

## Role of the Orthodox Church in Georgia's European Integration Process

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### *Abstract*

There is a dominant discourse in the Georgian society that Christianity makes Georgians European, although from the World Value Survey (1981-2015) by Inglehart & Welzel, we see that it distances them from Europe. Political elites and representatives of GOC build their narratives on Georgia's belonging to the European-Christian family, thus it is interesting to reveal whether the church and the state overlap in their approaches to European integration and how it affects the foreign policy of the country. This paper explores the role of Georgian Orthodox Church in the ongoing internal political affairs in Georgia, emphasizing a particular importance on influence of Georgian Orthodox Church on the process of European integration. The qualitative study results will be used in order to find out the role of Orthodox Church in Georgia's political discourse.

**Keywords:** *European integration; Georgian Orthodox Church; Symphonia; Church-State Relations;*

## Different Aspects of Political Influence of the Orthodox Church in Georgia

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) is the only religious institution in the country that is exempt from numerous state regulations. Moreover, the Constitution (1995) recognizes a special role of the Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia and there is a Constitutional Agreement (2002) between the Government and the Church signed on 14<sup>th</sup> of October in 2002 by Eduard Shevardnadze (ruling party-The Union of Citizens of Georgia) and Patriarch Ilia II shaping the framework for the interaction of the state and the church. Despite occurred political changes in the country and transformation of both entities the document has never been revised.

The very first article of the agreement reads: “*The State and the Church confirm readiness to cooperate under the inter-independence principle, for the wellbeing of population of the country*” (Constitutional Agreement, 2002). This unorthodox conjugation of words describes the principle of Symphonia, the Byzantine tradition where state and church are in the harmonious and somewhat dependent relation with their spheres of influence divided. Symphonia (Greek: συμφωνία) between church and state or harmony the way Meyendorff (1982) translates the term was first mentioned in the Justinian’s sixth Novella (AD 527-565) where Justinian declares priesthood and imperial dignity as the “*two greatest gifts of God*” and stresses their divine origin. As Papanikolaou (2003) states, the Ottoman and later Soviet occupation shielded most Orthodox countries from the political reforms of enlightenment, thus after dissolution of Greek monarchy and USSR, the question was whether orthodox Churches could embrace modern democratic institutions together with their inherent notions of church-state separation and multiculturalism. Given the framework of Orthodox Society of Byzantine theocracy, *where the head of state was expected to be an Orthodox Christian, the church and the state were to coexist harmoniously for the good of the Orthodox Christian society, and the state was expected to support the preservation of an Orthodox Christian culture* (p. 84). The Georgian example can answer the question posed by Papanikolaou and prove that indeed, Orthodox states are still guided by Byzantine Theology hardly acknowledging/accepting pluralism and secular principles. Between legislation and practice, there is a gap filled with informality Georgian culture embodies in itself, therefore on paper the Georgian state is secular but in reality, an increased role of GOC in the public space is evident by its power to shape and reflect public opinion, sometimes against the government itself.

GOC as a dominant religious entity has privileges and rights no other religious denomination enjoys. The Fifth and Sixth articles of the Constitutional agreement define the rights of church to be partnered with

state in the realm of national education system. The agreement also talks about the amount of money the government should pay the church for the material and moral damage it experienced from 1921 till 1990 (the Soviet repressions). This amount varied through years and in the period of 2002-2013 the GOC received approximately 200 million GEL in total from the state budget (Transparency International Georgia, 2013). In 2009, the funding from the budget was increased and reached 25 million per year, while in 2008 it was 9, 521 million GEL (Netgazeti.ge 2012). There are different opinions explaining a sudden change in the financial assistance. The dominant view is that after the crisis started in the Saakashvili (United National Movement-UNM) government in 2007, he needed a support to stay in power and thus used the church as an authority to regain trust. The period of 2008-2009 was the momentum in the Church-State relations, when the existing paradigm shifted (Lorusso, 2013). The Church became more powerful and since then has tried to play an important role in all the state affairs. It is noteworthy that since the government changed in 2012, there has not been fundamental alteration in the State-Church relations. Georgian Dream government was as supportive of the church as Saakashvili's and Shevardnadze's. Moreover, the church supported initiative of constitutionally defining marriage as a union of woman and man, has been added in the new edition of Constitution (2018). The church has been also very adamant on the state's initiative on legally cultivating and exporting marijuana for medical use. The draft law has been halted in the parliament proceeding after the GOC urged government to reconsider their decision (BBC, 2018). It seems the state is affected by the church's position. Therefore, the logical question will be as follows: Why does the Georgian state try to accommodate the GOC's position on any principal issue in its internal affairs and does the church have any influence on the foreign policy as well?

