to national identity, morality, and social norms (Gurchiani, 2017; Kekelia, 2014). Politicians often seek the Church's endorsement or align themselves with its positions to gain public support (Minesashvili, 2017; Minesashvili & Kachkachishvili, 2018).

This institutional influence is reinforced by the Church's extensive network of parishes, monasteries, and educational institutions throughout the country (Sul Khanishvili, 2012; Zedania, 2011). The Church maintains a presence in virtually every community in Georgia, allowing it to disseminate its messages widely and mobilize public opinion when necessary (Funke, 2014). Additionally, the Church operates its own media outlets, including television and radio stations, which further amplify its voice in public debates (Minesashvili & Kachkachishvili, 2018).

The Church's moral authority is particularly evident in its ability to shape societal attitudes on issues such as family values, gender roles, and sexual morality (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016; Rekhviashvili, 2010). Its conservative positions on these matters resonate with many Georgians, particularly in rural areas and among older generations, who view the Church as a bulwark against what they perceive as the negative influences of Western secularism and liberalism (Gurchiani, 2017; Kekelia, 2014).

### **Church Involvement in Political Issues**

The Georgian Orthodox Church does not shy away from direct involvement in political matters (Gavashelishvili, 2012; Zedania, 2011). It articulates positions on a range of issues, from constitutional reforms to foreign policy (Chitanava, 2020; Serrano, 2018). For example, the Church has been a strong advocate for traditional family values and has opposed policies it perceives as undermining these values, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage or the liberalization of abortion laws (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016; Mestvirishvili et al., 2017).

In 2016, the Church actively opposed a government initiative to introduce anti-discrimination legislation protecting LGBTQ+ individuals, arguing that such legislation would promote „homosexual propaganda“ and undermine traditional Georgian values (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Mestvirishvili et al., 2017). Similarly, the Church has advocated for the introduction of religious education in public schools and has sought to influence educational policy more broadly (Gavashelishvili, 2012; Kekelia, 2014).

The Church has also taken positions on economic and social welfare issues, often advocating for policies that protect vulnerable populations (Funke, 2014; Serrano, 2018). During economic reforms that have increased inequality and hardship for many Georgians, the Church has sometimes served as a voice for those marginalized by these changes, calling for greater social protection and economic justice (Ladaria, 2012; Minesashvili, 2017).

On matters of foreign policy, the Church has occasionally expressed views that diverge from the government's pro-Western orientation (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015; Minesashvili, 2017). While not opposing European integration outright, the Church has expressed concerns about the cultural implications of closer ties with Europe, particularly regarding values it perceives as contrary to Georgian traditions (Chitanava, 2020; Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015). This has sometimes created tensions between the Church's conservative social vision and Georgia's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration (Minesashvili & Kachkachishvili, 2018; Serrano, 2018).

### **Influence on Electoral Politics**

The Church's influence extends to electoral politics, where it can significantly impact voter behavior (Minesashvili & Kachkachishvili, 2018; Zedania, 2011). During elections, political parties and candidates often court the Church's support, recognizing its substantial influence over voters (Kakachia & O'Beachain, 2014; Cecire, 2013). The Church's public endorsement or criticism can affect election outcomes and political legitimacy (Gvosdev, 2012; Metreveli, 2016).

While the Church officially maintains political neutrality and does not formally endorse specific parties or candidates, in practice, clergy members often signal their political preferences to their congregations (Funke, 2014; Kintsurashvili, 2015). These signals can be particularly influential in rural areas, where the local priest may be the most respected authority figure in the community (Transparency International Georgia, 2016; Minesashvili, 2017).

The Church's influence on electoral politics is also evident in the adoption of religious rhetoric and symbolism by political actors (Cecire, 2013; Zedania, 2011). Politicians frequently attend church services, particularly during campaign periods, and incorporate religious references into their speeches and platforms (Gurchiani, 2017; Wheatley, 2017). Some political parties explicitly align themselves with the Church's conservative social agenda to attract religious voters (Chitanava, 2020; Reisner, 2009).

