
ORTHODOX POWER AND POLITICS: HOW CHURCH-STATE TIES UNDERMINE GEORGIA'S EU PATH

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Abstract

The paper explores the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in Georgia's Europeanization path by answering the question of how the alignment between the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Georgian Dream government in supporting the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" – the so-called "Foreign Agents' Law" affected Georgia's EU integration prospects. The paper is based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Process Tracing methods of analyzing all statements made in 2023-2024 of the church and state in tandem to explore the resisting actions of civil society, opposition, and the international community. The study reveals that the alignment of the ruling party with the GOC around the "Foreign Agents' Law" by framing the civil society and media as threats to national sovereignty, identity, and religious values, was one of the key triggers of Georgia's decision to suspend the accession talks with the EU.

Keywords: Church-state alignment, Foreign Agents' Law, Georgia's EU Integration, Civil Society.

INTRODUCTION

Georgia's more than three-decade-long effort toward Europeanization has experienced significant regress over the past three years. The rapid reforms implemented in the direction of European integration, including the active involvement of civil society, may quickly lose their value, putting the people's historic struggle to become an inseparable part of Western democracy at risk. All of this became especially evident in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine when the government gradually shifted its foreign policy rhetoric and chose a course of alignment with Russia. In Georgia, attempts to suppress democratic development and free speech began with the introduction of the "Foreign Agents' Law".

The adoption of the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" has dramatically altered Georgia's foreign policy architecture and consequently jeopardized its EU integration perspective. It is noteworthy that one of the most trusted institutions in Georgia with 69 % of the public declaring trust in it [CRRC, 2020], the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), indirectly supported the adoption of the law.

The main targets of this law are non-governmental organizations and the media, which represent key democratic institutions whose strengthening is one of the conditions of the EU integration process. These two actors make a special contribution to the Europeanization of Georgia and to the process of supporting the country's transformation from a hybrid regime to a consolidated democracy. Their vital role was many times emphasized by the EU officials [EESC, 2024]. Moreover, strengthening the civil society and engaging them in democratic processes was also one of the priorities of 9 conditionalities¹ set by the EU on Georgia's EU integration path as a prerequisite to start Accession Negotiations [European Commission, 2023], as well as, the priorities of the European Neighbourhood Policy [ENP, 2003] and Eastern Partnership [EaP, 2009] to which the Georgian state is a signatory.

Despite European officials' criticism of this initiative, the bill was reintroduced by the parliamentary political group People's Power, which was affiliated with the ruling party, Georgian Dream. With this move, the Georgian Government finally achieved the goals it had set out in 2023. Moreover, the adoption of the previously withdrawn bill was preceded by the official return of oligarch Ivanishvili to political life.

¹ EU Conditionalities for Georgia on its EU Integration Path. Conditionality number 9: "Improve the protection of human rights including by implementing an ambitious human rights strategy and ensuring freedom of assembly and expression. Launch impartial, effective and timely investigations in cases of threats against safety of vulnerable groups, media professionals and civil society activists, and bring organizers and perpetrators of violence to justice. Consult and engage with civil society, allowing for their meaningful involvement in legislative and policymaking processes and ensure they can operate freely".

The government's extensive propaganda campaign against the Georgian civil society and media, endorsed by the GOC, was largely driven by a narrative that framed the law as necessary to protect the state's sovereignty, religious and traditional values from NGOs and media outlets funded by Western donors [Eurasianet, 2024]. In particular, the GOC Synod in its official statement framed activities of the non-governmental sector and media as targeted actions to discredit the GOC, which was done in parallel with labelling NGOs' activities as the "growing trend of propaganda of the LGBT lifestyle and sin" [Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia, 2024a]. Notably, the Synod of the Orthodox Church of Georgia contributed to the growing hostility towards organizations financed from abroad by legitimizing the law's adoption among parishioners by stating that "the government has clearly taken the path of protecting traditional values" [Ibid., para. 5].

Despite large-scale street protests, harsh statements from Georgia's strategic Western partners, and an appeal to the Constitutional Court, the bill was adopted. As a result, Georgia's EU integration process was suspended. The Georgian government framed this action as evidence that the West opposed Georgian values, religion, and traditions [Social Justice Center, 2024]. Such framing of the Western reaction towards the Georgian governmental actions has to be seen as a pre-election speculation from the Georgian Dream to bolster public support in the conservative segments. This is so, because it was obvious that adopting the law like "Foreign Agents' Law" would create more barriers for the European integration, in particular, by increasing the danger of removing civil society from policy-making and decision-making processes. This speculative strategy was indirectly supported by powerful non-state actors such as the Georgian Orthodox Church².

