Bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia have long been complicated, oscillating between independence and subordination. There is a fundamental incompatibility between Georgia and Russia today, between the former’s democratic aspirations and the latter’s politics of “spheres of influence” and strategic conservatism. In addition, the complex interaction between the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) drives some core dynamics in the bilateral relationship. This is reinforced by the close integration of the GOC within Georgian politics.

Located on the edge of Europe, surrounded by assertive empires, Georgia has had to fight for its statehood and its religion for centuries. In 1783, Heraclius II, the King of Georgian principality Kartli and Kakheti, concluded the Treaty of Georgievsk with Russian empress Catherine II, which turned Georgia into a Russian protectorate. Georgia would not pursue its own foreign policy without Russia’s prior consent and would participate in all military operations conducted by the Russian Empire; in return, the kingdom would maintain its statehood and was guaranteed military-political patronage.

This protectorate would be short-lived: in 1801, Russian emperor Paul I abolished the Kartli and Kakheti Kingdom and annexed it (as well as other principalities such as Imereti, Guria, Samegrelo, and Abkhazia). A century later, in May 1918, Georgia regained its statehood for a mere three years; in 1921, Bolshevik Russia invaded Georgia and abolished its statehood again, only to be regained after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries were broken in 2008 after Moscow invaded and recognized the self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia (hereafter Tskhinvali Region). Today, 20 percent of Georgia’s territory is illegally occupied by Russia, and Russian forces continue installation of barbed wire fences in those territories while intensifying military presence on Georgian soil.

At the same time, the two countries have intensified cooperation on trade, economic, infrastructure, and cultural issues. Russian companies such as Inter RAO, Lukoil, VTB, and Beeline own a considerable share of Georgia’s energy sector, information technologies, media, communications, and banking.

In 2012, when the Georgian Dream political coalition of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili (who made his fortune in Russia) won the parliamentary elections, the new government announced a normalization process with Russia. This contributed to strengthening economic ties. Today, Georgia’s economy depends on Russia for tourism, foreign trade, and remittances; Georgian exports to Russia have risen to


Nevertheless, expectations that economic cooperation would lead to political reconciliation have not been realized. As a NATO-aspirant country with an association agreement with the European Union, Georgia has slowly stepped away from Russia’s political orbit. This is reflected in popular opinion as well: in spite of the Russian occupation, economic pressure, and information attacks, a majority of the Georgian population still supports integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Throughout the past decade, this figure has rarely been under 70 percent, most often ranging between 70 and 80 percent.\(^\text{288}\)

**ORTHODOXY IN GEORGIA: POWER AND INFLUENCE**

The Kremlin has used a range of hybrid tactics to retain its influence, using various points of leverage. Chief among them is religious affiliation, pitting Orthodoxy and “traditional values” against liberal democracy. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of Georgia’s population is Christian Orthodox: out of over 3.7 million people (not including occupied territories), 83.4 percent belong to the Orthodox church (the Russian minority in Georgia represents 0.7 percent of the population).\(^\text{289}\)

Ever since Georgia adopted Christianity as an official religion in 326 AC, it has been one of the key determinants of Georgian statehood and identity. The cycle of brief independence and prolonged periods of subordination between Georgia and Russia has played out within the GOC as well, oscillating between autocephaly (or independence) from and domination by the ROC—its “Brother in Faith.” After almost a hundred years of subordination, including the prohibition of religious services in Georgian and the closure of more than 800 churches, the GOC declared autocephaly in March 1917, a year before the state’s independence.\(^\text{290}\) It was again suppressed under early Soviet rule, but after Stalin restored the patriarchate of Russia, the new patriarch of Moscow boosted his own legitimacy by restoring the Patriarchate of Georgia and recognizing its autocephaly in 1943. This act transferred all parishes, churches, and monasteries located on the territory of Georgia to the jurisdiction of the GOC, meaning the ROC no longer possesses any official property in Georgia.