This influence on electoral politics raises important questions about church-state separation and the role of religious institutions in democratic processes (Berglund, 2014; Janelidze, 2018). Critics argue that the Church's involvement in politics undermines democratic principles and pluralism, while supporters contend that the Church has a legitimate role to play in public life as a representative of Georgian cultural values and traditions (Gavashelishvili, 2012; Kekelia, 2014).

## **RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND POLITICAL INCLUSION**

### **Diversity in Georgia's Religious Landscape**

While the Georgian Orthodox Church dominates the religious landscape, Georgia is home to diverse religious communities, including Muslims, followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholics, and Jews, as well as other religious groups (State Department, 2019; Tsintsadze, 2007). According to the 2014 census, approximately 83.4% of the population identifies as Georgian Orthodox, 10.7% as Muslim, 2.9% as Armenian Apostolic, 0.5% as Catholic, and the remainder belonging to other religious groups or identifying as non-religious (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2017).

This religious diversity is partly a result of Georgia's geographic position at the crossroads of different civilizations and its historical experience as part of various empires (Gvosdev, 2000; Rapp, 2016). Muslim communities are concentrated in the southwestern region of Adjara and in areas with significant Azerbaijani populations in the southeast (Gogadze, 2016; Sanikidze, 2012). The Armenian Apostolic community is primarily located in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region and in Tbilisi (Simonian, 2004; Wheatley, 2009). Other religious groups, including Catholics and Jews, have smaller but historically significant presences in various parts of the country (Batiashvili, 2018; Tsintsadze, 2007).

Despite this diversity, the dominant position of the Georgian Orthodox Church in public life and its special legal status have created a situation where religious minorities often feel marginalized or treated as second-class citizens (Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2018; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015). This perception is reinforced by instances of discrimination and the conflation of Georgian national identity with Orthodox Christianity in much public discourse (Lomtadze, 2016; Public Defender of Georgia, 2020).

### **Status and Rights of Religious Minorities**

The status and rights of religious minorities constitute a significant political issue in Georgia (Lomtadze, 2016; Serrano, 2018). The government has taken certain steps to protect religious freedom, including legislative reforms that have improved the legal status of non-Orthodox religious groups (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Public Defender of Georgia, 2020). In 2011, amendments to the Civil Code allowed religious organizations to register as legal entities of public law, granting them legal recognition and certain rights previously reserved for the Georgian Orthodox Church (Papuashvili, 2015; Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2014).

Despite these improvements, challenges persist (Freedom House, 2020; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2019). Religious minorities continue to face barriers in building new places of worship, recovering properties confiscated during the Soviet period, and receiving state funding proportionate to their size (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Public Defender of Georgia, 2020). For example, Muslim communities have encountered opposition when attempting to build new mosques or reopen historic ones, often facing resistance from local Orthodox communities and clergy (Gogadze, 2016; Vateishvili, 2015).

Discrimination and tensions have occurred, frequently exacerbated by nationalist rhetoric that equates Georgian identity with Orthodox Christianity (Batiashvili, 2018; Serrano, 2018). Incidents of religious-based discrimination and violence, though not systematic, occur periodically, particularly against Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2018; Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2018). These incidents highlight the challenges of ensuring equal treatment for all religious communities in a society where one religion is so closely associated with national identity (Lomtadze, 2016; Sanikidze, 2012).

The government's response to these challenges has been mixed (Freedom House, 2020; Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2018). While official policy supports religious freedom and equality, in practice, authorities sometimes fail to adequately address discrimination or may even appear to favor the majority religion (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Public Defender of Georgia, 2020). This discrepancy between policy and practice reflects the political sensitivity of religious issues in Georgia and the government's reluctance to alienate the influential Orthodox Church (Janelidze, 2018; Serrano, 2018).

### **Interreligious Relations and Social Cohesion**

Interreligious relations play a crucial role in social cohesion and political stability (Tsintsadze, 2007; Vateishvili, 2015). While there is generally a tradition of coexistence, tensions can arise, particularly in regions with significant religious minority populations (Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2019; Sanikidze, 2012). The government's approach to managing these tensions and promoting interreligious dialogue is crucial for maintaining social harmony (Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2014; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015).

