

**POLITICS AND RELIGION IN  
CONTEMPORARY GEORGIA:  
THE RUSSIAN MODEL AND  
ITS POSSIBLE ADOPTION**

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1

**Georgia's future hangs in the balance as the ruling Georgian Dream coalition attempts to derail the country's democratic progress. Once a frontrunner among Eastern Partnership countries<sup>1</sup>, Georgia now fails to demonstrate progress and meet the requirement in order to be considered a candidate for EU membership.**

While the prospects for European integration of Georgia are tempered by several serious challenges relating to the country's broader backsliding democracy, the Georgian Dream coalition seems determined to level up its authoritarian inclinations by attempting to impose new restrictive norms. With this goal in mind, the **Georgian government employed a well-known chapter from the Kremlin playbook**. With the Russian-style law on foreign agents intended to impose repressive measures against pro-democracy activists and media outlets, the ruling party revealed its desire to adopt Russian political practices.

After mass protest rallies, the controversial law was dropped, but it will barely lead to the accomplishment of sustainable political

consent. On the contrary, Georgian authorities can likely embrace other Russian-inspired legislative measures. As the journalist Boris Grozovsky noted, "In an attempt to retain power, the ruling party and its creator, Boris Ivanishvili, are accelerating the transformation of the Georgian political system into an autocratic one."<sup>2</sup>

One of the potential directions can be the use of Russian experience in the sphere of religious policies. This direction was a secondary but significant part of the development of Russian authoritarianism. This strategy can be highly unscrupulous in Georgian society, where religious values are profoundly revered. Furthermore, the attempts to enforce different laws devoted to protecting religious values were multiple in Georgia. In the current context of polarization and the political struggle, these attempts can be ratcheted, especially when high officials have resorted to religious rhetoric against opponents. Accordingly, **analysis of Russian discourses and political projects in this area can help understand possible risks and outline the scenarios to cope with them.**

<sup>1</sup> Russel, Martin. 2021. [Georgia's Bumpy Road to Democrac: On Track for a European Future?](#)

<sup>2</sup> Grozovsky, Boris. 2023. [Importing Autocracy: a Dangerous Moment for Georgia](#). CRS.

# OVERVIEW OF THE DRAFT AMENDMENTS TO LAW OF GEORGIA ON ASSEMBLIES AND DEMONSTRATIONS

## 2.1

**The legislative initiative on amendments to the Law of Georgia on Assemblies and Demonstrations was initiated by the pro-kremlin Alt-info/Conservative Movement on November 7, 2022.<sup>3</sup>**

The draft law introduces Article 10<sup>1</sup> prohibiting holding an assembly or demonstration -

- ▷ If it aims or during which there may be a demonstration, promotion, and/or propaganda of sexual orientation.
- ▷ If it is aimed at or during which there may be statements and calls that are against any religious movement, that are defamatory and/or contrary to the beliefs of people of any religious denomination, and/or during which there may be propaganda of war and violence, incitement of national, religious or social feud.

**The same draft envisages administrative liability prescribing fines or administrative detention for violating the rules mentioned in the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations. Repeated offenders will face up to 2 years of imprisonment.**

The explanatory note of the draft law clearly suggests that the amendment aims to limit forms of expression perceived as offensive to religious sentiments and beliefs. While this draft law primarily targets people of LGBTQI identity and prohibits their right to assembly and demonstration, with its endlessly broad definition of terms - “religious sentiments and beliefs” and “incitement of national, religious, or social feud,” the draft law potentially covers any assembly and demonstration that authorities would deem to fall under these definitions.

**The draft law is unambiguously designed to prohibit the right to peaceful assembly prescribed by law and is necessary for a democratic society.** It further poses considerable threats to the existence of different opinions and provides the government with the means to gag any public criticism of state policies.

<sup>3</sup> [Legislative initiative of the citizens' initiative group](#) (Giorgi Kardava, Zurab Makharadze, Irakli Morgoshia, Shota Martinenko, Konstantine Morgoshia), November 7, 2022.

## DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE LEGISLATION

### 2.2

The group advocating the draft law - Alt-Info/Conservative Movement affiliated with Georgian ultranationalists, has emerged as an openly pro-Russian political platform. According to its leaders, the party's objectives are to overturn "liberal dictatorship" and establish "Christian democracy" in Georgia.<sup>4</sup> The leaders of the Alt-Info/Conservative Movement, who frequently resort to violence as a primary tool, were among those who organized the homophobic violence on July 5, 2021. **Although the Georgian Orthodox Church condemned the violence, their perspective was captured in the remark of Patriarch 'locum tenens,' Shio Mujiri urging the society to "start thinking on reflecting the commandment concerning the insult of religious and national feelings in the legislation."**<sup>5</sup>

Demands to establish a legal framework against offending religious beliefs have been part of the Georgian political discourse for years now. With this goal in mind, a member of the Georgian Dream faction, Soso Jachviani, initiated amendments to the Administrative Offences Code of Georgia<sup>6</sup> envisaging administrative liability for insulting religious feelings in 2015. **Although the draft law was withdrawn, the initiative received severe criticism for its attempts to establish discriminatory practices, which would "further deteriorate the state of religious minorities in the country" and "prohibit constructive criticism of the Georgian Orthodox Church."**<sup>7</sup>

Despite the failure of previous efforts to push through the legislation, the hazardous circumstances under which the current legislative initiative was introduced call for further analysis of possible implications this draft law may pose. Recent developments in Georgia indicate that the ruling Georgian Dream coalition has become more eager to strengthen its anti-liberal policy. Their statements and political decisions clearly show that the ruling party successfully adopted a populist-conservative agenda and nativist rhetoric previously associated with marginalized, radical actors. This is especially relevant in the context of upcoming elections. **As the 2024 elections approach, the stakes for the Georgian Dream party grow higher. Therefore, the ruling party's growing attempts to advance its position and maintain political power by winning a fourth consecutive term can be expected.** Given these circumstances, the prospect for the legislative initiative registered by the Alt-Info/Conservative Movement to receive support from the parliamentary majority and make its way through the parliament is far higher. **In order to better assess the risks and potential outcomes that Georgia may face if the amendment to the Law of Georgia on Assemblies and Demonstrations comes into force, we take Russia's experience with the similarly tailored law and its practices into account and examine the consequences that can be foreseen within the Georgian political context.**

<sup>4</sup> DRI. [Results of Observing a Far-right Political Group "Conservative Movement/Alt-Info"](#). October 6, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Agenda.ge. [Patriarch 'locum tenens' says Georgians will unite again against LGBT events 'anytime in future'](#) July, 5, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> [Legislative initiative of Ioseb Jachviani](#), a member of the Parliament of Georgia, December 2, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> [Statement of the civil society platform no to phobia on the draft law on liability for insulting religious feelings](#). 3 February, 2016.

# THE POLITICAL USE OF RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

## 3

### THE ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY TRENDS

#### 3.1

This piece is devoted to the use of Russian Orthodoxy in the political process because, **amid various directions of state-religious relations in Russia, this subject is the largest and the most relevant for Georgia.** The relationship between the Russian state and the Russian Church has deep roots in the past. One could argue that the transfer of the Russian metropolitan chair influenced the rise of the Moscow principality in the fourteenth century. The most conspicuous example of the political harnessing of religion by the Russian government is the creation of the first Russian ideological model – “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality” in the XIX century.

In this concept, Orthodoxy should have unified the Russian people in their loyalty to the Russian monarchy, which had faced the challenges of nation-building in modern Europe. Paradoxically, several decades earlier, Georgian Orthodoxy was integrated into the Russian Church System on the right of an autonomous structure – the Georgian Exarchate.

After the period of the Soviet Union, when religious structures had been entirely suppressed (although the ROC had the place for its existence from 1943), the period of spiritual renaissance embraced Russia. The most impressive example of this renaissance and the emerging tightening of the Church and authorities was the restoration of the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior, in which the Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov played a colossal role<sup>8</sup>.

However, this relationship was in the main informal. According to the Constitution of 1993, Russia has proclaimed “a secular state” in which no one religious structure can acquire official status. Nonetheless, this secularity has gradually eroded: the first step was the introduction of classes of “The elements of Orthodox culture” in 2006-2009. Apart from that, the personal ties between political actors and religious figures strengthened: Tikhon Shevkunov obtained the reputation of Putin’s confessor at the beginning of the 2000s, and the Kremlin has not refuted these rumors<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Kathleen E. An old cathedral for a New Russia: The symbolic politics of the reconstituted church of Christ the Saviour, Religion, State and Society: The Keston Journal 25 (2), 1997. Pp. 168-169.