Because of this history, the GOC holds a special status in the country. Constitutionally, it enjoys special privileges such as tax exemption, annual budgetary support (on average €25 million per year, or approximately $7.3 million), the exemption of clerics from mandatory military service, and immunity

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for patriarchs. The state ensures chaplaincy within the defense forces as well as in penitentiary facilities, and the state and the GOC can implement joint programs in the education system.291

The GOC also remains one of the major property owners in Georgia: dozens of commercial and noncommercial organizations have been created with the participation of the patriarchate.292 Reports on the GOC expenses and financial activities are not public, and the state audit service is not allowed to inspect its finances. This is in spite of the GOC receiving numerous gifts and donations from various donors of different reputation and citizenship, including businessmen operating in Russia.293

The history of the GOC, its current role, and its privileges have bestowed upon it a central role in the country’s socio-political life. Although its public support has decreased in recent years (75 percent deemed its performance “good” in 2015), it remains quite high (50 percent in 2019) and, importantly, higher than any other state institution besides the army.294 Such credibility makes the GOC a valuable target of influence, whereby gaining its support is advantageous for any internal or external actor. In Georgia, gaining control over the GOC means control over the shaping of public opinion and political decisions. As a powerful actor in the Georgian political system, it is no surprise the GOC has attracted Russia’s interest in the context of its pursuit of “strategic revanchism” and politics of “spheres of influence.”

This pursuit has involved a quest for influence within the Orthodox world, most recently exemplified by the declaration of autocephaly by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2018 (granted by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople). The ROC fiercely opposed this move and launched another front in the propaganda battle, into which the GOC has been drawn.295 In 2019, the chairman of the ROC’s Department of External Church Relations, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), directed a veiled threat at the GOC. When asked what consequences the GOC’s potential recognition of the OCU would carry for the status of the Georgian Patriarchate in the occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, he noted many high-ranking hierarchs were well


292 “საქართველოს საპატრიარქოსთან დაკავშირებული ბიზნესკომპანიები და სხვა ორგანიზაციები [Business companies and other organizations related to the Georgian Patriarchate], Transparency International Georgia, September 5, 2014, https://www.transparency.ge/ge/blog/sakartvelos-sapatriarkostan-dakavshirebuli-bizneskompaniebi-da-skhya-organizaciebi/; and “დაფინანსება, მიწები, მოძრავი ქონება — როგორ იზრდებოდა საპატრიარქოს ქონება წლების განმავლობაში” [Funding, land, movable property - how the Patriarchate’s property has grown over the years], News.On, May 7, 2020, https://on.ge/story/55673-%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b3%d0%b0%d0%bc%d0%bc%d0%b0%d1%80-%d0%b2%d0%bd%d0%b5%d0%b7%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%b5.%

293 “პატრიარქის ფერისცვალება” [Transfiguration of the Patriarch], iFact, November 12, 2020, https://www.ifact.ge/patriarqisferistsvaleba/.


aware of the threat the GOC may face in case of recognition.\textsuperscript{296} The Georgian Patriarchate considered it a direct threat—and a bold one given that Russian churches located on the territory of Georgia are under jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Georgia—although it has not yet recognized the OCU’s autocephaly.

At the same time as Ukrainian autocephaly was coming into play, a cascade of scandals surfaced within the GOC amid leadership struggles.\textsuperscript{297} Different groups struggling for power reportedly used kompromat—compromising material—to blackmail one another and accused each other of being pro-Russian.\textsuperscript{298} No one was spared, including the patriarch himself and Metropolitan Archbishop Shio (Mujiri), whom the patriarch had appointed Locum Tenens (interim leader).\textsuperscript{299} This war of kompromat has further escalated as the struggle for power within the GOC enters a critical transition phase (Patriarch Ilia II is 88 years old and frail), and Russia has a clear stake in whomever succeeds Ilia II.\textsuperscript{300}

**ROC INROADS INTO THE OCCUPIED REGIONS OF ABKHAZIA AND TSKHINVALI**

The Kremlin’s “spheres of influence” push is most visible in the occupied territories Russia invaded in 2008. Despite the ROC’s official recognition of the GOC’s canonical authority over the occupied regions, it has taken steps to slowly inch out the latter and impose its own influence, in furtherance of the Kremlin’s objectives.