In order to understand the church-state relationship dynamics in Georgia, we have to admit that the high trust rates towards Georgian Orthodox Church and its leader the Patriarch Ilia II have a decisive role in this. Based on the NDI poll of March 2018, the performance of Georgian Orthodox Church has been positively assessed by 56% of respondents. The church has 2% negative assessment from public, while Georgian police has 11% and the Parliament of Georgia receives 28% mistrust. Furthermore, according to March 2016 NDI poll, 74% of the respondents said that they would not vote for the party if its leader expressed a critical opinion about Georgian Orthodox Church. And lastly, the Patriarch of GOC has 87% trust rate among Georgian people, higher than the Prime Minister and the Chairman of the Parliament at that time (NDI, 2015). All the abovementioned figures partially explain the state's concern regarding the GOC's stance in any important matter the country faces, there is a high chance public opinion towards any issue to be shaped according to the institutions it trusts most, and later those opinions lead to actions with

real consequences (losing-winning election, losing-gaining trust/power). Vivid exemplification can be made with a very particular event, when in 2013 people led by Orthodox clergy gathered and later attacked rally against activists marking the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOTB). This was the case when GOC showed its power to organize masses for a certain cause, to guide and lead people, moreover when the event was preceded by Patriarch's "*call to authorities to ban gathering of gay rights activists*" (Civil.ge 2013) and therefore, had an institutional authorization. However, the most important tool to establish political power is an election and it seems the state is most cautious in that area, while interacting with the church as an institution. The church is empowered enough to affect electorates' opinion and therefore, halt election results. Comparative advantage of the church in gaining trust from society, along with its large organization structure with eparchies and administrative branches throughout Georgia, makes the state's concern over the church's support comprehensible.

The church-state relation dynamics show that every government (Shevardnadze's - The Union of Citizens of Georgia, Saakashvili's - United National Movement and Ivanishvili's - Georgian Dream) teamed up with the church, particularly if a political crisis had started. In 2002 Shevardnadze signed the constitutional agreement with the church prior to losing his power as a result of the Rose revolution; after 2008, when the war and street protests were predicting his decline, Saakashvili (UNM) considerably increased the budget funds for the church and finally, Georgian Dream (GD), the current ruling party won the parliamentary elections of 2012 with a substantial support from GOC. In addition, during the presidential elections of 2018, the fact that a GD supported presidential candidate could not win in the first round presumably encouraged the ruling party to make concessions in terms of liberalization of drug policy, fiercely opposed by the church itself. This pattern of church-state Symphonia is continuous and unbreakable and results in desecularization (Berger, 1999) of Georgia.

While trying to explain religious behavior and an increased role of church in public space throughout the world, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke in their book *Acts of Faith* (2000) would deny the secularization happening in its predicted form. Moreover, Stark and Finke note that religion is not an *irrational behavior*, but *belief is just a misinformed rationality with an imagined benefit* (p. 55). Thus, religious organizations as social enterprises whose purpose is to create, maintain and supply religion to set of individuals are main actors in this field with exclusive rights to support and supervise people's exchange with gods. This religious economy consists of all the religious activity happening in our society: "market" of current and potential adherents, organizations seeking to attract or maintain adherent and religious cultural offer by the organizations. Just as a commercial economy can be distinguished into elements of supply and demand, so

too can a religious economy (p. 56). The supply/demand dynamics can explain the Georgian Orthodox church's effort and the state's motives as well, both the church and the state as institutions are working to increase demand in their constituencies, however this is most beneficial to the state with lower levels of institutional trust in society. If we look at it from another angle, such a state-church cooperation can also be seen as a continuation of Byzantine theological tradition achieving a Symphonic ideal with a substantial dependency on each other.