The paper explores the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in delaying Georgia's EU membership negotiations (supported by approximately 80 % of the Georgian population [NDI, 2023], by undermining democratic institutions and supporting the adoption of the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" that has triggered a regress in the EU integration path of Georgia. The adoption of this law has been followed by other undemocratic laws and actions inconsistent with the EU policies. The analysis in the paper is based on the timeframe 2023–2024, especially on two critical juncture cases when the "Foreign Agents' Law" was introduced and then withdrawn in 2023 and subsequently when the same law with a different name was reintroduced in 2024 and adopted; this process eventually ended with

² "Indirect support" is means that the GOC did not issue the statements explicitly advocating the "Foreign Agents' Law" adoption, or its enforcement but endorsed governmental decisions.

the Georgian Dream's statement about suspending EU accession talks until 2028 which triggered large scale street protests, workers' strikes, and critical dissent of a part of Georgia's civil service, and sparked off a serious political crisis.

The study aims to answer the following **question** about how the alignment between the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Georgian Dream government in supporting the "Foreign Agents' Law" affected Georgia's EU integration prospects. The **hypothesis** is that the government brought the church as close as possible by pleasing them with the adoption of the homophobic law and by framing the adoption of the "Foreign Agents' Law" in the context of protecting the national identity and sovereignty of the state. These laws, in essence, stand in contradiction to the fundamental European values and serve as the trigger for the suspension of the Europeanization process of Georgia.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper draws on the theoretical perspectives of '**religious nationalism**' and '**post-secularism**' that both help to elucidate the case of contemporary Georgia, including the years 2023-2024 under examination in this paper.

1.1. Framing religious nationalism in Georgia

In essence, religious nationalism emphasizes the fusion of religious and national identities in a way that casts religion as the most important source of political legitimacy and national identity. In the context of religious nationalism, religious and political articulations of national identity are strongly intertwined. The Georgian dynamics of the relationship between church and state, and between religion and politics, have been very similar to the historical experiences observed in the Orthodox states of Southeastern Europe [Triandafyllidou, 2024]. Eastern Orthodox political spaces have traditionally been inclined to caesaropapism, a *de facto* combination of religious and secular power. Therefore, a certain historic link between religion and statehood has always existed historically in Orthodox states, including Georgia.

Already in the Soviet period, the Georgian nationalist movement fused nationalism and religion in their rhetoric and the 'sacred trinity of language, faith, and homeland' was an inseparable part of nationalist demonstrations in Georgia [Jones 2012, p.46]. In 1989, as the Soviet Union collapsed, a moment of new national awakening emerged in many states of Eastern Europe, including Georgia, which was accompanied by the revival of both religion and national identity. Given the

prehistory of a cultural and political tendency towards *caesaropapism*, the religious and nationalist categories soon found common ground. For instance, the first president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, referred to his course as ‘the Way of Christ’, while the enemy camp was characterized as ‘the way of Barabbas’ [Jones 2012]. Indeed, Georgia’s traditional Orthodox Christian heritage was at the time generally viewed ‘as an essential factor for the formation of national self-awareness’ [Zedania 2011, p.124]. As in many former Soviet republics, in Georgia too, decades of religious repressions led to a new kind of nostalgic reawakening that further fueled the religious and nationalist fervor of the day [Metreveli, 2021].

This sort of (re)turn to religion exemplifies the main contention of post-secular theory, which challenges the broad assumption that modernization presupposes secularization and thus irreversibly leads to a process of gradual decline of religion in public life [Habermas, 2003]. On the contrary, the post-secular theoretical model holds that religion maintains its defining role in the cultural, political, and social realms and represents a powerful force that often revolts against the secular tendencies of modernity, globalization, and other emerging threats to the established order [Casanova, 2006]. In the context of southeastern and central eastern states, it has been shown that church-state relations develop ‘not only in a specific national context ... but in response to broader transformations stemming from European integration and social change characterizing liquid modernity’ [Baumann, 2000]. In the case of Montenegro, too, ‘revitalization of religion and the desecularization of society’, as well as a ‘mass return to religion’ have been shown to have taken place in the early 1990s [Bakrac, Blagojevic, 2020]. Triandafyllidou has argued that ‘in late modernity’, and in particular in the post-1989 period, religion re-asserts itself to become ‘emblematic of the political transition and gets mobilized by different political forces’ as these nations respond to broader external transformations, such as European integration [Triandafyllidou, 2024, p. 24].

1.2. Post-secular interpretation for the case of Georgia

The post-secular interpretation explains the case of Georgia well. The wave of modernization undergone by Georgia during the three decades of independence – and especially the rapid modernization during the years of the Saakashvili administration – has not at all resulted in the decline of religion in public life. On the contrary, the Georgian Orthodox Church has prospered, while the GOC has retained the highest level of popularity. Moreover, precisely in the post-secular manner, recent years of Georgian history, including the last two years, have

witnessed countless concerted efforts by the GOC to reassert itself in the realm of public and political affairs to “defend” itself from the perceived threats of secular modernity and globalization. The GOC’s “reactionary nature” as exemplified in its opposition to aspects of EU integration, particularly draft laws initiated in the parliament, as well as the church’s positioning on the matter of the “Russian Law” on foreign agents in 2023 and 2024 exemplify the church’s resistance to globalization and secularization, which is a post-secular phenomenon [Kakachia, 2014]. Finally, the way in which successive Georgian governments, and especially the Georgian Dream party, have sought to align themselves *rhetorically* with the Church attests to the broader acceptance of the continuous political influence of the GOC as a post-secular, traditionalist, conservative force that is an instrument of resisting the EU and the globalized international order. During the electoral campaign in 2024, the government, in fact, proposed that it would declare Orthodox Christianity as the state religion in Georgia upon winning the next term [Chedia, 2014].