As a result of conflict in the 1990s and the 2008 invasion, which compounded the first conflict’s population displacement, more than 400,000 people (combining internally displaced people and refugees) were expelled from the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali or displaced, including clerics.\textsuperscript{301} Despite a break in diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia, relations between the GOC and ROC remained cordial. Notably, then-patriarch Alexy II of Russia did not support the Ossetian and

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\textsuperscript{298} “მღვდელმთავრების ნაწილი საქართველოს მიერ უკრაინის ეკლესიის ავტოკეფალიის აღიარების გაჭიანურებას რუსეთს უკავშირებს” [Some priests link Georgia’s delay in recognizing the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church to Russia], FormulaNews, October 14, 2019, https://formulanews.ge/News/12274; and “პატრიარქის ფერისცვალება” [Transfiguration of the Patriarch], iFact; and “ჭორს ავრცელებენ, რომ პატრიარქის წინააღმდეგ კომპრომატების გამოქვეყნება იგეგმება” [Rumors spreading that compromising materials are planned to be published against the Patriarch], Akhali Taoba, March 19, 2018, https://akhalitaoba.ge/2018/03/tchors-avrtselenben-thithqos-p/.

\textsuperscript{299} “ილია მეორემ საპატრიარქოს ტახტის მოსაყდრედ მიტროპოლიტ შიო დაასახელა” [Ilia II nominated Metropolitan Shio to ascend the throne of the Patriarchate], REGinfo, November 23, 2017, https://reginfo.ge/people/item/3786-ilia-meorem-sapatriarqos-taxtis-mosaybdred-mitropoliti-shio-daasaxela.


Abkhazian Orthodox Churches in their desire to secede from the GOC. Indeed, there were some limits to the pronouncements the ROC could make without risking a secession of its own: should the Patriarchate of Russia create a precedent for change in canonical territory, it would draw the ire of the Orthodox world, in which the principle of territorial allegiance is of the utmost importance. This decision would also cast doubt upon the Moscow Patriarchate’s authority over the territories of other countries (e.g., Belarus and Moldova).

Nevertheless, in 2008, the then-head of the ROC’s Foreign Relations Kirill (now patriarch of Russia) stated that while the ROC considered the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali as canonical territory of the GOC, both sides should look for a “transitional model” given the GOC’s inability to carry out its activities there. Kirill’s statement was a de facto recognition of the restriction of the GOC’s canonical rights in the occupied regions.

Since his enthronement, Patriarch Kirill has actively pursued this political line, and ROC activities in the occupied regions have taken place in three main domains: ecclesiastical-religious, political, and cultural-humanitarian.

**Ecclesiastical-Religious Dimension**

Many Georgian clerics left Abkhazia following the conflict. Since then, Besarian Aplia, who has supported separatists and has faced criminal allegations in the past, has been elevated to headship of the eparchy and awarded twice by the Russian Patriarchate. In 2009, he announced the independence of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church, which de facto implemented Kirill’s “transitional model.” In spite of the Holy Synod of the GOC making Patriarch Ilia II the Metropolitan of Tskhum-Abkhazia and Bichvinta, representatives of the ROC never address him with this title. Furthermore,


the ROC has subordinated the Tskhinvali Region to the Vladikavkaz eparchy. ROC clerics have repeatedly visited the territories and jointly administered divine service.

The GOC has protested these moves numerous times, but the ROC has unabashedly pursued its policy, which is in full alignment with the Kremlin’s other activities in the occupied territories. Its goal is to substitute the GOC with the ROC; SPAS, the Russian Orthodox TV channel, even announced a competition to select the best architectural design for a new Russian church in the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali that will provide divine service for Russian army garrisons deployed there.

**Political Dimension**

The Moscow Patriarchate and Russian officials often use the same wording in their correspondence and meetings with separatist leaders, suggesting the patriarchate closely follows the Kremlin’s policy when it comes to the occupied regions. The ROC and its patriarch are in regular communication with the so-called Abkhazian and South Ossetian presidents. The head of the GOC has publicly condemned Kirill’s actions as “regrettable and absolutely incomprehensible,” accusing him of supporting and recognizing separatist regimes established by force.