Despite the trust the Patriarch and the Church as an institution enjoy in the-Georgian society, it is worthy to mention that the incident on the International Day Against Homophobia on May 17, 2013, when the anti-homophobia rally was disrupted and violently attacked by the church supporters and clergy, somewhat affected public opinion towards the church. This led to the arrest of the priest who was taken a photo while holding a chair and chasing the rally participants (Civil.ge 2013). The government started the investigation and charges were summoned. Subsequently, GOC decided to declare May 17 as the day of Family Purity and Honor of Parents. After 2013 events the anti-homophobia rally has never been large-scaled, despite several attempts in 2014 and 2015, while in 2018 it was cancelled altogether. The 2013 rally events did not represent the only factor contributing to the growing distrust towards the church but the role of the so called "Cyanide case" should also be mentioned, when a senior priest was charged for his attempt to kill the Patriarch of Georgia (RFL/Georgian Service, 2017). Since the GOC representatives started openly talking about the internal affairs of the Patriarchate, the de-sacralization of this institution has intensified. The following chart shows the declining trust towards GOC.

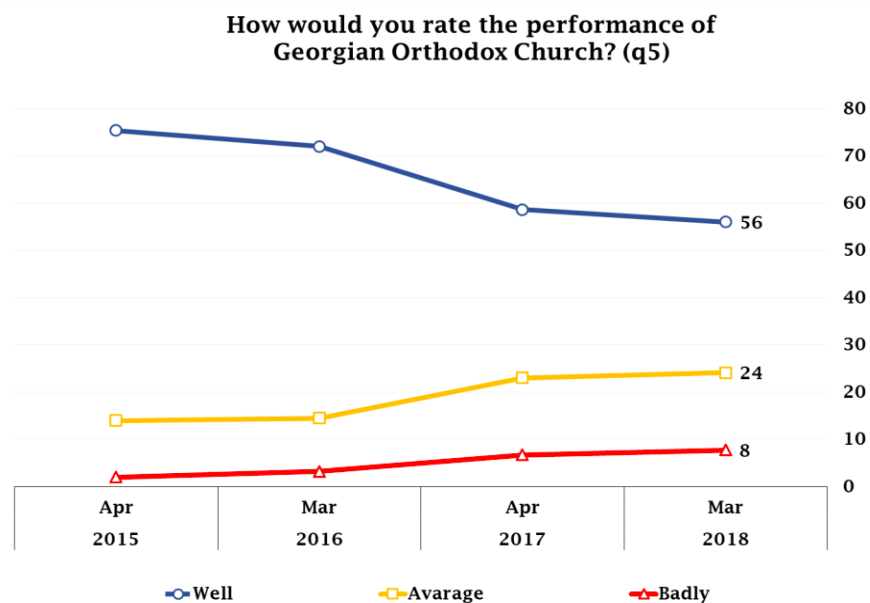


Table 1. NDI public opinion poll.

Another effort by the Church to interfere in the state affairs is its attempt to influence the law-making process while in 2014 the Parliament of Georgia adopted the law on elimination of all forms of discrimination. The law was one of the requirements under the Visa Liberalization Action Plan in order to successfully finalize the process of granting visa-free regime with the EU. The Patriarch Ilia II in his public speech urged the parliament to delay the adoption of this law; the church argued that: *“The EU represents a diverse space unifying different nations and religions, and it respects different cultures and traditions while respecting their values, and thus this law is in conflict with these principles,”* therefore GOC recommended the government to involve the church in the discussion in order not to *“have a negative effect on our country’s European aspirations.”* This statement was made on 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2014, while on 30<sup>th</sup> of April the church supported a rally held in Kutaisi and Tbilisi where the Parliament was located. Worthy to mention that financial penalties for discriminators were already removed from the bill, as the government revised it before submitting to the Parliament and according to the human rights organizations, this change already made the law ineffective. The church not only affected the general public, but also several MPs were in line with the church’s position, although finally with 115 votes to 0 law was adopted (Civil.ge, 2014). The crisis that occurred during the debates on the anti-discrimination law, and how the government tried to cooperate with the church risking its most valuable foreign policy achievement altogether is a showcase of the church’s power to pressure the government via its parish and public opinion.