With these two theories – religious nationalism and post-secularism – this paper seeks to explore how the rhetoric of the GOC intertwines religion and nationalism and how this link affects attitudes towards Georgia’s European Union, and also to examine how the GOC frames its narratives in order to strengthen its endurance in the post-secular phase of existence.

1.3. Role of civil society in democracy and Europeanization process of Georgia

Civil society plays a critical role in the creation of an inclusive, stable system based on participatory democracy. Both Anderson and Stephan emphasize the role of civil society in the creation of consolidated participatory democracies based on inclusion and the rule of law. Anderson argues that a robust civil society could have a decisive role during periods of political transformation. Civil society could assume a range of roles that are conducive to such moments, including mediation between actors, promotion of pluralism and deliberation, advocacy for the rule of law and human rights [Anderson, 2004]. Stephan, too, emphasizes that democracy might only be properly considered as consolidated where ‘there is the opportunity for the development of a robust and critical civil society that helps check the state and constantly generates alternatives’ [Stephan 2000, p. 39].

As is well known, the Copenhagen Criteria, established by the EU in 1993 for states aspiring to join the union, sets out democracy, rule of law, and human rights as the key political criteria for EU membership [Copenhagen Criteria, 1993]. Having a

robust civil society is in turn vital to attaining these political objectives in the framework of a consolidated democracy. In the same spirit, in 2023, the EU set out a nine-point plan for Georgia's prospective EU membership that called upon the government to "consult and engage with civil society, allowing for their meaningful involvement in legislative and policymaking processes and ensure they can operate freely", while also calling for "more positive engagement ... a transparent and inclusive process involving opposition parties and civil society" [European Commission, 2023]. Therefore, both in theory and practice, fostering a strong civil society is a strong EU conditionality that Georgia ought to accomplish in order to fulfill its EU membership aspirations.

2. METHODOLOGY

To analyze how the discursive alignment between the church and the state has influenced Georgia's European integration process, especially through the support of the so-called "Foreign Agents' Law" and similar laws limiting the powers of civil society and contradicting fundamental human rights, qualitative research approach – in particular, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) – has been used as a methodology. Considering the context of Georgia in 2023–2024, Teun A. van Dijk's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), focusing on elite discourse and manipulation, is most relevant since it makes it possible to distinguish how language and discourses are used to frame power relationships in the society and manipulate public perceptions [van Dijk, 2008]. It is useful to analyze why specific social norms are enacted, legitimated, and resisted in textual and verbal communication in the social and political context [van Dijk, 2015]. CDA is relevant because it focuses primarily on social problems and political issues, which are mostly multidisciplinary; it explains social interaction in social structures and enables researchers to explain how discourse structures "enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power abuse (dominance) in society" [van Dijk 2015]. In the context of this particular research, the emphasis is on the discursive manipulations of elites targeting the Georgian Orthodox Church, especially by politicians representing the ruling party, the Georgian Dream, with an interest in how they frame selective information, and how they make emotional appeals to shape public opinion (ibid). On the other hand, the analysis also focuses on how stigmatized groups like civil society, particularly NGOs and media, challenge their power by opposing counter-narratives. In this study, the *independent variable* could be the church-state alignment in support of the so-called Russian style law adoption which frames this

action as protecting the country from foreign interference and defending the anti-national, traditional, and religious values and sovereignty that could be explained from the religious nationalism perspective. On the other hand, the *dependent variable* could be the developments in the Europeanization process of Georgia and their regress. Resistance from the political opposition, civil society, and critical reactions from the Western actors could be considered as *external variables*.

The timeframe of the research analysis is 2023–2024. Case study analysis is done by picking *critical juncture* cases like the (1) introduction of the “Foreign Agents’ Law” in 2023 and the (2) reintroduction of the same law in 2024. Critical Discourse Analysis of narratives and behavior-alignment of all statements of the Georgian Orthodox Church is pursued by focusing on both rhetoric and actions of the ruling party. In particular, all official statements of the GOC Synod made in 2023 regarding the introduction and withdrawal of the “Foreign Agents’ Law” and the Synod’s statements made in 2024 after the reintroduction of the same law with the different name “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence” shall be analyzed. Critical analysis is also integrated into the publications and public statements of the civil society organizations regarding the church-state tandem against the “Foreign Agents’ Law”. Discourses spread by pro-governmental and opposition media are not analyzed separately because they directly mirror either the ruling party’s rhetoric or the pathos of the opposition and civil society, so an analysis revealing such media discourses separately would be superfluous.