<sup>9</sup> Clover, Charles. [“Putin and the Monk”](#). January 25, 2013. Financial Times

## THE CONSERVATIVE TURN OF THE EARLY 2010s

### 3.2

Despite all these signs, the pivotal watershed was in 2012. Here one should note two fundamental factors: the mass protests against the government in 2011-2012 (the rallies on the Bolotnaya Square) and the bringing of the Cincture of the Theotokos (Blessing Virgin Mary) in Russia in 2011. **According to data from organizers, approximately 3,5 million believers visited the demonstration of this relic, including 1 million in Moscow.** Although this number can be contested, the enormous queues to the Cincture were captured by independent media.

This context revealed two crucial points: the Russian authorities felt their vulnerability in the conditions of protests, and the Russian Orthodox Church demonstrated that it could hypothetically mobilize people's resources. In this context, **some prominent Church actors unambiguously supported the government and condemned protesters** – for instance, the famous “elder” Elijah (Nozdin) claimed: “These rallies are a disgrace, they are a trash”; “Enemy acts in our country attract dark forces from an abyss, and thereby create and provoke chaos, which is more dangerous than the period of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution.”<sup>10</sup>

However, in the sphere of law, the starting point was a concrete episode – the so-called “punk-prayer of the band “Pussy Riot” in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior on February 21, 2012. The group of young

women organized a performance in this cathedral with a message directed against Vladimir Putin. After that, three participants of the performance were convicted of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” and each sentenced to two years of imprisonment on August 17, 2012.

After approximately one year of this trial, on June 30, 2013, the Russian Parliament codified, and Vladimir Putin signed the law against “publicly offending the feelings of believers” with possible imprisonment of 1 year. This episode coincided with the confirmation of so-called Russia’s gay propaganda law signed by Vladimir Putin on the same day and fervently applauded by speakers from the ROC. Moreover, it was the initiative of the actor from the ROC, hieromonk Dmitrii (Pershin), to expand this law from the regional level to the national one.<sup>11</sup>

This coincidence was not accidental; on the contrary, both laws have been associated with “the conservative turn” in Russia’s internal policy – the turn to “traditional values.” After the mass rallies of 2011-2012 consisted of people with liberal or progressive views, the Russian authorities began to rely on “the conservative majority” or even invent it.

Apart from this, traditional values, including religion, were intensively harnessed as the reason for the exacerbated conflict with

<sup>10</sup> The Proekt team. “[The Kremlin's Elder How the Russian government fell in love with mysticism.](#)” May 29, 2019. Proekt

<sup>11</sup> <https://ria.ru/20120312/592300576.html> March 12, 2012.

“the collective West”: Sergei Karaganov, the leading pro-Kremlin political scientist, remarked that Europe “is also worried by Moscow’s readiness to defend the old European values such as Christianity, the family, the state, nationalism, and sovereignty, which most Europeans still support, while their elites are rejecting them or trying to leave them behind.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Vladimir Putin claimed at the Valdai Discussion Club on September 19, 2013, “We see that many Euro-Atlantic countries have actually taken the path of abandoning their roots, including the Christian values that form the basis of Western civilization.”<sup>13</sup>

It was an additional rhetorical topos close to “traditional values” – “spiritual bonds” with even more explicit religious connotations. Hence, Vladimir Putin mentioned a “lack of spiritual bonds” in his state-of-the-nation address to the Federal Assembly in 2012 and called for “avoiding a vulgar, primitive understanding of secularism.” at the Bishop’s Council. The political scientist Olga Malinova noted: “Regrettably, securitized “spiritual bonds” can prove too destructive a weapon: an amorphous ideology open to arbitrary interpretations can become a dangerous instrument for settling political scores.”<sup>14</sup>

## THE LAW AGAINST “OFFENDING THE FEELINGS OF BELIEVERS”

### 3.3

**By returning to the political practice, the implementation of the law against “offending the feelings of believers,” the significant applied element of this conservative turn, was incremental. For the first year of this law, there were no trials, only some prohibitive actions of local authorities, for instance, the cancellation of the rock singer Marilyn Manson’s concert. For the next year, 2014, four criminal proceedings were initiated. Still, the information-analytical center “Sova” did not define them as unlawful; these cases were connected with the arson of temples, desecration of the temple, fighting in the temple, and cross-pollination<sup>15</sup>.**