### **Georgian Orthodox Church and European Integration**

According to the most important foreign policy document - National Security Concept of the country, (2000, p. 15):

*“One of Georgia’s major foreign and security policy priorities is membership in NATO and the European Union. As a Black Sea and Southeast European country, Georgia is part of Europe geographically, politically, and culturally; yet it was cut off from its natural course of development by historical cataclysms. Integration into NATO and the EU is Georgia’s sovereign choice, one which will strengthen Georgia’s security and ensure its stable development.”*

Europe is mentioned 55 times in the document in relation to the country’s aspirations, while North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is mentioned 27 times. Thus, all the declared values and principles of Georgian political elite tend to reinforce Georgia’s Europeanness. The country’s declared aspirations were

exemplified by Zurab Zhvania's (the former Chairman of the Parliament) famous words at the General Assembly of the Council of Europe on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1999 – "I am Georgian and therefore, I am European." This speech was more than important for the newborn Georgian state; it was a chance to denote and declare Georgia's European aspirations.

The EU-Georgian relations' start from the 1990s, but only in 1996 did Georgia sign the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with the EU, which entered into force in 1999. From 2003 when the post of a special representative of the EU in the South Caucasus was created, it resulted in closer relations and nowadays Georgia is involved in the European Neighborhood Policy and Eastern Partnership programs. The momentum for Georgia-EU relations was in June 2014 when the Association Agreement was signed; also, the EU is a major trade partner for Georgia. As far as the society is concerned, the latest poll shows that the majority of population approves the Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU, in particular, 81% of the respondents did so in the recent NDI poll (2018). Thus, both the political elite and the society agree that the European choice is the right one for Georgia.

Georgian foreign policy is elite driven, as Gvalia (2011) notes, and modernizing the society through integration and close association with European and Euro-Atlantic military institutions was the most important project for Georgia's political elite. The Rose Revolution brought new Western-educated elites, who under Saakashvili's leadership were distancing themselves from Russia and established closer relations with US, NATO and the EU, while a "*European Idea*" was always present as part of the national identity in Georgia, after the Rose revolution it has been dominating the political discourse. As Gvalia states:

*The elite's ideas about Georgia's identity and strategies for affirming that identity play an essential role in explaining their foreign policy decision-making and there is a high-level consensus among the political elite regarding fundamental issues that a major external threat is Russia and balancing is the most effective strategy to cope with it (p. 52-53).*

Jones and Kakhishvili (2013) add that Georgian Orthodox Church played a major role in the domestic political discourse, often challenging the secular aspirations of Georgian political elite. However, despite the fact that the church has a significant power at home, its impact on Georgia's foreign policy is marginal. Nonetheless, as Ghia Nodia argues, GOC has become a milieu where the pro-Russian position has been most openly and radically propagated. In pro-Russian he means the ideological stance that presents the

West as an enemy of Orthodox Christianity and the Georgian identity, and urges an alliance with Orthodox Russia as a guarantee to preserve Georgia's cultural and spiritual values.

The Georgian society is trapped in the Europe/West versus Russia dichotomy, and this is an embodiment of our *"bivocality"* as Batiashvili (2018) characterizes Georgia's national narrative. She points out the tension between Saakashvili's attempt to Europeanize and modernize the nation and the nationalist agenda, which was solely a rhetoric of Georgian Orthodox Church.

*By usurping and consecrating secular spaces and discourses, the church asserted its ownership over "Georgiannes" as a category of its authority and inscribed it into Georgian Orthodoxy. Georgia's Patriarch has promoted the idea of "purity of Georgian culture" with a veiled anti-Western sentiment, as long ago as the 1990s (p. 16).*

Thus, with its sacralization of the secular and secularization of the religious, the church becomes a major rival of the state. This rivalry continues as Orthodox Christianity is a significant part of Georgian cultural identity and the dichotomy between non-Orthodox West and Orthodox neighbor - Russia is still valid.

