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Faith, Nation, and Freedom: the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Politics of Religious Diversity

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Abstract. Freedom, as a political value, is never negotiated in a vacuum. In post-Soviet Georgia, the boundaries of religious freedom have been systematically shaped – and constrained – by the dominant position of the Georgian Orthodox Church within both the constitutional framework and the broader political culture. This paper examines how the institutionalization of Orthodox Christianity as a marker of national identity has produced a contested understanding of religious freedom in contemporary Georgia, one that privileges the majority confession while generating structural pressures on minority faith communities and secular actors alike. Drawing on three decades of church-state relations (1991–2025), the paper traces how the Georgian Orthodox Church evolved from a suppressed institution under Soviet rule into a politically influential actor capable of shaping legislative outcomes, electoral behavior, and public discourse. The Concordat of 2002 and subsequent constitutional amendments formalized the Church's privileged status, creating an asymmetric landscape in which religious diversity is formally tolerated but substantively marginalized. Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Muslim, and other communities have faced varying degrees of institutional discrimination, social hostility, and legal ambiguity – patterns that illuminate the tension between liberal constitutional commitments and the illiberal logic of religious nationalism. The paper further argues that Orthodox hegemony has increasingly functioned as a resource for illiberal political mobilization, used to delegitimize Euro-Atlantic integration, restrict minority rights, and define the boundaries of authentic Georgian citizenship. Methodologically, the paper combines institutional and discourse analysis with comparative reference to analogous cases in Central and Eastern Europe – particularly Poland and Serbia – to situate Georgia within wider regional debates about religion, populism, and democratic backsliding. Georgia's trajectory ultimately reveals the fragility of religious freedom where the sacred and the national remain deeply entangled.

Keywords: *religious nationalism, church-state relations, democratic backsliding, religious pluralism, post-Soviet Georgia.*

Introduction

Freedom is rarely adjudicated by political institutions alone; it is also negotiated through the symbolic and

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institutional weight of religion. In Georgia, three decades of post-Soviet state-building have been inseparable from the consolidation of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) as a privileged political actor. This article examines how the institutionalization of Orthodox Christianity as the chief marker of Georgian national identity has produced a contested and asymmetric understanding of religious freedom – one that affords substantial latitude to the dominant confession while constraining the practical freedoms of religious minorities, secular citizens, and sexual minorities alike. Drawing on the Concordat of 2002, subsequent legislative and constitutional debates, and the political crises of 2024–2025, the article situates Georgia's trajectory within the broader Central and Eastern European pattern in which religious institutions function as both a resource for post-communist identity reconstruction and a vector of illiberal political mobilization. The Georgian case is instructive for comparative debates on freedom in the region precisely because it demonstrates that constitutional guarantees of religious liberty are fully compatible with a deeply unequal lived experience of that liberty.

The Institutionalization of Orthodox Privilege

Although Article 9 of the Constitution of Georgia formally separates church and state while recognizing the GOC's "special role" in national history, the Constitutional Agreement (Concordat) signed in October 2002 by President Eduard Shevardnadze and Patriarch Ilia II established a substantively different reality (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021). The Concordat confirmed Church ownership of all churches and monasteries on Georgian territory, including non-functioning structures; granted the Patriarch legal immunity; gave the GOC exclusive rights to staff military chaplaincies while exempting its clergy from conscription; and created a unique consultative role for the Church in education policy (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021). Crucially, the Concordat made the GOC the only religious institution permitted to register as a "church" under Georgian law; Catholic, Muslim, and other communities could register only as unions or foundations, a distinction with direct consequences for property rights and tax status (Concordat of 2002, n.d.).

These asymmetries were not incidental but constitutive. As Gegeshidze and Mirziashvili (2021) document, the Church's privileged legal position has translated into substantial

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fiscal transfers, with the Patriarchate receiving significant annual support from state and municipal budgets – resources unavailable to other confessions, which remain subject to standard taxation. The result is a legal architecture in which religious pluralism is formally permitted but substantively hierarchical: one confession enjoys constitutional recognition, property restitution, and budgetary support, while all others operate within a residual category of tolerated but unequal civil status.

Hegemony in Practice: Religious Diversity and Its Limits

The practical consequences of this asymmetry are most visible in the experience of religious minorities. Georgia's Muslim community – concentrated in Adjara and parts of Kvemo Kartli – has faced repeated, often informal, obstruction of mosque construction; Batumi's decades-long inability to secure permission for a second mosque, eventually ruled discriminatory by the Kutaisi Court of Appeals, is illustrative of how administrative discretion has been used to constrain minority worship (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021). Armenian Apostolic communities have likewise been engaged in protracted property disputes with the GOC over historic churches in Tbilisi, reflecting tensions inherited from the Soviet period (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021).

The clearest illustration of how Orthodox hegemony shapes the boundaries of permissible freedom emerged in July 2021, when radical conservative groups, including several Orthodox priests, violently disrupted Tbilisi Pride events, injuring more than fifty journalists and tearing down the European Union flag in front of parliament (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021). The Patriarchate publicly condemned the violence, yet senior clergy simultaneously denounced the Pride march itself as incompatible with Georgian tradition, a duality that left ambiguous whether ecclesiastical authority functioned as a restraint on extremism or as a permissive backdrop for it (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021). This was not an isolated rhetorical moment: the Patriarch's Easter epistle earlier that year had already characterized the erosion of fixed gender categories and family values as a central threat to be resisted, establishing a discursive template that the ruling party would later translate into statutory form (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021).