The first questionable cases emerged in 2015: proceedings for rude remarks in the social network “Vkontakte”; the publication of an article with insults to Christianity, Judaism, and the ROC; an effigy hung on a bowed cross; and a “Vudu ritual” with Christian objects<sup>16</sup>. **All these cases were aimed at so-called “ordinary people”; opposition politicians and journalists were utterly hesitant with the topic of religion, although various media obtained prosecutorial warnings for reprinting “Charlie Hebdo” cartoons.**

The most well-known proceeding connected with this law was initiated in 2016: the

<sup>12</sup> Karaganov, Sergei. “The Watershed Year: Interim Results.” December 18, 2014. Russia in Global Affairs.

<sup>13</sup> <https://rg.ru/2013/09/19/stenogramma-site.html> September 19, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Malinova, Olga. “Spiritual Bonds” as State Ideology, Russia in Global Affairs, December 18, 2014, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/spiritual-bonds-as-state-ideology/>

<sup>15</sup> Kravchenko, Maria. March 25, 2015, <https://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/publications/2015/03/d31610/> Sova.

<sup>16</sup> Kravchenko, Maria, Verkhovskiy, Aleksandr. March 02, 2016, <https://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/publications/2016/03/d33946/> Sova.



case of the blogger Ruslan Sokolovskii who published a video with gaming “Pokemon Go” in a temple in Ekaterinburg. Sokolovskii, a consistent atheist and relatively popular video blogger with 270 000 subscribers, was sentenced to 3 years and six months on probation<sup>17</sup>. This case acquired significant publicity, and many famous figures vocally supported Sokolovskii, including the TV host Vladimir Pozner and the leading opposition politician Alexei Navalny.

From 2018 to 2020, there were no signs of active law enforcement: one sentence in one year and all of them - compulsory work. The situation changed in 2021: the Russian courts passed eight sentences, including one sentence with eight months of imprisonment. Apart from this, the court from Saint Petersburg forbade the video of Marilyn Manson torn out from Bible pages, and the chair of the State Duma Committee, Sergey Gavrillov, asked for prosecution scrutiny for the video clip of Russian singers Morgenstern and DJ Smash<sup>18</sup>.

The last analyzed year, 2022, was noted by the same eight sentences – all of them were connected with “obscene” photos and videos near temples. Aside from this, several new criminal cases devoted to “obscene” episodes were initiated in that year<sup>19</sup>; although in the context of large-scale proceedings against “discredit of armed forces” and “fakes,” this law has receded into the background.

It is worth noting that Church speakers made relatively disapproval statements about law enforcement, at least before the war: the official from the Saint Petersburg Eparchy, Natalya Rodomanova, claimed: “Each blogger’s prank is not worth to be reacted. It is actually not very reasonable,”; and the deputy chairman of the Synodal Department for the Cooperation of Church and Society, Vachtang Kipshidze, stated that “the objective of the law is not maximal sentences for the maximal number of people.”<sup>20</sup> Apart from this, some speakers from “the liberal wing of the ROC” criticized this law even during its adoption.

## THE POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION BEYOND THE LAW

### 3.4

**Another considerable direction of the political use of religion in Russia is the endowment of religious features in the sphere of armed forces and security services. This practice has soared from the beginning of the war against Ukraine, but it has sufficiently deep roots.** The Synodal Department for the Cooperation of Church

and Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Authorities was established in 1994, even before the first election of Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, the custom of being “the spiritual protectors of Russian troops” already emerged in the 2000s; the prophet Elijah has been considered “the protector” of Russian airborne troops, and so on<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://zona.media/article/2017/05/17/sokolovsky-prigovor> May 17, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Sibireva, Olga. February 28, 2022. [https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2022/02/d45859/#\\_Toc509950632](https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2022/02/d45859/#_Toc509950632) Sovo.

<sup>19</sup> Sibireva, Olga. March 24, 2023. [https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2023/03/d47883/#\\_Toc129862572](https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2023/03/d47883/#_Toc129862572) Sovo.

<sup>20</sup> Sibireva, Olga. February 28, 2022. [https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2022/02/d45859/#\\_ftn14](https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2022/02/d45859/#_ftn14) Sovo.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1030213> September, 23, 2008.