According to the data from the sixth wave of World Value Survey by Inglehart & Welzel (2010-2014), Georgia is among the Orthodox states group, where the survival and traditional cultural values are dominant over the self-expression and secular principles. A time series of the world value survey shows that despite its European aspirations through years, Georgia was moving away from secular values towards the enforcing of traditional cultural values, while changing its position and leaning slightly in the direction of self-expression cultural principles, although still remaining deeply rooted in the survival side. The map below shows the most recent position of Georgia on the WVS map:



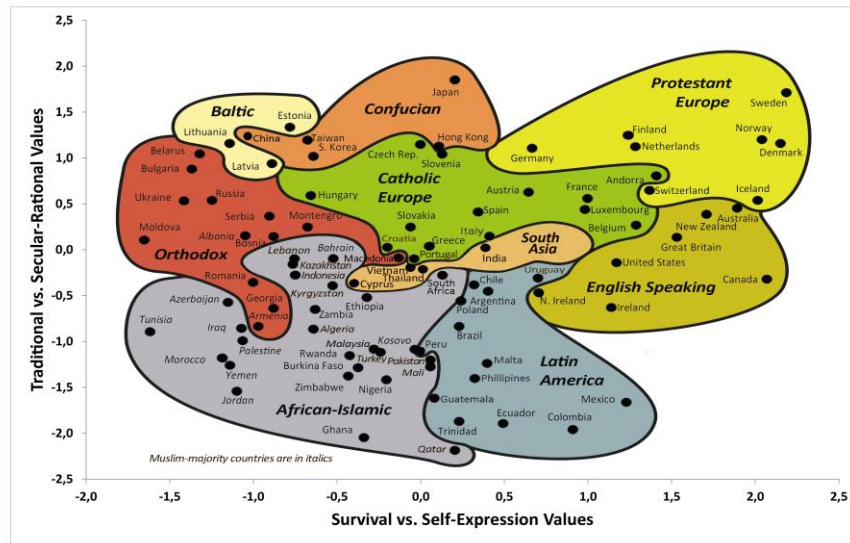


Table 2. Cultural map - WVS wave 6 (2010-2014)

Weltzel and Inglehart ascribe the following characteristics to the society, which is prone to traditional values: Importance of religion, close parent-child ties, deference to authority and traditional family values. People who embrace these values also reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia and suicide. These societies have high levels of national pride and a nationalistic outlook. In the societies where survival values are dominant, the emphasis is on economic and physical security, which is linked to a relatively ethnocentric stance and low levels of trust and tolerance towards each other. It is notable that most of the European Union states cherish secular-rational and self-expression values, and they are grouped under Protestant and Catholic Europe (WVS, 2014). Notwithstanding those differences that Orthodox countries have in comparison to the rest of Europe (Catholic, Protestant), there is a discourse in the Georgian society that our Christianity makes us European, that being situated among the Muslim countries between Europe and Asia, our identity is defined by our religion's innately European character. Despite these narratives, from the abovementioned map we see that Orthodox Christianity separates Georgians from Europe but puts closer than African or Asian states where Islam or other confessions are dominant. Therefore, we can characterize Georgia's Europeanness as cultural ambivalence and need to culturally 'bandwagon', nonetheless European Integration stays as the most important foreign policy goal for the country. Finally, we can argue that GOC as a political actor is trying to maneuver between powerful Orthodox neighbor Russia with whom it has historical ties, and Georgia's European aspirations through supporting Georgian people's choice to self-identify as Europeans. Therefore, it is upon the EU, the Georgian State and Russia how this strategy works out in the future, as nowadays GOC is a battlefield of values, ideologies and various policy decisions.