In one instance, in 2008, Bishop Theophanes of Stavropol and Vladikavkaz (hierarch until 2011) hosted then-foreign minister of France Bernard Kouchner on a visit to the Tskhinvali Region during the August War. The bishop asserted that Russian armed forces interdicted a genocide perpetrated by Georgians against the Ossetian people, a line often used by the Kremlin or its affiliates to distract from attacks against Georgians in the region and their displacement. The hierarchs that followed Theophanes also made political statements about the situation in the region, criticizing Georgia, NATO,
and the West in line with Moscow’s official accounts.313

**Cultural-Humanitarian Dimension**

Russia has carried out a Russification campaign in the occupied territories through the imposition of the Russian language, information campaigns, the Kremlin’s compatriot policy, and other cultural-humanitarian activities.314 Indeed, “humanitarian cooperation” and “unified cultural space” were mentioned in the Agreements of Strategic Cooperation and Integration concluded between Moscow and the occupied territories in 2014.315 The goal appears to be alienating those living in the territories from the rest of Georgia; religion and the institution of the church play a specific role in this process.

Some of these efforts have erased Georgian presence and Georgia’s Christian heritage in the occupied territories. These actions and their motivations are reminiscent of the policy the ROC has conducted toward Georgia since 1801. As a result of the “refurbishment” carried out by the Abkhazian occupation forces and some Russian companies, churches dating back a thousand years were whitewashed, historical Georgian inscriptions were removed, and a Georgian dome was replaced by a Russian dome.316

The ROC has tolerated this breakdown in humanitarian principles and respect for religious sites, showcasing some ideological incongruities in its position.317 Ethnic Georgians in the occupied territories have faced harsh conditions, cut off from healthcare access and, in the worst cases, have faced acts of ethnic cleansing.318 The Metropolitan Isaiah of Tskhinvali and Nikozi has seen his right to administer divine service and right of movement increasingly restricted.319 Christian values and communion between the ROC and GOC should have prompted the ROC to support the Georgian

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archbishop’s right to administer religious services, yet those have been restricted in his own canonical territory, while the ROC has remained silent.

OTHER LEVERAGE POINTS: TRADITIONAL VALUES AND PROXIES OF INFLUENCE

NGOs and Foundations

Russian soft power in Georgia has ramped up since 2008 along with information operations through the ROC and such organizations as Russkiy Mir ("Russian World") and the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund (hereafter Gorchakov Fund). Officially, the ROC does not have the right to perform any activity on the territory of Georgia. However, since 2009 the GOC has allowed the ROC to administer divine service for Russian-speaking parishes through a representative in Georgia, who relays the ROC’s position on a variety of issues.320 The ROC’s official activities in Georgia are limited to this, but it helps further the Kremlin’s political interests in informal ways through the Orthodox connection. With its support and funding, other organizations and foundations, as well as self-proclaimed patriotic organizations and individuals claiming to be defenders of “tradition,” have become more active. And, as in other countries across Europe, referenda have been used to drive societal division over “traditional values” issues that rally both conservative and pro-Russian groups.

Extremist organizations and pro-Russian political and civic groups currently operating in Georgia have indeed sought to affiliate with the GOC and manipulate public opinion using the slogan “defending faith” through the use of referenda to either create or heighten internal divisions. In 2016, an initiative group comprising representatives of the Georgian March (see below) and other radical organizations collected more than 200,000 signatures to request a referendum to amend the constitution and define civil marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman.321 Then-president Giorgi Margvelashvili refused to hold the vote for two reasons. First, by law a referendum should be held on the entire territory of Georgia; holding one with 20 percent of the country under occupation, with no easy way of organizing it in those areas, would represent an act of territorial concession to Russia.322 (The last referendum in Georgia was held in 2003, well before the Russian invasion of the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.) Second, Georgian legislation already regulates the issue of marriage, defining family as a relationship between a man and a woman.323 This was akin to pushing on an open door, reinforcing the optics of a calculated campaign that could in turn strengthen legal arguments for Russia’s occupation of the regions of Abkhazia and


Tskhinvali. Indeed, it is surprising that the referendum’s backers—who spent significant resources on public campaigns and signature collection and complied closely with all legislative procedures (suggesting professional lawyers were involved)—did not know this issue was already addressed in the law. Through a large media campaign, they also suggested the government of Georgia was unable to defend national values—implying others could in its stead, such as Russia.