This trend gained traction during the 2010s: the institution of army chaplains has been established in 2011, and the most visible example of the cooperation between the ROC and Armed Forces was demonstrated in 2018-2020 when near Moscow, the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces was built and opened. This cathedral has conflated Russian Orthodoxy and another state-supported cult – the cult of victory in World War II. Hence, its constructive elements, such as the stairs from melted down German tanks, and its “relics,” such as a cap of Adolf Hitler, seem to be at least bizarre for traditional Orthodox cathedrals.

Here, one can discern one of the crucial directions of religion harnessing in contemporary Russia – the resort to religion aimed at past glorification. An utterly eloquent statement in this area was made by Patriarch Kirill in 2014: “Unified concept of a school history textbook would help young people overcome the ‘syndrome of historical masochism.’” This point vividly contrasts previous arguments of Church chairmen about necessary repentance for sins of the XX century: “Kirill is certain that Russia has atoned for its sins; hence the speculations about a “syndrome of historical masochism”<sup>22</sup>.

The practical embodiment of this glorification has been the creation of the system of historical parks “Russia – My History,” the ideologue of which is considered archimandrite (metropolitan from 2018) Tikhon Shevkunov [16]<sup>23</sup>. The starting point of this network was the exhibition “Romanovs,” which opened in 2013 in the space “Manege” near Kremlin. Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill visited this exhibition, and Tikhon Shevkunov played the role of their guide.

Meanwhile, in the context of so many intensive state-church interactions, the significance of “grass-root” Orthodox movements

is relatively low in the political process. These groups exist or existed: “The Union of Orthodox Banner-Bearers”, the association “God’s Will,” the movement “Sorok Sorokov (Forty of the Forties),” and so on. However, the number of their participants has been highly modest, and the authorities have not harnessed them for counteraction to the liberal opposition by preferring to rely on police and security services. The most influential medium of this ideological wing is the TV channel “Tsargrad,” in which Alexander Dugin had the position an editor-in-chief from 2015 to 2017.

Apart from the TV channel “Tsargrad,” some Orthodox bloggers broadcast on YouTube, although their popularity is not impressive too. The unique exception is the channel of the priest Andrey Tkachev who possesses far-right and anti-Ukrainian views and can boast 1,5 mln subscribers. Howbeit, there is intricate to evaluate how his fame transforms into some actions beneficial for the Russian authorities.

**In conclusion, one can argue that the political use of religion in contemporary Russia is a complex and multidimensional process.** The law against “publicly offending the feelings of believers” is a tangible example of this use, the consequences of which can be broader than the list of proceedings and trials. **Being a part of “the restrictive wave” of 2012-2014, which also included laws against “foreign agents” and “gay propaganda,” this law has damaged the freedom of speech and confirmed the authoritarian trends in the Russian state.** Another crucial direction belongs to the discursive sphere: references to religion emerge for reasoning Russian uniqueness, the conflict with the contemporary West, and even the aggressive war. The rest of the political ways are vaguer and more uncertain, although it worth be analyzed too.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, Alexei. “A Year of Frustrated Hopes”, Russia in Global Affairs, December 18, 2014, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-year-of-frustrated-hopes/>

<sup>23</sup> Kazmina, Victoria. “Istoricheskie parki «Rossija – moja istorija» kak otrazhenie transformacij institucional'nogo izmerenija rossijskoj politiki pamjati”: Politika pamjati v sovremennoj Rossii i stranah Vostochnoj Evropy. Aktory, instituty, narrativy: kollektivnaja monografija, SPb, 2020. P. 173.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT OF ADOPTING THE LEGISLATION ON GEORGIA

### 4

The origins and outcomes of this law in Russia prove the obvious - the legislation protecting the religious feelings of believers has led to an expansion of authoritarian control in the country. A decade after its enactment, the law remains deeply embedded in the censorship infrastructure at the disposal of the Russian government. **If adopted, the Russian-inspired legislative**

**initiative will have similar effects in Georgia.** Although the overall disruptive nature of the law is evident, several specific consequences may be anticipated if the pessimistic scenario plays out. We assess particular aspects of political and public spheres to examine these changes possible within the current Georgian political context.