## Research Findings

In order to provide evidence for our discussion, the paper presents the results of a research on the role of Georgian Orthodox Church in the political processes of Georgia conducted in the scope of the ASCN funded project, by the Caucasus Institute for Peace and Development with the financial assistance of the Open Society Foundation fellowship. Alongside the primary goal of research to explain the GOC's involvement in the Parliamentary elections of 2012, the question of its position regarding Georgia's European integration was inquired.

Georgian Orthodox Church's communication with the State Minister of Euro-Atlantic Integration (now part of Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and with the EU representation in Georgia intensified in 2014. A vivid example of such rapprochement is the official meeting between then EU High Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy Stefan Fule and Patriarch Ilia II. In addition, an educational project was implemented by the Center for Development and Democracy (CDD), the Georgian NGO and Education Center of Patriarchate, for the bishops and priests regarding the benefits of EU integration. This project had a particular importance because it was the first time when the civil society, the government and the church collaborated, while there is a general tendency of disagreement on most of the issues between the NGO sector and the church. CDD initiated the project in 2014 and since then 1700 priests have been its participants (Eurasianet, 2016). On the church's part the project is managed by Ioane Gamrekeli, an Archbishop of Rustavi and Kumurdo and head of Education Center of the Patriarchate. He famously attended the rally against the NATO in Tbilisi, when Russian funded "Eurasian Institute" organized the screening of a movie on war in Yugoslavia in order to show the effort *NATO "made in fighting not only against Yugoslavia but Orthodox civilization"* - as one of the organizers denoted (Netgazeti, 2014). The possible explanation of the Church-EU dialogue is again the church's high trust in society; therefore, the state and EU officials made sure GOC was on their side. However, this could mean the problem the state might have seen in the GOC's position and role in Georgia's European integration process. The research findings below will try to explain major trends in the church-state relations regarding the most important foreign policy decisions.

During the fieldwork conducted in 2016, Georgian politicians, experts and representatives of GOC (archbishops and priests) were interviewed. The discourse in the interviews is reflecting Symphonic relations between the church and the state, while at the same time reproducing the values projected by GOC to Europe/EU and by politicians and experts to GOC. Those values are cultural and embody an existent dichotomy of Russia vs. the West. The following quotes describe this dichotomy:

*In my opinion, nowadays, Western civilization is perceived as an enemy to the church. West lives with secular values...but generally values attributed with Europe are perceived as a threat. .... This creates problems for persons sharing European values...When they (people/political parties) say (describe themselves) pro-Georgian, this means (they are) pro-Russian and thus being considered as enemy of the West (priest, GOC).*

*I think that inherently GOC is a Russia-supporting institution, but they could not declare it openly. Therefore, the way to cover it up is publicly supporting European integration. I remember, in the beginning (2013-2014) they did not need Europe with same-sex marriage, but lately the church started filtering its public speeches and inserting politically correct topics. But they are mostly reinforcing the anti-Western discourse. While on the one hand, they are against emancipatory processes, attack certain groups and narratives are mostly ones produced by Russian Orthodox Church that the West is immoral, perverse and on the other side, there is the Russian Orthodox world defending purity of families (expert, NGO representative).*

The church's ambivalent position on European integration and its ties with Russian Orthodox Church contribute to its perception as an anti-Western force. West/Europe is perceived as liberal and secular, while the Orthodox church finds more in common with conservative values often outspoken by the Russian propaganda messages. It is noteworthy that there is a group supporting European integration in GOC though it is noticeably marginal, which further highlights the relevance of Russia vs. Europe/West dichotomy within the church.

*There is a very small group among the clergy that supports the country's European course although this discourse is not well developed theologically. Opposing narratives are built on the notion that Georgia is a unique country, globalization is a problem, Russia is our neighbor with whom we have to have good relations and Orthodox Christianity has to be the bridge with Russia (expert, NGO representative).*

*The Church has to be one of the moving engines of our European choice, and in several instances upon meeting with the representatives of the EU, the Patriarch made supporting statements, but I cannot say that the majority of clergymen are supporting this process (European integration) (representative of political elite).*