Over the president’s objections, the Georgian Dream-led government—which at the time was preparing for elections and courting support from the GOC—supported including the marriage issue in the constitution. This highlighted, once again, the GOC’s central political role. Finally, in 2017, the Georgian parliament approved amendments to the constitution without a referendum, and marriage was defined as “a union between a woman and a man for the purpose of creating a family.” Though nothing has changed from a legal perspective, the groups involved in the campaign were able to showcase their support for and defense of Georgian traditions and identity. They also forced a public debate over contentious and potentially divisive issues.

Other organizations supporting the Kremlin’s line have been active in this space as well, the most potent example being the Gorchakov Fund. It assists in implementing Russian foreign policy goals, for example, through “provid[ing] assistance in creating a favorable public opinion of Russia abroad.” In 2013, the fund opened the Yevgeny Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center, which offers courses on Russian language and culture. Its head is Dimitry Lortkipanidze, who is known for his anti-Western political activity: he is one of the leaders of the ultranationalist “Georgian March,” which started as a civic organization but later turned into a political party and ran in the 2020 parliamentary elections. Estonian Foreign Intelligence deems the party a threat to internal cohesion:

The Georgian March . . . plays a major role in [propaganda to promote so-called traditional values in Georgia]. Its mission is to resist the values supposedly imposed on Georgian society by the West, allegedly threatening the very existence of the Georgian people and society. . . . It is aimed at rattling public support for joining the European Union and NATO . . . as well as creating internal tensions and escalating conflict within Georgian society. Among the leaders

324 Interestingly, Georgian Dream’s argument at the time was that allowing this amendment would prevent “certain groups” from galvanizing homophobic, anti-Western sentiment: Ron Synovitz, “Georgian Dream Doubles Down on Same-Sex Marriage Ban,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 24, 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/georgian-dream-doubles-down-same-sex-marriage-ban/28577114.htm.


326 “პატრიოტთა ალიანსი”: პარლამენტში თუ მოვხვდებით ქორწინებაზე ცვლილების თემას წამოვწევთ [‘Patriotic Alliance’: If we get in parliament, we will raise the issue of marriage change], iPress, August 11, 2016, https://ipress.ge/new/patriotthia-aliansi-parla/; and სანდრო ბრეგაძე: სასაცილოა, მომავალი პარლამენტი მუშაობას ქორწინების დეფინიციის თემით იწყებს [Sandro Bregadze: Ridiculous for the future parliament to start working on the topic of marriage definition], iPress, October 13, 2016, https://ipress.ge/new/sandro-bregadze-sasatsilo/.


328 Nata Dzvelishvili “From a Pro-Russian to a Pro-Georgian Narrative,” Foreign Policy Centre, July 18, 2018, https://fpc.org.uk/from-a-pro-russian-to-a-pro-georgian-narrative.
of the Georgian March are several individuals with ties to Russia and its influence activities.329

Pro-Russian and Anti-Western Clerics
The GOC is not a monolith; it is not rare to see some bishops publicly deviate from the patriarchate’s or the patriarch’s official position. The GOC has welcomed the ROC’s position on some cultural issues, but not on political ones such as the status of the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. The Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia officially supports Georgia’s Western integration, but that is not the case for other hierarchs. In 2014, ahead of the signing of the association agreement between Georgia and the European Union, Ilia II reaffirmed his long-standing support for Georgia’s future EU accession and promised the GOC would work to achieve this objective.330 On the opposite side, Archpriest Tadeoz Saralidze once stated during a sermon that he sees Georgia’s future only with Russia. He considers Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic, to be a devoted son of Chechnya and believes Russian flags should fly together with Georgian flags in all the eparchies of Georgia.331

These pronouncements can seem paradoxical, presenting Russia as a savior in spite of its abolition of GOC autocephaly and Georgian statehood in the past. The focus is instead on a decadent West that will pervert Georgian values. Ioane (Gamrekeli), the metropolitan bishop of Kutaisi and Gaenati, published an extensive article after his ascent to metropolitan addressing foreign policy and Georgia’s Western orientation. In it he affirmed that “being with Russia is an issue of divine providence for Georgia and we should not oppose it” and warned there are attempts to draw Georgia away from its path of natural development. In his view, European values that contradict Christianity are imposed upon the Georgian nation, for example, “nontraditional sexual orientation”—a narrative common in Russia and other “traditional” constituencies.332

LGBTQ+ Discrimination, “Family Values,” and Populism
The GOC as a whole has long adopted a negative attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community on religious grounds, an attitude shared to some degree by other monotheist faiths. Yet in the case of Metropolitan Ioane, his article addressed these issues not in the context of religious teachings but in the light of politics. The piece closely matches the Russian narrative of European and Western forces imposing “nontraditional sexual relations” and LGBTQ+ propaganda onto other countries.