Georgia has established a State Agency for Religious Issues, which aims to foster dialogue between different religious communities and address issues of concern to religious minorities (Lomtadze, 2016; State Agency for Religious Issues, 2018). The agency has supported various initiatives to promote interreligious understanding and cooperation, including conferences, educational programs, and community projects (Government of Georgia, 2019; Janelidze, 2018).

Despite these efforts, interreligious tensions persist in some areas, often intertwined with ethnic and regional identities (Gogadze, 2016; Wheatley, 2009). In regions like Samtskhe-Javakheti, home to a significant Armenian Apostolic population, and Kvemo Kartli, with its large Azerbaijani Muslim community, religious differences sometimes overlap with linguistic and cultural distinctions, creating complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Reisner, 2009; Simonian, 2004).

The relationship between religious identity and civic belonging remains a challenge for Georgia's democratic development (Batiashvili, 2018; Serrano, 2018). Creating a political system that respects and includes the perspectives of all religious communities, including minorities, while acknowledging the historical and cultural significance of Orthodox Christianity to many Georgians, requires a delicate balance that has yet to be fully achieved (Janelidze, 2018; Public Defender of Georgia, 2020).

## **RELIGION AND GEORGIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

### **Geopolitical Position and Religious Identity**

Georgia's geopolitical position and its religious identity significantly influence its foreign policy (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015; Rapp, 2016). The country's aspiration for Euro-Atlantic integration sometimes conflicts with the conservative social values supported by the Orthodox Church (Cecire, 2013; Minesashvili, 2017). This tension creates a complex dynamic where Georgia simultaneously seeks closer ties with Western institutions while maintaining a strong religious identity that sometimes aligns more closely with traditional values emphasized in Orthodox countries like Russia (Chitanava, 2020; Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015).

The Church's influence on public attitudes toward foreign policy issues is substantial (Gurchiani, 2017; Minesashvili & Kachkachishvili, 2018). While the Church does not formally oppose Georgia's

European and NATO aspirations, it has expressed concerns about the cultural implications of Western integration, particularly regarding what it perceives as liberal values that conflict with Georgian traditions (Chitanava, 2020; Zedania, 2011). These concerns resonate with segments of the population who fear that closer ties with Europe might undermine Georgia's cultural and religious identity (Gvosdev, 2012; Minesashvili, 2017).

At the same time, Georgia's Orthodox identity creates certain cultural affinities with Russia, despite the political tensions between the two countries stemming from the 2008 war and Russia's ongoing occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Jones, 2015; Kimitaka, 2015). These religious and cultural connections complicate Georgia's relationship with Russia and influence how different segments of Georgian society view relations with their northern neighbor (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015; Serrano, 2018).

### **Shared Orthodox Heritage with Russia**

The shared Orthodox heritage with Russia adds a layer of complexity to Georgia's foreign relations (Curanović, 2012; Gavashelishvili, 2012). Although the Georgian Orthodox Church maintains independence from the Russian Orthodox Church, religious ties sometimes influence public attitudes and political decisions, particularly regarding relations with Russia (Kimitaka, 2015; Makarychev, 2018).

The Russian Orthodox Church has historically viewed the post-Soviet space as its canonical territory and has sought to maintain influence over Orthodox churches in former Soviet republics (Curanović, 2012; Leustean, 2014). While the Georgian Orthodox Church has resisted such influence and maintained its autocephalous status, there are still connections between the two churches that can affect bilateral relations (Coene, 2016; Warhola & Lehning, 2007).

Some Georgian clergy and laity feel a sense of religious kinship with Russia based on their shared Orthodox faith, despite political differences (Makarychev, 2018; Serrano, 2018). This sentiment can sometimes translate into support for closer relations with Russia or resistance to policies perceived as anti-Russian (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015; Kucera, 2013). The Russian government has occasionally attempted to leverage these religious connections as a form of soft power in Georgia, presenting itself as a defender of traditional Orthodox values against Western secularism (Gvosdev, 2011; Torbakov, 2017).