The church's ambivalence and inner division can be explained by politicization of religious and sacralization of political occurring in Georgia. The church is a closed institution, prone to mythologization

and mystification of itself. On the other hand, due to the Symphonic relations between the church and the state, GOC is constantly trying to balance between its (conservative) values and the country's foreign policy course, as well as inspire the nationalistic narratives. Most of the respondents characterized the Patriarch's position as ambivalent:

*The Patriarch declared and wrote also that he supports this (European integration) process, but it is difficult to say whether his support is real and full-fledged. Meanwhile, we hear different oblique ideas in some public speeches. To have good relations with Russia at the same time is like running after two rabbits (priest, GOC).*

As mentioned above, Georgians link their Europeanness to Christianity but simultaneously are concerned about the loss of their identity and traditional values. The church might be voicing public opinion and vice versa, the society might be voicing what clergy thinks regarding this issue. As Sabanadze (2010) states, the political nationalism in Georgia fluctuated as long as globalization has increased but even the “most militant of Georgian nationalists never believed in isolation for the purpose of cultural prestarvation, instead they advocated engagement with the West as a way towards protection and survival of the Georgian national identity.” Moreover, mythologization of the West has been an innate feature of national discourse since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, and as Beachain & Coen (2014) conclude in their article, in most of the arguments supporting Georgia's Europeanness “facts have been embroidered, embellished or even manufactured to sustain a contemporary political narrative that seeks Georgian membership of western political, economic, and military alliances” (p. 937). Nonetheless, concrete concerns have been named, which shows that GOC is afraid of Georgia's approximation to the European political/cultural space: “Same sex marriage is a threat, loosing family and children-oriented values and distorting educational system are main concerns as well” (priest, GOC).

The Church is afraid of *liberal values* although it seems there is no clear understanding of what is attributed to those liberal values:

*We have a common Christian basis, Europe is Christian, and we have a similar system of values. We have to cooperate in that sphere. But if Europe loses those values and other systems get through, what they call Liberal values, we won't cooperate in this sphere (archbishop, GOC).*

After dissolution of the Soviet Union, a vacuum was filled with various movements - political, ethnic, national and religious though European Identity has been formed as a dominant movement in the self-

identification. This meant “*deliberately obscuring important parts of Georgia's past, including its interaction with the Persian and Ottoman imperial regimes and, most controversially perhaps, the Russian and Soviet empires*” - state Beachain and Cohen (p. 938). Our quote from the interview with the representative of political elite, is a continuation of this discourse:

*Georgia is indebted to Christianity, and here I mean European orientation, because in other case we would have been an Islamic state with much more hostility towards Europe. In reality, we were Europe, situated on the edge of Europe, and Stalin and Lenin cut us off from them. We were one of the most successful countries of Europe and this is what we are trying to get back now (representative of political elite).*

This last quote can be a perfect embodiment of discourse Georgia's political elite holds towards European integration, and hence as we see, Christianity is part of it, therefore involvement of GOC in the process in any form is feasible. In addition to the religious identity, a high trust rate towards the Orthodox Church in Georgian society makes this institution a notable actor in the European integration process, since it can affect the public opinion. However, in a Symphonic condition political elites and clergy are in a close cooperation and the Church could risk financial benefits if it goes against those elites. There is another consideration that since the positive effect of visa liberalization will wither away in public, GOC could again help nurturing Euroscepticism in the society with its ambivalent attitude and tangible Russian influence.

## **Conclusion**

The supply side of Georgia's Orthodox religiosity, its cultural self-identification and high trust rates towards the church makes GOC an important actor in Georgia's European integration process. As it tries to balance between various interests, the church is likely to affect Georgian public and thus indirectly halter decisions the political elite is making towards the country's foreign policy. Guided by the Byzantine theology and Symphonic tradition, the church is in a close cooperation with the government, therefore every important internal or external policy decision is affected by the church's opinion and interest to interfere in the matter. Thus, with its sacralization of the politics and secularization of the religious, the church becomes a major rival of the state. This rivalry will continue as far as Orthodox Christianity is a significant part of Georgian cultural identity and the dichotomy between non-Orthodox West and Orthodox neighbor Russia is valid.

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