Before its adoption in 2014, the GOC categorically opposed the law on the elimination of all forms of discrimination, which defined direct and indirect forms of discrimination and established basic legal mechanisms against such discrimination. It played an important role in harmonizing Georgian legislation with EU requirements, which contributed to the visa liberalization process for Georgia. Nevertheless, the GOC viewed the law as the legalization of a “deadly sin” due to its inclusion of “gender identity” and “sexual orientation” in the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination. Various radical groups joined with representatives of the GOC to oppose the law in spite of its rewards, with some clerics reportedly warning Georgian Dream lawmakers of consequences for going against the patriarch’s will. They harnessed religious feelings against the legislation by claiming Georgia was being compelled to change its identity and abandon its traditions.

Beyond this general positioning, some clerics have been much more extreme in their views than the patriarchate, mixing homophobia with xenophobia and anti-Semitism. In 2013, on the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, thousands of people, led by priests, surged through police cordons and attacked a group of peaceful anti-homophobia demonstrators. Some of these clerics were members of the Orthodox Parents’ Union, a radical organization that had been involved in prior violent events. One of its leaders, the Archpriest David Isakadze, had been convicted several times in his secular life. There are many such examples, with the same messages appearing repeatedly, that the West wants to demoralize Georgia, that Georgians of different faiths are not Georgians of full value, and that Georgia should not accept migrants (particularly from non-Christian countries). Anti-Semitic statements and appeals to an eternal alliance with “co-religionist Russia” are often mixed in.

In July 2021, organizers of the Tbilisi Pride march were forced to cancel the parade after violent protesters—among them Orthodox priests—stormed the headquarters of LGBTQ+ activists. Local authorities had failed to provide adequate security for Pride marchers, and a TV cameraman covering the anti-Pride protests was attacked; Lekso Lashkarava later succumbed to his injuries.

violence, coupled with the perception that the government did not do enough to protect activists and journalists, further inflamed political tensions and has led to calls for Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili to step down. These demands were reinforced by the fact that Gharibashvili had argued the march should not have been planned in the first place and concerns over the government’s approach to freedom of the press.

Another key issue of concern for conservative groups and the GOC has been the protection of the family. Demography is a topical issue in Georgia given its small population and drives some narratives around existential threats to the Georgian way of life. Population growth has been on a downward trend in Georgia and is estimated to decline by 12 percent by 2050. This reality makes it easier to manipulate public worries around the “protection of family purity” (rather than confront the drivers of these demographic trends) and use it as an instrument of anti-Western politics.

In 2016, the 10th conference of the World Congress of Families (WCF) was organized in Tbilisi, entitled “Civilization at the Crossroads: The Natural Family as a Bulwark of Freedom and Human Values.” The patriarchate blessed the meeting, and many clerics actively participated in it (former U.S. president George W. Bush also sent a letter of support to the gathering). Some of the key messages pointed to U.S. foreign policy as supporting homosexuality in the world, accused the West of exporting all kinds of perversion and misfortune, and lamented immoral and perverted lifestyles being imposed on Russia, Georgia, and other Orthodox countries.

**International Organizations**

International organizations also represent an important platform for Russia’s “Orthodox Diplomacy.” The ROC actively cooperates with UN agencies and the Council of Europe, while its representatives participate in the meetings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as in the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches at the European Union. Russia also has a leading role in the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO). Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian member of parliament, has been chairman of the assembly since 2018, a strange ideological position.

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given his membership in the Russian Communist Party.\textsuperscript{348} He is also the coordinator of the Interfractional Group for the Defense of Christian Values in the State Duma of the Russian Federation.\textsuperscript{349}

Gavrilov is at the center of a public row that set off changes from which Georgia is still reeling today. In 2019, the IAO General Assembly took place in Tbilisi on the initiative of some Georgian members of parliament who aimed to score political points by appealing to Orthodox constituencies. However, the visit of a Russian delegation (Russia continues to illegally occupy over 20 percent of Georgian territory) and the optics of Gavrilov sitting on the Georgian parliament speaker’s chair sparked intense public protests, today known as “Gavrilov’s night.”\textsuperscript{350} Initially peaceful protests turned violent that evening as police resorted to tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse demonstrations, resulting in hundreds of injuries and arrests and provoking calls for the government’s resignation.

