

THE FUTURE OF GEORGIA PROJECT

The Orthodox Church in Georgia's Changing Society

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This article is the fifth of five in a series for the Future of Georgia project run by Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation analyzing contentious issues in Georgian society.

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) is **one of the most trusted institutions in Georgia**, and its leader, Patriarch Ilia II, is the most respected person in the country. “The main reasons for the high authority of the church are, I think, solidity, stability, and impartiality,” said a GOC representative in an anonymous interview to the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) for the Future of Georgia project.

The positive reputation the national church enjoys in Georgia 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 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.

Furthermore, under the agreement, the state recognizes the **GOC's ownership of all churches and monasteries on Georgian territory** and undertakes to compensate the church for some of the damage it has suffered since losing its autocephaly—or independent status—in 1811. The findings of a September 2020 **CRRC survey**, commissioned by Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation for the Future of Georgia

project, reflect generally positive attitudes among various groups of Georgians toward this privileged position of the GOC (see figure 1).

The GOC, however, is not universally popular in Georgia. It is also at the center of several controversies that reflect how a country with generally conservative values has also committed itself to embrace an agenda of European integration.

These contradictions came to a head in a crisis in [Tbilisi in July 2021](#) when far-right protesters, including several priests, attacked and injured more than fifty journalists covering Tbilisi Pride events. Some protesters later tore down and burned a European flag flying in front of Georgia's parliament.

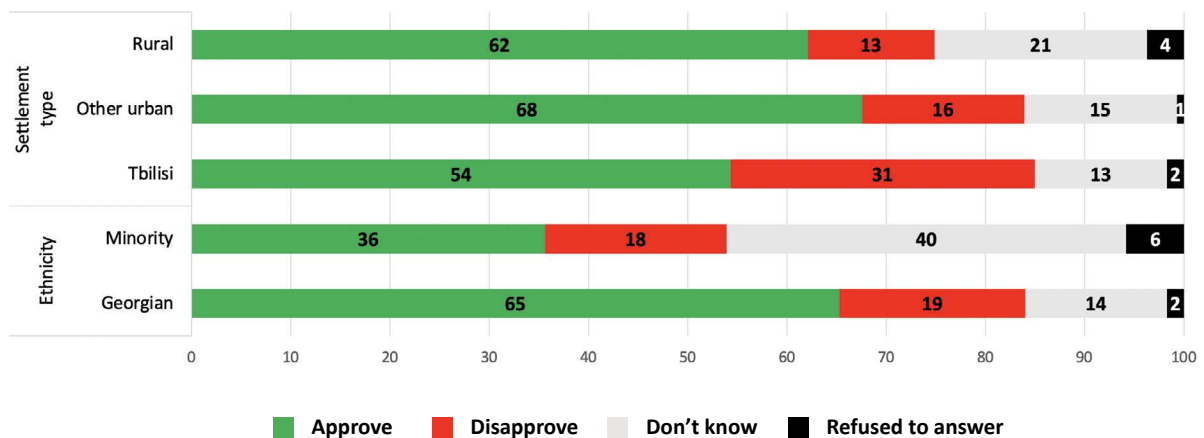
Church leaders both condemned the violence and denounced the attempt to hold Pride events in the first place, calling LGBTQ rights “immoral” and against

Georgian tradition. By holding the latter opinion, they antagonize Georgia's Western partners and parts of civil society. As the row intensified in the aftermath of the crisis between the government and Western embassies, one leading Georgian cleric, Metropolitan of Vani and Baghdati Diocese Anton Bulukhia, publicly rebuked the U.S. and EU embassies in Tbilisi and said he was closing a European club in his diocese. “You want to force your profligate, obscene and depraved ideals” on Georgia, he [said on July 11](#).