In order for the analysis to be consistent and to reflect the dynamics of how the rhetoric and actions of the church and state against European integration intersected, the analysis is based on the so-called *Process Tracing* method that chronologically follows all significant events during the specified study period and ultimately clearly reflects what led to the suspension of negotiations on accession to the European Union (Beach, 2020). In other words, through the Process Tracing method, causal effects of the outcome are revealed within case analysis [Collier, 2011]. Using the *Process Tracing* method, in the context of this research, according to minimalist understanding of the causal mechanisms when mechanisms are not unpacked in detail [Beach 2020], “*cause*” could be the “introduction and adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence”, “*causal mechanism*” could be the church-government joint discursive influence in support of the adoption of the law contradicting EU policies and already set conditionalities for Georgia, while the “*outcome*” could be the suspension of EU accession talks. In order for the analysis to be structurally sound, data was collected as follows: during 2023–2024, all direct

and indirect statements made by the Church regarding the “Foreign Agents’ Law” that were consistent with the ruling party's rhetoric towards civil society and the media potentially contradicting the European integration process were collected. All statements were analyzed one by one using the vivo-coding method through the MAQXDA software program, and the main message boxes were classified into thematic categories that could potentially harm the functioning of civil society, fundamental human rights, and, accordingly, European integration. During data collection, it was noted what statements or actions preceded or followed the statements of the ruling party, the Georgian Dream, to analyze church-state discursive coincidences in the dynamics. In addition, opposing arguments surrounding the “Foreign Agents’ Law” and other subsequent similar laws and actions were also collected during the research. Analyzed were the statements of civil society, media, and opposition, as well as the European Union and the United States referring that the government’s specific actions, changed rhetoric towards the West, and the adoption of specific laws, contradicted the country’s stated constitutional goals. For the analytical framework, (1) the keyframes of religious nationalistic and anti-Western discourses were identified; (2) in terms of power and ideology discourse interaction, the mutual legitimization between the Church and the state was examined; (3) the domestic implication of linking discourse to the political outcome was assessed by measuring the impact of the church on public opinion shaping.

3. WHAT IS THE “LAW ON TRANSPARENCY OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE” ABOUT AND HOW DO DIFFERENT ACTORS FRAME IT?

According to the Legislative Herald of Georgia, the aim of the “Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence” can be formulated as ensuring transparency of foreign influence over the non-commercial legal entities, broadcasters, print media owners, and digital media platforms operating in Georgia. According to the law, the listed types of organizations funded by foreign donors with more than 20 % annually are required to register as "organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power" [Legislative Herald of Georgia, 2024a]. Foreign power is defined as a foreign government non-citizen of Georgia, a foreign-established legal entity (ibid).

3.1. Law defenders

The Georgian Dream (GD), Peoples Power, and indirectly the Georgian Orthodox Church are among the law's direct and indirect defenders. The way these actors

framed the law and how their narratives coincide with each other by categorizing each argument is analyzed through the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method, which focuses on identifying the patterns of how the language is being framed and how church-state power relations are articulated.

The bill on “Foreign Agents’ Influence” (“Foreign Agents’ Law”) was first introduced in 2023 by the parliamentary fraction “People’s Power”, which separated from the ruling party Georgian Dream a few months before this initiative. When announcing its initiation, they claimed that the law aimed to “register foreign agents” [Formula TV, 2022]. However, after a harsh reaction of the Georgian society, the bill was withdrawn a few months after its introduction [Kirby, 2023].

On the 3rd of April 2024, GD brought back Russian style “Foreign Agents’ Law” claiming that it is similar to Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and some European laws. The word “agent” was removed from the name without changing much of the content in the law itself and named “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence” in reality labeling civil society actors, critical media, and opposition as ruled by foreign powers [Gavin, 2024]. In 2024, GD’s main discourse in support of the adoption of the law was framed with three main claimed aims: firstly, to ensure the “protection and strengthening state sovereignty”; secondly, to fight against black money that could have been used to “devalue Georgian traditions in the country” [Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024a]; and thirdly, to not allow foreign power (“Global War Party”) to appoint a new government consisting of the so-called “Agentura” (Agents/Spies) [Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024b].

Among the law's indirect defenders, it is possible to name the Georgian Orthodox Church. The GOC repeated the same messages as the ruling party in slightly different words, framing them as the main necessary aim of a state in difficult times. In this way, concepts such as the “protection of national and religious values” indirectly connect with GD’s second aim mentioned above which is “safeguarding sovereignty” thus echoing GD’s key motto [Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia, 2024b].

3.2. Opponents of the law

Civil society organizations, especially the ones working on human rights, since 2023 have argued that the “Foreign Agents’ Law” was incompatible with the European Union legal system and values [IDFI, 2023]. More precisely, lawyers frame it as harmful to the process of Georgia’s integration into the European Union (ibid). In 2024, when the law was adopted and the Constitutional Court refused to

suspend its enactment, the 16 media organizations, 120 CSOs, and 4 individuals addressed the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) with the appeal arguing that the law was not compatible with fundamental human rights, especially freedom of expression and association [Art 10–11], the right to respect for private and family life (Article 8), and protections against discrimination [Article 14] [CSOMETER, 2024]. In addition, before the third reading, the ruling party quietly added a clause to the law that concerns special categories of personal data including information about a person's health, sex life, genetic data, and more [Kunchulia, 2024a]. Civil society representatives also claim that the law is imbued with a distinctly Russian spirit, aimed at restricting and stigmatizing civil society [Shubashvili, 2024]. Experts explain that it is similar to the Russian law on foreign agents adopted in 2012, as a result of which a third of all NGOs were closed after its enactment in Russia and argue that the same repressions are intended to take place in the Georgian case too [Goedemans, 2024].