Although the session was ultimately cut short and Gavrilov left Georgia, blaming the protests on “fake news” over his past involvement in armed conflicts, the incident had lasting repercussions.\textsuperscript{351} For one, it served to highlight broader public apprehension about the ruling Georgian Dream party’s backsliding on democracy and its perceived closeness to Russia. These concerns were only amplified when Georgian Dream chair Bidzina Ivanishvili appointed then-interior minister Giorgi Gakharia as the new prime minister—in spite of calls for Gakharia’s dismissal in light of excessive police force on June 20 and degraded public trust in government. Several opposition parties also seized on the moment to demand changes to Georgia’s mixed electoral system that would give more weight to proportional representation, setting up months of negotiations mediated by Western diplomats. The event also led to a downturn in relations with Russia—President Vladimir Putin temporarily prohibited Russian airlines from flying to Georgia—which remains a contentious issue. In many ways, “Gavrilov’s night” was a test of resilience for Georgian society that produced positive changes. However, the incident illustrated how the IAO remains an instrument of foreign policy influence for the Kremlin.\textsuperscript{352}

Some individuals are also involved in spreading “pro-family” messages and supporting closer ties with Russia. Levan Vasadze, a Georgian businessman and conservative activist who helped host the 2016 WCF conference, is a major donor to the GOC.\textsuperscript{353} He is known for his pro-Russian, xenophobic, and homophobic statements and allegedly patronizes organizations that present themselves as “defenders of traditions.”\textsuperscript{354} Vasadze’s business activities (primarily insurance and private equity) are closely

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\textsuperscript{348} “ГАВРИЛОВ Сергей Анатольевич” [GAVRILOV Sergey Anatolievich], Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, https://eiao.org/archives/15188.

\textsuperscript{349} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{351} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{352} Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, \textit{International Security and Estonia} 2019, 34.


connected to Russia;\textsuperscript{355} he has ties with Konstantin Malofeev, Vladimir Yakunin, and others in the Kremlin’s inner circle.\textsuperscript{356} Vasadze is a friend of Alexander Dugin’s and can be viewed as a domestic implementer of Russia’s strategic conservatism.\textsuperscript{357} In 2021, he announced his intention to enter politics to address a “political, economic, cultural, social and ideological crisis,” partly driven by the recent EU-mediated agreement between the government and the opposition.\textsuperscript{358} To do so, he founded a public movement called “Unity, Essence, Hope” (abbreviated in Georgian as ERI), which means “nation.”\textsuperscript{359} It remains to be seen how much public support his movement will garner, but its political and religious orientation is clear.

**CONCLUSION**

The Georgian case shows how the “Brother in Faith” slogan is merely a political instrument for the Kremlin; when necessary or useful, various tactics—from the occupation of a coreligionist country to the destruction of Christian cultural heritage—have been used. The ROC has participated in this strategy, disrespecting other Orthodox churches’ autocephaly and encroaching on their canonical territory. In this way, it has mirrored the Kremlin’s violation of other countries’ sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In 2005, Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union “the largest geopolitical disaster of the century.”\textsuperscript{360} In 2011, Patriarch Kirill called it “the collapse of historical Russia.”\textsuperscript{361} Both the Kremlin and the ROC share this nostalgia for a former empire and consider Russia’s “near abroad” (which includes Georgia) a sphere of privileged interests, with both working together to enhance Russian influence there. Orthodoxy has become an integral, often covert tool of the Kremlin’s foreign policy and its soft power.

From its actions in occupied territories to its ties to conservative groups in Georgia and support for cultural associations, Russia’s “Orthodox foreign policy” should be reviewed through the prism of strategic conservatism. Such issues have become a question of national security for Georgia and should be addressed within this context, incorporating Russia’s psychological and information operations. Alarms should be set off in the face of attempts to instrumentalize faith as a political tool, including by some domestic actors, and as a leverage point to keep nations within the Kremlin’s sphere of influence.