Unlike Western churches, the GOC was bypassed by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. After Georgia regained independence in 1991, it never underwent post-totalitarian reforms. The main source of the GOC's conservatism is its Orthodox doctrine. However, Orthodoxy as such does not contradict a society's goals of modernization and Europeanization, as is evidenced by other European Orthodox countries, such as Bulgaria and Greece. Yet, because the GOC

FIGURE 1
Georgians' Views on the Special Legal Status of the Georgian Orthodox Church

The Georgian Orthodox Church has a constitutional agreement that gives it a special legal status in Georgia. Do you approve or disapprove of this status?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey (by CRRC).

considers itself the only defender of Georgia's national values, which are diverse and hard to define, the church has never been able to define a precise ideological basis for its conservatism.

RELIGIOSITY AND GEORGIA'S EMERGING IDENTITY

The privileges the GOC acquired under the 2002 concordat marked a sharp contrast to the previous two centuries of the church's history. After czarist Russia abolished the church's autocephalous status, Soviet totalitarian rule instilled atheism among Georgia's population and closed or destroyed monasteries and religious monuments.

In postcommunist Georgia, the situation changed dramatically as the church began to fill the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of state socialism. When Georgia regained independence in 1991, the vast majority of the country's population consisted of Orthodox Georgians, and they wanted to quickly get rid of the Soviet legacy. They saw the church as an important resource for the formation of a new identity and the restoration of lost statehood. In a young post-Soviet state that otherwise [lacked a clear and consistent state ideology](#), indoctrination by the church was easy. The concept of a Georgian as a person who belongs to the Georgian ethnos and church—that is, Orthodoxy—began to spread.

For many, being an Orthodox believer was an essential—or even the only—attribute of being a true Georgian. In an interview with CRRC, one religious scholar argued, “Usually when you ask an average Georgian what it means to be Georgian, what he or she means is to be ethnically Georgian, to speak the language, and to be Orthodox. So if you lack any of those three qualities, you're not a real Georgian. That's the kind of thing that is contributing to the popularity of the church.” After independence, both the number of parishioners and

of priests grew. As a result, the inculcated ideology of “Georgian-ness” began to rely on a solid infrastructure of churches, dioceses, and parish priests, with the concordat serving as an important legal backup.

Soon, however, this new religious-nationalist ideology began to lose its monopoly in society. A 2017 study by the [Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies](#) (GFSIS) suggested that globalization and increased access to the internet had gradually challenged people's beliefs. As interest in the outside world grew, much of Georgian society tried to be more open. Liberal ideology, including a greater embrace of civic nationalism, started to strengthen in the country. The numbers of liberal NGOs and media outlets also increased.

After the 2003 Rose Revolution, the new government further promoted liberal views. In parallel, criticism of the church stepped up. The findings of the 2020 CRRC survey suggest that an ethno-religious definition of identity is still strong among Georgians but is no longer predominant. At the same time, for most Georgian citizens, Orthodox Christianity is a more important marker than Georgian ethnicity (see figure 2).

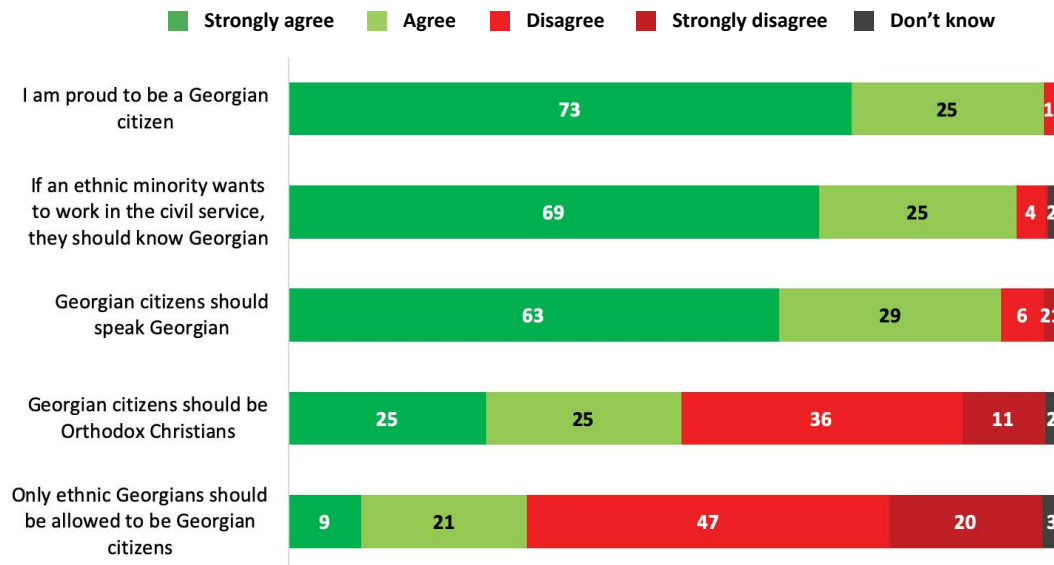
Increased religiosity, which generated conservative values in the 1990s, has inhibited the deepening of democracy in Georgia by opposing liberal views, such as the freedom of expression of sexual minorities. However, a 2011 study argued that religious social behavior might also [enhance support for democracy](#) by fostering greater trust in democratic institutions. Ketevan Chachava, director of the civil society organization [Center for Development and Democracy](#) (CDD), further argues that “church attendance is found to increase electoral turnout, protest activism, and support for democracy.”