However, it is important to note that the Georgian Orthodox Church has generally supported Georgia's territorial integrity and has criticized Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states (Dzidziguri, 2016; Matveeva, 2018). This demonstrates that religious affinity does not necessarily override national interests in the Church's approach to foreign policy issues (Kimitaka, 2015; Zedania, 2011).

### **Tension Between Traditional Religious Values and European Liberal Democratic Norms**

As Georgia seeks closer ties with the European Union, tensions between traditional religious values and European liberal democratic norms become more apparent (Ó Beacháin & Coene, 2014; Tsuladze, 2018). Issues such as human rights, minority protection, and secularism are areas where religious perspectives intersect with political aspirations (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016; Mestvirishvili et al., 2017).

The EU's emphasis on LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and religious pluralism sometimes conflicts with the conservative social positions advocated by the Georgian Orthodox Church (Kakabadze, 2016; Reisner, 2018). This has created challenges for Georgian policymakers who must navigate between meeting EU expectations regarding human rights and democratic reforms while respecting the influential role of the Church in Georgian society (Nodia, 2016; Tsuladze, 2018).

These tensions were evident during debates over anti-discrimination legislation required as part of Georgia's visa liberalization agreement with the EU (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Mestvirishvili et al., 2017). The Church strongly opposed provisions protecting LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination,

leading to modifications in the legislation and highlighting the challenges of reconciling religious conservatism with European liberal norms (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016; Kintsurashvili, 2015).

Similarly, the Association Agreement signed between Georgia and the EU in 2014 contains provisions related to human rights, including minority rights, that have sometimes been criticized by religious conservatives who fear they will undermine traditional Georgian values (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2017; Tsuladze, 2018). These concerns have been exploited by anti-Western political forces who portray European integration as a threat to Georgia's religious and cultural identity (Kakachia et al., 2018; Kintsurashvili, 2015).

The government has attempted to address these tensions by emphasizing that European integration is compatible with preserving Georgian cultural and religious traditions (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2017; Nodia, 2016). Officials often argue that Georgia can maintain its unique identity while still adopting European standards of governance and human rights protection (Kakachia et al., 2018; Ó Beacháin & Coene, 2014). However, reconciling these sometimes competing visions remains a significant challenge for Georgia's foreign policy (Reisner, 2018; Tsuladze, 2018).

**Discussion.** The analysis of religion's influence on Georgian politics reveals several key patterns and tensions that characterize contemporary church-state relations in the country (Chitanava, 2020; Metreveli, 2016). First, the Georgian Orthodox Church occupies a position of considerable institutional power that extends beyond the purely religious sphere (Gurchiani, 2017; Serrano, 2018). This influence stems not only from its legal privileges but also from its deep historical connection to Georgian national identity and the high levels of public trust it enjoys (Batiashvili, 2018; Kekelia, 2014). In a society where traditional institutions have been destabilized by the collapse of the Soviet system, economic transitions, and political instability, the Church represents continuity and stability (Metreveli, 2016; Zedania, 2011).

Second, the relationship between religious identity and political legitimacy in Georgia presents both opportunities and challenges for democratic development (Janelidze, 2018; Ladaria, 2012). On one hand, the Church has sometimes played a constructive role in promoting national unity and providing moral guidance during periods of transition (Grdzeliidze, 2010; Wheatley, 2017). On the other hand, its conservative social positions and influence over policy-making have sometimes limited the rights of minorities and constrained the parameters of democratic debate (Chitanava, 2020; Freedom House, 2020).

Third, the Georgian case illustrates how religious institutions can shape a country's geopolitical orientation (Curanović, 2012; Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015). The Church's emphasis on traditional values creates a cultural counterweight to Georgia's official pro-Western foreign policy, producing a complex dynamic where the country simultaneously pursues European integration while maintaining certain cultural affinities with Orthodox Russia (Coene, 2016; Tsuladze, 2018). This dynamic is exploited by various political actors, both domestic and foreign, who seek to promote particular visions of Georgia's place in the regional and global order (Gvosdev, 2011; Torbakov, 2017).