Representatives of the Georgian political opposition parties develop the same line as the civil society and add that the so-called “Russian law” (same as “Foreign Agents’ Law”) was introduced in the first place to tie Georgia to Russia. They argued that the ruling party, which was on the path to defeat, was trying to drag the country into its own defeat [Radio Liberty, 2024a]. As an alternative to this law, representatives of the parliamentary opposition initiated a bill “On Protection From the Influence of the Occupant State – the Russian Federation”, which was finally rejected by the parliament, while the “Foreign Agents’ Law” was adopted [Interpressnews, 2024]. Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili vetoed the controversial “Foreign Agents’ Law” claiming that it is Russian law in its essence, but parliament overrode the veto [Light, 2024].

The EU, NATO, UN, OSCE ODHIR, COE, Amnesty International, and other international organizations alongside the politicians from the USA and individual European states unanimously condemned the adoption of this Russian-style “Foreign Agents’ Law”, stressing that neither the US nor the EU and its member states have such laws in place and that the only country that adopted such law was Hungary and ECHR annulled it since it aimed at “silencing the media and oppressing NGOs” [BBC, 2020]. The key messages from the international actors were that this law stigmatizes the civil society and media (US Embassy in Georgia, 2023), that it is incompatible with Georgia’s EU path (European Economic and Social Committee, 2024), hindering the ability of people to safeguard human rights [Amnesty International, 2024]. ODHIR issued a report on the “Foreign Agents’ Law”,

assessed it as non-compatible with international standards, and called the Georgian Government to revoke the law [OSCE ODHIR, 2024].

The Venice Commission “strongly recommended” the Georgian Dream to repeal the law, stating that “fundamental flaws in the law will have significant negative consequences for the freedom of association and expression, the right to respect for private life, the right to participate in public life and the prohibition of discrimination” [Venice Commission, 2024]. Individual international experts, already in 2023, predicted that law would “effectively stop the European integration process of Georgia [GIP, 2023].

There were several statements made by the individual representatives of the Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church perceiving the reintroduction of the “Foreign Agents’ Law” as a threat to Georgia’s European integration and stating that everybody should respect people’s historic choice to become part of a European family [Intskirveli, 2024]. On 24th April, Archbishop Zenon Iarajuli of Dmanisi and Agarak-Tashiri criticized the reintroduction of the law as stigmatizing the civil society and emphasized that if the bill were to pass the non-commercial organizations of the Georgian Church would also have been considered foreign agents [Iarajuli 2024]. One more Synod representative, who expressed concern over the law was Metropolitan Grigory [Berbichashvili] of Poti and Khobi who expressed the fear of further escalation and that the enemy might take advantage of this situation where Georgia’s partners would not be able to save the long-suffering country [Kunchulia, 2024b].

4. HOW DID THE CHURCH-STATE POWER INTERACTION SHIFT IN FAVOR OF GD’S POLITICAL GOALS?

In 2023, the government failed to pass the “Foreign Agents’ Law” because they encountered strong public opposition, and the Orthodox Church, which has a profound influence on shaping public opinion, was not involved in supporting the bill. GD claimed that in 2023 “large part of society was misled” [Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024b]. The rhetoric where the church and government largely coincided throughout two years was in the name of maintaining peace [Erstulovneba TV, 2023].

In the manner characteristic of the post-secular condition, in order to engage the church in the political sphere in a more explicit manner, in 2024, the government developed a new tactic of being in closer harmony with the church both to score points in the pre-election period and to pass the “Foreign Agents’ Law”. This

occurred despite the fact that constitutionally Georgia is a secular state, with a more or less clear division between national and religious spheres even though there is a “Concordat”, a constitutional level agreement between the State and the Orthodox Church [Legislative Herald of Georgia, 2002]. However, the ruling party Georgian Dream went even further, namely, among the 4 main pre-election promises of the Georgian Dream was the proposition of declaring Orthodox Christianity as the state religion [Caucasus Watch, 2024]. There have been skeptical comments from the church representatives in response to this initiative. For example, Giorgi Zviadadze, the official representative of the Patriarchate, stated that the “declaration of Orthodoxy as the state religion is connected with a process of mutual subordination, which is unacceptable for the church” [Palitra TV, 2024]. Some of the experts connect this initiative intending to gain more electoral support for the parliamentary election 2024 [Chedia, 2024]. However, the ruling party and the church held a meeting and agreed that in case GD gains a constitutional majority, which did not happen, they would have added an amendment to the constitution naming “Orthodoxy as the pillar of the identity of the Georgian state” [Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024c].