Data suggest that Georgia's [weekly church attendance rate](#) of 10–13 percent is comparable with the [European average](#), although the overall proportion of churchgoers in Georgia is higher than the European average.

FIGURE 2

Georgians' Attitudes Toward Ethnicity

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about ethnicity in Georgia?

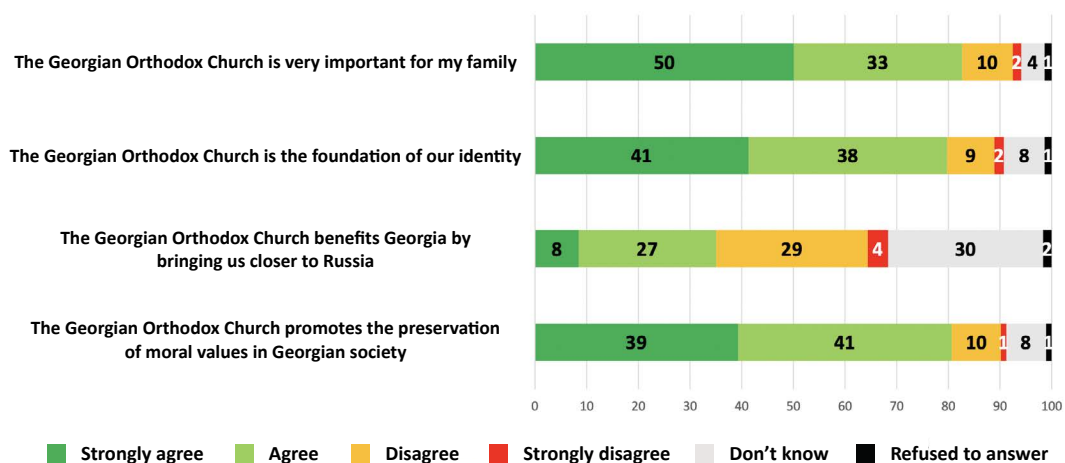


SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey (by CRRC).

FIGURE 3

Georgians' Attitudes Toward the Georgian Orthodox Church

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Georgian Orthodox Church?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey (by CRRC).

Seen in conjunction with the move away from a conservative definition of Georgian-ness, these figures could suggest that, paradoxically, increased religiosity contributes to the spread of liberal concepts, including civic nationalism, in Georgia. However, the growth of religiosity is largely due to the church's identification as the guardian of Georgians' morality and identity (see figure 3).

THE GOC'S ATTITUDES TO THE WEST AND RUSSIA

The GOC understands Georgia's foreign policy priorities in very specific ways. There is great diversity within different parts and factions within the church. On the one hand, the church leadership supports the country's declared commitment to integration into the EU and Euro-Atlantic institutions. "The Georgian Orthodox Church is playing an important role in . . . Georgian society in supporting the Georgian people and the country's focus on [its] Euro-Atlantic future and integration. The United States is very proud of this," noted Acting Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs [Philip Reeker](#) after meeting the Georgian patriarch in June 2021.