Fourth, the status of religious minorities serves as a critical test case for Georgia's commitment to pluralism and equality (Lomtadze, 2016; Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2018). Despite legal protections, the continued marginalization of non-Orthodox religious communities in various aspects of public life indicates a gap between formal rights and lived reality (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Public Defender of Georgia, 2020). How Georgia addresses this gap will be crucial for its democratic consolidation and its ability to build an inclusive civic identity that transcends religious affiliation (Papuashvili, 2015; Serrano, 2018).

Finally, the tensions between traditional religious values and liberal democratic norms in Georgia reflect broader global debates about the proper relationship between religion and politics in the 21st century (Berger, 1999; Karpov, 2010). These tensions are not unique to Georgia but take on particular significance in a post-Soviet context where religious and national identities have been closely intertwined in opposition to the enforced secularism of the communist period (Gurchiani, 2017; Pelkmans, 2009).

## CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS OF CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

### Concerns About Democratic Processes

The close relationship between church and state raises certain concerns among critics (Batiashvili, 2018; Janelidze, 2018). Critics argue that the Church's influence may undermine democratic processes and equal treatment of all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs (Papuashvili, 2015; Transparency International Georgia, 2016).

The privileged position of the Georgian Orthodox Church in public life and its influence over policy decisions have led some observers to question whether Georgia can truly develop as a secular, pluralistic democracy while one religious institution holds such significant sway over political processes (Nodia, 2016; Serrano, 2018). These concerns are particularly acute in areas where the Church's positions conflict with principles of individual rights and freedoms that are fundamental to liberal democracy (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Papuashvili, 2015).

For example, the Church's opposition to LGBTQ+ rights has contributed to a climate where discrimination and violence against sexual minorities are commonplace and often go unpunished (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016; Mestvirishvili et al., 2017). Similarly, the Church's influence has sometimes limited the space for public debate on sensitive social issues, as politicians are reluctant to adopt positions that might put them at odds with the Church (Kintsurashvili, 2015; Minesashvili & Kachkachishvili, 2018).

The Church's involvement in electoral politics, even if unofficial, raises questions about the fairness and openness of democratic competition (Cecire, 2013; Transparency International Georgia, 2016). When Church officials signal support for particular candidates or parties, it can create pressure on religious voters and potentially distort electoral outcomes (Funke, 2014; Minesashvili, 2017). This is especially problematic given the Church's moral authority and the high level of trust it enjoys among the population (Gurchiani, 2017; International Republican Institute, 2019).

These dynamics highlight the tension between majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism in Georgia's democratic development (Berglund, 2014; Nodia, 2016). While the Church's influence reflects the religious preferences of the majority of Georgians, liberal democracy also requires the protection of minority rights and the maintenance of state neutrality on religious matters (Janelidze, 2018; Papuashvili, 2015).

### Balancing Religious Tradition with Pluralism

Ensuring that the political system respects and includes the perspectives of all religious communities, including minorities, remains a challenge (Lomtadze, 2016; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015). While Georgia has made progress in establishing legal frameworks for religious freedom and equality, the practical implementation of these principles in a society where one religion is so closely tied to national identity poses ongoing challenges (Janelidze, 2018; Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2018).

The government faces the difficult task of acknowledging the historical and cultural significance of Orthodox Christianity while ensuring that this recognition does not translate into discrimination against non-Orthodox citizens (Public Defender of Georgia, 2020; Serrano, 2018). This balance is particularly challenging in areas such as education, where the introduction of religious content in public schools must be handled in a way that respects the diversity of religious beliefs among students (Crego, 2014; Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2014).

Similarly, state funding for religious institutions must be allocated in a manner that is perceived as fair and non-discriminatory (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Papuashvili, 2015). The current system, which provides substantial financial support to the Georgian Orthodox Church while offering more limited funding to other religious groups, has been criticized as inequitable and potentially unconstitutional (Lomtadze, 2016; Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2018).

The protection of religious minorities' rights, particularly their ability to build and maintain places of worship, remains contentious (Gogadze, 2016; Sanikidze, 2012). Local authorities often face pressure from Orthodox communities when making decisions about permits for non-Orthodox religious buildings,

creating situations where legal rights exist on paper but are difficult to exercise in practice (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Public Defender of Georgia, 2020).