The second step for aligning with the GOC, was GD adopting homophobic legislation, as well as, initiating tightening legislation to protect religious feelings and insulting religious buildings [Radio Liberty, 2024b], in response to the incident when one of the civil activists Nata Peradze threw blue paint on the icon of St. Matrona icon of Moscow seated beside Georgian-born Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin 2024 which was accidentally spotted by the people at the Trinity Church on Christmas Eve. Some civil society representatives called on the Georgian Orthodox Church to remove the icon from the cathedral. However, church spokesperson Andria Jagmaidze assessed this as an anti-church campaign, saying “this is not an icon of Stalin” but rather an icon featuring Stalin [Parulava, 2024]. However, later the GOC issued an official statement explaining that the Patriarchate of Georgia is planning to “make changes” to the icon depicting Stalin in the Trinity Cathedral because as they stated there is insufficient evidence confirming Stalin’s meeting with St. Matrona [Tskipurishvili, 2024].

The third step for aligning with the church was increasing the state’s funding for the Georgian Orthodox Church. In March 2024, the state funding of the GOC increased by 35 million, overall amounting to 60 million annually which was assessed by some of the experts, researching church-state related issues, as a clear political aim for the pre-election period [Social Justinec Center, 2024].

5. CHURCH-STATE ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES FRAMED AS A DEFENSE OF RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SOVEREIGNTY

This chapter elaborates on the distinction between the statements and actions of the church and government in tandem against Europe, and the West, in particular by framing “traditional values” from the prism of religious nationalism to build resistance to Western liberal ideals and creating an “us vs. them” dichotomy.

5.1. Church against minorities and media

In summer 2023, in response to Pride events, the church issued a statement condemning the activities of the people supporting LGBTQ+ rights arguing that it negatively impacts the society and values of the majority of Georgians. Moreover, while Europe was not mentioned explicitly in the statement, it implied the resistance of the GOC towards the Western liberal influence. Church is presented as a defender of conservative and nationalist narratives and sees European liberal democracy and cultural trends as a threat to Georgia’s identity. The Church explains the increase of polarization as a result of LGBTQ+ supportive events and the church suggested regulating such events by legislative actions [Orthodox Christianity, 2023]. It frames itself as a protector of national values and claims that opposing views attempt to slander or undermine the Church. In this statement, it is also stated that “the Georgian Orthodox Church has been the object of constant attacks, slander, and offensive campaigns in recent years”. Although it does not name any actors explicitly, it implies the civil society groups protecting fundamental rights and equality (ibid). In the later statement made in October 2023, the GOC criticized the media, referring to the opposition channel TV Pirveli for anti-church tactics, for shifting its focus from the spiritual content to scandals, and for its journalists’ misconduct during church services when reporting [ibid].

5.2. Building an election campaign on conservative and homophobic stances

Among the 4 main pre-election promises of the Georgian Dream was the proposition to adopt homophobic legislation [“Law on Protection of Family Values and Minors”]. This initiative was welcomed and supported by the GOC and it was finally adopted [Legislative Herald of Georgia, 2024b]. In the Press Release of the Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia it was mentioned that the “Church of Georgia has consistently defended and continues to defend our youth from ideologies that undermine traditional family structures” [Orthodox Times 2024] and therefore the decision of the government was perceived as a positive step forward [ibid]. Apart

from this, the GOC criticized the European Parliament resolution that according to the GOC's statement calls for not adopting a law on "prohibiting LGBT propaganda among adolescents" that by the church is perceived as pressure against the values of the vast majority of the Georgian population and that they do not recognize the sovereignty of Georgia as a state [Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia, 2024a, para.4].

Non-governmental organizations working on human rights claim that "the package in its essence refers not only to one group, the LGBTQ community but also creates a precedent that in the future the government can deprive any citizen of the rights guaranteed by the constitution" [Kandelaki, 2024]. Similar pathos was coming from the statement made by the European Union External Action (EEAS) arguing that this fast adoption of the law "undermines the fundamental rights of Georgian people and risks further stigmatization and discrimination of part of the population" [EEAS, 2024] that is not in line with the EU enlargement process, especially after making such decisions without broad public consultations (ibid).

5.3. Speculations around the conceptualization of "unity" and attempt to frame the youth as against religion

During the protests, a group of young people in Heroes' Square in Tbilisi swore an oath in front of the fallen heroes to protect the state from the "Russian laws", and Russian narratives, and to protect Georgia's statehood and unity. They recited the following: "We will protect our language, our homeland, and our unity" [Batumelebi, 2024]. The Georgian Dream presented this slogan as a distortion of the words – "homeland, language, and faith" of Saint Ilia the Righteous, a famous Georgian writer, publicist, and public figure. According to GD, Georgian liberals are fighting against religion by removing word "faith" and replacing it with "unity" [Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024d]. One of the activists, Zviad Tsetskhladze explained that when there was a threat of losing the language emphasize was on language, when facing threat of losing the religion, the focus was on faith, however in the understanding of the youth, "unity" is one of the most acute problems in contemporary Georgia and that is why the emphasis was on unity specifically [Formula TV, 2024]. After that, to avoid speculation on the issue, the following rallies featured signs reading "Language, homeland, faith = unity" [Maisuradze, 2024]. One of the most critical statements regarding civil society and external funding, and one that is in line with the Georgian Dream narrative, was made by the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church on April 26, 2024. They did not