Georgia's aspiration of membership in the Euro-Atlantic community is "to be decided by the Georgian people, and the church respects this choice," according to a 2016 [statement by the Patriarchate of Georgia](#). The statement followed a study visit organized by the CDD with a high-ranking delegation of GOC clergy to the EU and Euro-Atlantic institutions in Brussels and continued with unprecedented openness: "It . . . turned out that both at NATO and the EU, they had wrong information about the Georgian Orthodox Church, and we also had wrong views about their policies on a number of issues," the patriarchate said.

It is noteworthy that the visit to Brussels coincided with an agreement to allow Georgians to travel visa free to the EU, one of the milestones on the path to European integration. Previously, when Georgia was carrying out reforms within the framework of the EU's Visa Liberalization Action Plan, many senior figures in the church spoke out against the country's parliament passing a law to prohibit all forms of discrimination. Now, the same clergy, supporting the freedom of movement to and from the EU, took part in an [information campaign initiated by NGOs](#) and the government against anti-Western propaganda.

Like Georgian society as a whole, the GOC contains diverse voices often angrily opposed to one another. Many in the GOC revere the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Russia in general. In solidarity with the ROC, the GOC has refrained from recognizing the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church, which was granted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2019. An older generation of priests also retains fond memories of communicating with the "Russian world," as the Russian-language cultural space that stretches beyond Russia is often called. The Russian government and the ROC are widely perceived as flagships of the struggle against what many see as harmful liberal values. Conservative clergymen in both countries still identify the West as a source of debauchery and degradation of spirituality.

Yet, the GFSIS study also found that the younger generation of clergy held increasingly different views. In interviews for the study, younger priests emphatically supported Georgian young people studying in Western universities and viewed Russia more as an occupier than as a country with a common religion. They perceived Europe as the best space for Georgia's development and modernization.

THE GOC'S INTERCONFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Interfaith relations have a long tradition in Georgia. Despite the GOC's distinctiveness from other denominations, religious leaders of all groups understand the importance of interreligious dialogue to achieve national consolidation and civic unity. An example of this occurred in May 2021, when there were [violent clashes in the town of Dmanisi](#), home to a mixed Georgian-Azerbaijani population. The timely and coordinated response of GOC and Muslim leaders to the violence demonstrated an awareness of the need for dialogue to try to defuse a potentially dangerous crisis.

The 2017 study visit by Georgia's religious leaders to Washington, DC, also organized by the CDD, contributed significantly to increasing this understanding. In the words of [Metropolitan Theodore of the GOC](#), "This visit has a special significance, because . . . the traditional religions in Georgia are represented here, including: the representatives of [the] Holy Synod of [the] Georgian Orthodox Church, the leader of [the] Catholic Church in Georgia, the Leader of [the] Armenian Church in Georgia, [and] the leaders of the Muslim community including Shia and Sunni denominations. This unity creates a very good presence and appearance of Georgia."

Different religious denominations share a consensus that traditional values "need to be protected," according to a leader of the Azerbaijani Muslim community. In an interview for the Future of Georgia project, he said that he was especially concerned about "excessive, unbridled freedom of expression," citing the cartoons of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, which lampoon Islamic beliefs in France. "I would not wish Georgia to copy something like that from Europe," the Muslim leader added.

Georgia's religious communities are divided by various controversies, however. Georgia's public ombudsman has cited evidence of [discrimination against members of non-Orthodox religious communities](#) as well as the financial benefits the GOC enjoys, such as tax privileges. Watchdog organizations have closely studied the [annual donations](#) that the GOC receives from the Georgian government's central budget and from local municipalities, either in the form of specific amounts or through the transfer of land, buildings, and expensive off-road vehicles to church ownership. Critics charge that these transfers represent a kind of corruption.