Creating a truly pluralistic society requires not only legal protections but also a change in social attitudes and public discourse (Batiashvili, 2018; Serrano, 2018). As long as Georgian national identity is strongly associated with Orthodox Christianity in the popular imagination, non-Orthodox citizens may continue to feel marginalized or excluded from full participation in national life (Lomtadze, 2016; Zedania, 2011).

### **Perspectives on Church-State Separation**

Debates about the appropriate relationship between church and state continue in Georgian society (Nodia, 2016; Serrano, 2018). These debates reflect broader questions about Georgia's identity as a nation and its future development as a democratic state (Batiashvili, 2018; Zedania, 2011).

Some advocate for a stricter separation between religious institutions and government, arguing that this is necessary for the development of a truly secular democracy (Papuashvili, 2015; Tsuladze, 2018). They point to models in Western Europe and North America, where religious institutions may have social influence but lack formal political power or special legal status (Berger, 1999; Casanova, 2011).

Others argue for a model that recognizes the Georgian Orthodox Church's historical and cultural importance while still maintaining the principle of religious freedom and equality (Gavashelishvili, 2012; Janelidze, 2018). This perspective sees no contradiction between acknowledging the Church's special role in Georgian culture and upholding the rights of religious minorities and non-religious citizens (Grdzeldze, 2010; Ladaria, 2012).

The Constitutional Agreement of 2002 attempted to strike a balance between these perspectives by recognizing the „special role“ of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country's history while affirming the principle of religious freedom (Corso, 2009; Papuashvili, 2015). However, the implementation of this agreement and its implications for church-state relations remain subjects of ongoing debate (Lomtadze, 2016; Serrano, 2018).

These debates are not merely theoretical but have practical implications for policy decisions across various domains, from education to healthcare to social welfare (Crego, 2014; Transparency International Georgia, 2016). How Georgia resolves these tensions will significantly influence its future development as a democratic state and its ability to integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions while maintaining its distinct cultural and religious identity (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015; Ó Beacháin & Coene, 2014).

**Conclusion.** The influence of religious factors on Georgia's political processes is profound and multifaceted (Chitanava, 2020; Metreveli, 2016). The Georgian Orthodox Church plays a significant role in shaping national identity, public policy, and political discourse (Gurchiani, 2017; Minesashvili & Kachkachishvili, 2018). While it provides moral guidance and promotes social cohesion, its influence also presents challenges regarding church-state relations, religious freedom, and diversity (Freedom House, 2020; Serrano, 2018).

The intersection of religion and politics in Georgia raises important questions about the balance between respecting religious traditions and fostering a pluralistic and democratic society (Nodia, 2016; Zedania, 2011). As Georgia continues its path toward Euro-Atlantic integration, navigating the tensions between traditional religious values and liberal democratic norms will be crucial for its future development (Kakachia et al., 2018; Tsuladze, 2018).

The relationship between religion and politics in Georgia illustrates the complex dynamics that emerge when religious identity is closely tied to national consciousness (Batiashvili, 2018; Gurchiani, 2017). It demonstrates both the constructive role that religious institutions can play in providing moral guidance and social stability during periods of transition, and the challenges that arise when religious influence extends into the political sphere in ways that may affect the rights and status of those who do not share the majority faith (Metreveli, 2016; Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2018).

As Georgia moves forward, finding a balance that respects its religious heritage while embracing the principles of pluralism, equality, and democratic governance will be essential (Janelidze, 2018; Public Defender of Georgia, 2020). This balance will require ongoing dialogue among religious institutions, government authorities, civil society, and citizens about the proper role of religion in public life and the meaning of Georgian identity in the 21st century (Kekelia, 2014; Wheatley, 2017).

The Georgian experience offers valuable insights into the broader question of how societies with strong religious traditions can develop inclusive and democratic political systems that respect diversity while honoring cultural heritage (Berger, 1999; Casanova, 2011). It suggests that this process is neither straightforward nor predetermined, but rather involves continuous negotiation and adaptation as societies evolve and engage with the wider world (Karpov, 2010; Pelkmans, 2006).

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