miss the opportunity to indirectly echo the slogan described in the previous paragraph, specifically emphasizing that Georgia's progress in recent history should be based on the words of Saint Ilia the Righteous: “Homeland, Language, Faith” [Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia, 2024a, para.2]. The statement also calls for the patriotic spirit of new generations not to be used for political interests and harmful ideology. Moreover, stress is placed on the fact that the Georgian government's political vector was EU integration and that the government at the same time has clearly embarked on the path of protecting traditional values. Contrary to the previous GOC statement made in April, the Easter Epistle was less critical towards the civil society and the main motto of the Epistle was calling for the nation to show “love for the homeland” and “live together peacefully” despite political processes and people’s differences [Patriarchate.ge 2024], that was pretty in line what the young protestants were claiming to be the most important in today’s Georgia.

A few days after this statement, GD organized a counterdemonstration under the name of “United Public Gathering” on 29th April where the Honorable Chairman of GD addressed its electorate mobilized throughout Georgia specifically for that day. In his speech, he mentioned the fear of losing sovereignty, that the former government was elected in a revolutionary fashion by the foreign agent NGOs, and that the United National Movement (UNM) had a green light from the foreigners for their assertive actions against the society, and who nowadays want to return to that inhuman behavior that was previously also supported by NGOs in Georgia [Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024b]. The Chairman said that there is no worse enemy than the pseudo-elite brought up by foreigners [ibid]. He mentioned the so-called mysterious “Global War Party” influencing both NATO and the EU. And that the reason for the Global War Party's aggression towards Georgia is that it could not turn Georgia into a second front, which it could easily achieve if the “Agentura” returned to power [ibid].

5.4. The clash between European politicians and GOC-GD

A few days before the celebration of the “Family Purity Day”, Michael Roth – a German politician of the Social Democratic Party of Germany visited Georgia on an official visit and expressed support for the protesters opposing the “Foreign Agents' Law”. In his speech, he mentioned that the young generation is the future of Georgia and that they need to be heard, and in case they lose confidence in their country, they will leave it, and the resulting brain drain would be a disaster for the

country. He posed the following question while addressing the gathering: “how will you build a bright future for Georgia without the younger generation?! Only with the Orthodox Church, which is one of the closest allies of the ruling party?! Well, try it!” [Radio Liberty, 2024c]. The Georgian Dream assessed this statement as an attack on the church and the best illustration of foreign influence [Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024d]. “We saw foreign actors at the rally organized by the NGOs financed by them and addressing the protesters” – said Parliamentary Speaker Papuashvili [ibid, para.3]. While the GOC issued another statement in response naming Mr. Roth’s statement as completely incomprehensible, inappropriate, and unacceptable and added that the GOC does not divide society based on who stands on what platforms and represents which political force. His statement was described as an attempt to stigmatize the GOC by linking it with the ruling party [Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia, 2024c]. Despite Roth’s condemnation of the Church’s statement on its affiliation with the ruling party, it became clear on 17th May that the ruling party and the government, in general, were given a significant role, demonstrated by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze’s addressing the parishioners from the entrance of the Trinity Church where he stated that “Family Purity Day” is the day of defending families, identity as well as protecting “Nation, Language and Faith” and the Georgian Orthodox Church [Imedi TV, 2024]. He mentioned that Georgia is a Christian state and the main value of Christianity is love and some powers try to divide our society and replace love with hatred and that they need to do everything to unite the entire society around love [ibid]. This was a clear sign of alignment with the Church and a display of clever rhetorics a few months before the elections to gain the sympathy of the conservative electorate.

It is noteworthy that one month later, on the 17th of June, the Patriarchate hosted the EU Ambassador to Georgia, and the dialogue was focused on the importance of the family and the traditional and Christian values in the EU integration process of Georgia [Patriarchate of Georgia, 2024]. This was a clear sign of an attempt from the EU side to conduct constructive dialogue and explain to the GOC that the EU values does not contradict the above-mentioned conservative values.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While critically analyzing the discourses around the “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence” this paper makes a distinction between two narratives. On the

one hand, the initiators and supporters of the law frame it as being similar to the US version of the FARA law with the aim of justifying its appropriateness and to argue that the law was not in any meaningful contradiction to Western standards. On the other hand, the opponents of the law refer to the draft law as “the Russian law” to stress that the introduction of the law will isolate Georgia from the international community and yield nothing but negative results for the country. Regardless of the type and origin of the law, one thing is certain: the adoption of this law plays a negative role in Georgia's European integration process. In addition, even though the Georgian Dream claims that the introduction of the law simply ensures transparency in the activities of the foreign-funded civil sector, it is clear that this law does not in any way benefit NGOs and the media, it does not aim to promote the advancement of their activities, but rather presents this group as a threat to the rest of the society and serves to limit the scope of their freedom and action. The law has a clearly negative connotation and is perceived as a major step that distances Georgia further from its European aspirations. Therefore, the civil sector has had to go into a defensive mode and resist, since civil society, including the media, believes they make a significant positive contribution to the country's development and European integration, which has been repeatedly acknowledged by the West.