The GOC is widely believed to be behind the refusal of Batumi City Hall to allow the [building of a second mosque in the city](#). Batumi's Muslims have been seeking permission to build another mosque for years, but the request has not been granted. Interestingly, though, on April 13, 2021, [the Court of Appeals in the city of Kutaisi](#) supported a ruling of Batumi City Court that the city hall's refusal to authorize the first stage of the mosque construction was illegal and discriminatory on the grounds of religion. In a statement about the case, the [Social Justice Center](#), a Georgian NGO, said, "This is a very important decision of the national courts, which has recognized the discriminatory practice of violating the freedom of religion of the Muslim community for years and creates legal preconditions for the restoration of their rights and dignity."

Critics have also cited several incidents of discrimination toward other denominations, including the Catholic Church, which was denied the construction of a chapel in the city of Rustavi. Various disputes with the Armenian Church are noteworthy, especially the case of [Tandoyants Church](#) in Tbilisi, which the Armenian Church claims was illegally transferred to the GOC. Another contentious case is that of Norashen Church, which is one of several defunct Armenian churches in Georgia.

The GOC's reputation has also been tarnished by a series of high-profile scandals. In 2017, a clergyman was convicted of allegedly attempting to poison the patriarch. In some cases, scandals arose over transfers of land to the GOC for symbolic prices. More recently, scandals motivated by sexual violence have attracted public attention, and in 2020, the church's refusal to alter the shared-spoon communion ritual for the Easter liturgy during the coronavirus pandemic became a contentious issue. A study has suggested that these [scandals took a toll on trust in the GOC](#), at least in the short term.

There has been a lot of public discussion about the church-run boarding school in the town of Ninotsminda. A scandal erupted after a [statement by Georgia's public defender](#), who accused the school's rector, Bishop Spiridon, of failing to investigate reports of violence and sexual abuse in the school. The situation was aggravated when the public defender was denied her legal right to access the institution. [Bishop Spiridon](#) said that people such as the public defender who approve of same-sex marriage "should not be allowed into orphanages or any family in general."

Neither [the patriarchate](#) nor individual senior figures in the church had approved the move to ban those with certain views from entering schools. A court has since ruled that children should leave the boarding school in Ninotsminda and be transferred to other guardians. After the patriarch [replaced the head of the boarding school](#), the new principal announced [a staff cleansing and a reform plan](#). Employees of the public defender's office have received access to the territory of the boarding school where they met pupils and began studying the school documentation.

The episode had been amplified by parts of the media that are controlled by the political opposition and by numerous statements from NGOs and watchdogs

critical of the church.

LGBTQ RIGHTS—A LIGHTNING ROD ISSUE

One issue above all others has antagonized the GOC and much of Georgian society on the one hand and liberal Europeanized Georgia and the country's Western partners on the other.

In his [2021 Easter epistle](#), the Georgian patriarch stated that same-sex marriage is a strong taboo and that "traditional identities defining the human being – 'man' and 'woman', 'family values' – have been erased."

In July 2021 the GOC, other religious leaders in Georgia, and some members of the government called on organizers to cancel a Tbilisi Pride march. On July 5, 2021, there were [violent scenes in Tbilisi](#) as radical conservative groups stormed the offices of Tbilisi Pride and the Shame Movement, a liberal activist group, and physically attacked journalists attempting to cover the day's events. On July 11, one of the journalists, television cameraman Lekso Lashkarava, who had been injured, was found dead in his bed under unclear circumstances.

Following the attacks, the radical protesters took down the European flag in front of Georgia's parliament—and did so again the following day. Orthodox priests were visible in protests throughout the day, and on at least one occasion appeared to take part in an [attack on a journalist](#).

A [joint statement from foreign ambassadors](#) denounced "the failure of the government leaders and religious officials to condemn this violence."

There were mixed messages from the church. Its ruling body, the patriarchate, repeatedly released statements

during the day calling for protesters to remain peaceful and also condemning the violence. “If out of 2,000 priests, five are doing a bad deed, why should the other 1,995 have to answer for it?” said Father John, archimandrite from the Trinity Cathedral.