These patterns are reinforced by a deeper ideological current: the equation of authentic Georgian identity with Orthodox belonging. Comparative survey data place Georgia

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among the highest-scoring post-Soviet Orthodox states on the perceived necessity of sharing the dominant religion to be considered “truly” national, a marker more salient in Georgia than in Serbia, Russia, or Greece (Margvelashvili, 2025). This ethno-religious conception of nationhood, consolidated through the Church's role in the independence movement of 1989–1991, leaves limited discursive space for minority confessions, secular citizens, or LGBTQ individuals to claim full belonging within the national community (Margvelashvili, 2025). Where civic-national and Euro-Atlantic integration discourse have pushed against this conception since the 2003 Rose Revolution, the underlying ethno-religious template has persisted as the default frame to which political actors return in moments of perceived crisis (Metreveli, 2016).

Religious Nationalism and Illiberal Mobilization, 2014–2025

The years following Georgia's 2024 parliamentary election cycle illustrate how Orthodox hegemony has been redeployed as an explicit instrument of illiberal politics. As the ruling Georgian Dream party advanced its “foreign influence” legislation – closely modeled on Russia's “foreign agents” framework – the Patriarchate issued a statement in April 2024 endorsing restrictions on civil society organizations and “the propaganda of the LGBT lifestyle,” framing both as threats to “traditional values and the state's independence” (Civil Georgia, 2024). Human rights organizations characterized the resulting law as imposing onerous reporting requirements on foreign-funded media and NGOs, explicitly intended to suppress organizations critical of the government and the Church alike (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

This alignment deepened with the passage of the “Family Values and Protection of Minors” package in September 2024, which banned Pride events and public LGBTQ symbols, prohibited gender-affirming care, and nullified same-sex marriages contracted abroad. Parliamentary leaders explicitly justified the law by reference to “centuries-old Christian, Georgian and European values,” while Church officials had called for a ban on “LGBT propaganda” months earlier (Al Jazeera, 2024). The episode exemplifies a broader pattern documented in the scholarship on Orthodox political engagement: the Church functions as a societal veto player whose cultural capital is mobilized by governing elites to legitimize restrictions on minority rights and civic freedoms, while the Church itself

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secures protection from scrutiny and continued material privilege in return (Margvelashvili, 2025; Metreveli, 2016). This is not a relationship of simple instrumentalization in either direction; it is, as Margvelashvili (2025) argues, a discursive struggle in which both Church and ruling party draw legitimacy from one another's cultural and political capital, reinforcing a shared narrative that casts liberal pluralism – and, by extension, the European Union itself – as an external threat to Georgian civilizational identity (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024).

Comparative Reflections: Georgia in the Central and Eastern European Mirror

Georgia's trajectory is not unique within the region. Comparable dynamics of ecclesiastical nationalism – in which a historically dominant church legitimizes nationalist political projects and contests the boundaries of secular citizenship – have been documented in Serbia and, to varying degrees, Poland and Russia, where dominant confessions have similarly functioned as guardians of an ethnically and religiously defined national community (Metreveli, 2016). In Poland, the Catholic Church's alignment with the Law and Justice government after 2015 produced analogous outcomes, as religious authority was invoked to justify restrictions on reproductive rights and to frame LGBTQ visibility as a foreign import threatening national cohesion. In Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church has played a comparable role in legitimizing nationalist narratives tied to Kosovo and regional territorial disputes, illustrating how Orthodox ecclesiology's historical entanglement with national mythology recurs across the post-communist Orthodox world (Metreveli, 2016). What distinguishes Georgia is the comparative weakness of countervailing state institutions: unlike Greece, an Orthodox-majority state with comparable levels of religiosity but considerably more entrenched democratic institutions, Georgia's fragile post-Soviet state structures have offered less institutional buffer against the Church's mobilizing capacity (Margvelashvili, 2025). This comparative weakness helps explain why religious nationalism in Georgia has translated more directly into legislative outcomes than in cases where institutional checks are more developed.

Conclusion

Georgia's experience demonstrates that religious freedom

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cannot be assessed solely through constitutional text; it must be evaluated against the practical architecture of privilege, fiscal support, and discursive power that determines which communities can fully exercise that freedom. The Concordat of 2002 formalized an asymmetry between Orthodox Christianity and all other confessions that has proven durable across three decades of political change. In the post-2024 period, this asymmetry has been actively mobilized in service of an illiberal political agenda that frames Euro-Atlantic integration, civil society, and minority rights as threats to a religiously defined national identity. Georgia's case suggests that in societies where the sacred and the national remain deeply entangled, the consolidation of democratic freedom requires not merely formal guarantees of religious liberty, but a renegotiation of the relationship between dominant religious institutions and the state itself. For scholars of freedom in Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, the Georgian case offers a cautionary illustration: religious institutions inherited from the Soviet collapse can become durable infrastructures of illiberalism long after the initial moment of national revival has passed, suggesting that comparative research on democratic backsliding in the region should treat church-state entanglement as a structural variable rather than a peripheral cultural detail.

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