The analysis reveals how supporters of the law frame their case for adopting the law: (1) Protecting and strengthening state sovereignty; (2) protecting Georgian traditions and identity; (3) avoiding foreign agents coming into power; (4) protecting religious and national values. All of this framing aims to sow fear among Georgian society, at the same time, it deliberately affects the feelings of the religious and conservative electorate to convince them of the necessity of adopting the law. On the other hand, following categories might be distinguished for how the opponents of the law frame their case: (1) the law is restricting and stigmatizing civil society; (2) the law shows a clear intent to subject any opposition to repressions; (3) the law hinders the ability of people to defend human rights; (4) the law restricts freedom of association and expression; (5) the law creates grounds for discrimination. Accordingly, they are well-founded in their fear that this jeopardizes Georgia's European integration process.

Moreover, the statements of some Synod representatives against the law clearly show that opinions are divided within the Church, although ultimately the Church's position is still being disseminated through official statements

from the Patriarchate, which stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned concerns.

The Georgian Dream's further rapprochement with the Church has two goals. The first goal is to attract the conservative electorate through the Church's support, to which end it adopted an anti-LGBT law, initiated the tightening of legislation penalizing for insulting religious feelings and the Church buildings, and increased state funding of the Orthodox Church. The second goal is to subordinate the Church, which is revealed by the fact that it aims to declare Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, although GD failed to anticipate that it would encounter resistance from the Church itself. However, it should also be noted that in line with the post-secularistic approach, the Church's power in the public sphere has increased considerably in 2024, and therefore, the Georgian Dream is not the only party that benefits from this harmonious relationship.

Given that the majority of Georgian Dream supporters were also in favor of European integration, whatever the actual intentions of this political force in terms of conducting foreign policy are, it still had to emphasize European integration in the run-up to the elections. At the same time, the aim of GD, choosing a religious-nationalist discourse in tandem with the Georgian Orthodox Church, is to balance the criticism coming from the EU due to the adoption of the "Foreign Agents' Law" so as not to lose the pro-European electorate while attracting more conservative votes. Therefore, GD promotes the narrative that some unseen mysterious forces like the so-called "Global War Party" influence NATO, and the EU, without naming these institutions directly as the source. Accordingly, GD together with the Church's indirect support, frames the civil society and media as local agents funded by external powers posing a threat to traditional and religious values. Moreover, by using the "us vs them" dichotomy, GD labels practically everybody including the youth opposing the "Foreign Agents' Law" and some other laws and the actions that ensued from the adoption of these, as "collective enemies of the national identity". Although the Church has never directly accused the EU of insulting national identity and religious values, and even held a meeting with the EU delegation and expressed its desire for Georgia to become a member of the EU while preserving Georgian traditions and values, the Church willingly or unwillingly contributes to jeopardizing Georgia's European aspiration. In this case, the government effectively exploits the Church's main criticism of liberal democratic values to its advantage. It can also be said that the ruling party deliberately strays from the path of European integration and embarks on the path of authoritarianism. At the same time, it

should be noted that in this process, the Church's attempt to distance itself from the government is noticeable and twofold, the first time when it opposed the attempt to declare the Orthodox religion as the state religion, and the second time when the Church criticized the German politician Roth for attempting to affiliate the Church with the government.

It is important to highlight the limitations of the research here. Given that no face-to-face interviews were conducted with each actor, especially the government and the Church whose arguments regarding heading the state towards EU integration were not convincing, we cannot unequivocally prove what each actor's real intention is to support the "Foreign Agents' Law". Although all those statements and actions are quite sufficient to conclude, especially given the fact that the European integration process was stalled, the European Union itself warned the government about this. However, the government, without any justification, continues to claim that the country is on the path of European integration, although with its actions it is leading the country in an opposite direction. The second limitation of this research is that no in-depth media analysis was done throughout the research. However, it is balanced by the fact that it managed to gather all statements within 2023–2024 of the Church and state and analyzed these independently without interpretations of pro-governmental and opposition media agencies.

The results of the study allows to draw several conclusions, the first of which is that any statement made by any actor regarding the "Foreign Agents' Law" contains a hidden connotation, and what the actors say in support of or against this law is purposefully framed to carry out their discourse. The suspension of negotiations with the European Union demonstrates the accuracy of the arguments against the adoption of the law – that the law is not in line with fundamental European values and policies is a correct observation. In addition, it must be said that if it were not for the ruling party's further rapprochement with the Church and the adoption of the Church's discourse as its discourse to implement the party's goals, the ruling party would have had difficulty convincing its own and other conservative voters of the necessity of adopting the "Foreign Agents' Law" and also convincing them that this law does not contradict European values in general and that it is based on American legislation. Although there were many other obstacles on the path to European integration, the adoption of the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence", so-called "Foreign Agents' Law", is the main

trigger for the destruction of European aspirations, to which the Church, consciously or unconsciously, contributes due to its fear of losing national and religious identity and also fear of declining its influence in the public sphere in case of expansion of liberal political values in Georgia.

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