Leading church figures however continued to attack the Pride organizers and their Western backers. At a service at Kashveti Church called to “protect dignity” on the same day of the violence, Metropolitan Shio Mujiri, the patriarch’s locum tenens and de facto leader of the church in his absence, labeled Tbilisi Pride “part of a large campaign which aims to distancing the nation

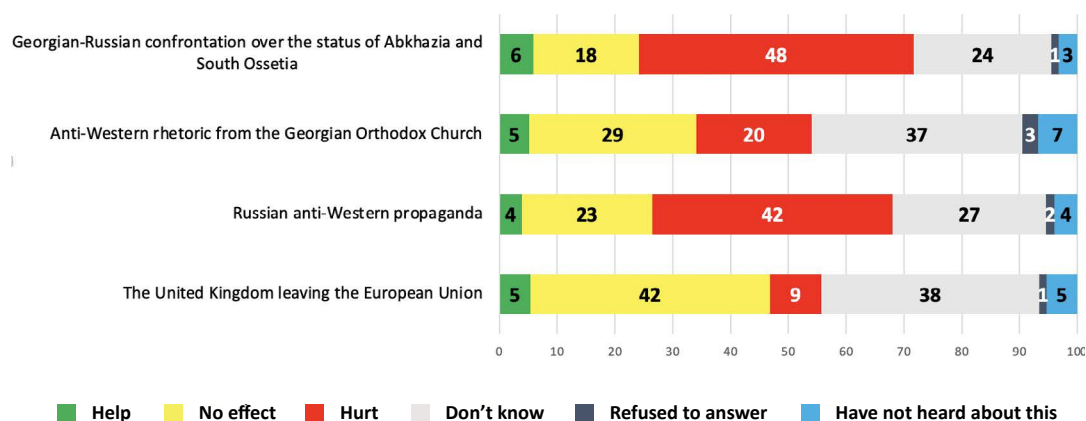
from God, our traditions, church and degrade it.” He recommended that “insulting religious and national feelings” should be punishable by law.

Most Georgians appear to believe they can support both the GOC and a pro-Western geopolitical agenda. According to the CRRC survey, just 20 percent of Georgians think that the GOC’s anti-Western rhetoric hinders Georgia’s path toward European integration, while 29 percent believe that this narrative does not affect the process (see figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Georgians’ Views on Developments That Have Shaped Georgia’s Geopolitical Path

Do you think the following developments have helped, hurt, or not affected Georgia in becoming closer to the European Union?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey (by CRRC).

CONCLUSION

The GOC remains a bastion of conservative values and largely reflects a conception of Georgia as a nation with a privileged place for ethnic Georgian Orthodox Christians. At the same time, cooperation with Western institutions and states has acquired enormous transformative power in Georgia. The West's influence is increasingly felt in the government's policies and the public consciousness.

As Georgia's pro-Western orientation and Euro-Atlantic integration have become the main themes of national consolidation, the GOC faces the challenge of how to adjust to this new reality. If it manages to do so, the church will acquire the functions of supporting modernization and helping to build a Western institutional democracy. The results of visits to Brussels and Washington in 2016 and 2017, respectively, demonstrated that a transformation of this sort is possible. This change is quite possible because there is an ongoing generational shift in the church as younger priests with more liberal views renew the ranks of the clergy.

If these liberal views continue to penetrate the church, it will cease to be the conservative institution it was in the past. It will have to reckon with the evolving balance of Georgian society's receptiveness to conservative versus liberal values. Perhaps this development will result in the church ceasing to be the most powerful ideological force in Georgia.

However, this in no way means that the GOC's role in Georgia's political and public life will necessarily weaken in the years to come. The church will maintain influence over the public and politics as the most powerful actor outside the government. And, therefore, the GOC will continue to matter for both the government and competing political forces, as public closeness to the church will remain an important source of electoral support for all sides.

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