## ENTRENCHMENT OF AUTHORITARIAN TRENDS

### 4.1

Under the pessimistic scenario, the course of events in Georgia will unfold similarly to those in Russia, where the political use of religion, reflected in legislation in 2013, further enhanced the authoritarian trends. **As mentioned above, adopting this law provided the regime with the means to accomplish two primary objectives. First, as a part of the restrictive wave, weaponizing religion contributed to establishing restrictive mechanisms to eradicate public criticism. Besides, religion and traditional values became the ideological founda-**

**tion for Russia to set itself apart from the liberal West and discourage people from adopting pro-Western positions.** The recent revival of nativist populism in Georgia's political mainstream, fueled by the ruling party's radical rhetoric and anti-Western sentiments, suggests that both of these objectives may be relevant to the Georgian Dream. Therefore, **it is expected that if the pessimistic scenario unfolds, the ruling party's excessive concentration of power will result in a shift towards more authoritarian rule.**

**As in the case of Russia, the enactment of the law in Georgia may be paired with additional legislative measures aiming at suppressing critical opinion.** Given the recent debacle with the foreign agents' law,

new legislative efforts are more likely to weaponize religion and traditional values with the hope of gaining greater support among conservative Georgians.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

### 4.2

In the pessimistic scenario, human rights will suffer significantly. Enactment of the law will severely damage the constitutional standard of protecting the right to freedom of expression as it contradicts the universally recognized international human rights principles. The restrictions on the right to assembly and demonstrations will violate the fundamental rights of a wide range of people, particularly people of LGBTQI identity. **As a result of introducing discriminatory practices in the legal framework, violence and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community will be especially aggravated, resulting in a rise in homophobia and violent extremism.**

The current draft law in Georgia is already more extensive than Russia's initial law against "publicly offending the feelings of believers." Along with limiting any person's expression perceived as offensive to religious sentiments and beliefs, **the law will simultaneously apply to "propaganda of war and violence" and "incitement of national, religious, and social conflict."** This endlessly broad and vague definition is highly concerning as it may provide the authorities with a legal pretext to silence critical voices of pro-democracy activists.

## ANTI-LIBERAL POLITICS AND THE DISTRACTION OF THE PLURALISTIC ENVIRONMENT

### 4.3

**If the law goes through, the anti-liberal discourse is expected to gain new momentum.** Although Georgian politics has been long saturated with anti-liberal messages linked to anti-Western propaganda, up to this point, such rhetoric was habitual for the pro-Kremlin, far-right groups, and their important ally, the Georgian Orthodox Church. Recently, these anti-Western and anti-liberal attitudes have been internalized in Georgia's political mainstream. Particularly in light of Russia's war in Ukraine, we observe that such rhetoric has normalized and is frequently voiced by the parliamentary majority and government officials. In a pessimistic scenario, the chances for a reassessment of existing liberal legislation increase as the government is expected to advance its support to anti-liberal sentiments and strengthen its anti-liberal policy practices. **If this pattern persists, the odds are in favor of things unfolding just like they did in Russia.**

With the excessive concentration of power that allows the Georgian Dream Party to utilize different means in order to maintain its political influence, the government seems unhesitant to take controversial steps, even towards authoritarianism. **Although the recent attempt to marginalize and silence civil society and independent media have failed, another Russia-inspired law restricting the right to freedom of assembly can effectively serve the same purpose.** Indeed, this law may have two simultaneous effects that will undermine democratic institutions and endanger preserving the pluralistic environment in the country. On the one hand, it will likely become a repressive instrument to suppress civil protests. On the other hand, it will change the dynamics of state-religion relations reflected in the Georgian Orthodox Church's expanding influence. **While the Georgian Orthodox Church receives persistent preferential treatment from the state, merging religion and politics in the public sphere like this sets a dangerous precedent and imperils secularism.**

## PRO-RUSSIAN GROUPS AND STRENGTHENING RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

### 4.4

**The pessimistic scenario involves the increase of Russian influence in the country.** In this regard, enacting the Alt-info-initiated law will unleash two simultaneous trends. First, it will further encourage pro-Russian actors and radical groups to expand their activities and advance their agenda. Although it is unlikely that this trend will ramp up pro-Russian sentiments, given the widespread perception of Russia as the greatest political threat among the domestic public, it carries the danger of radical groups gaining more significant influence over domestic politics by sowing distrust and engaging in civil violence. **Among the potential threats under the pessimistic scenario is the concern that the ruling party may encourage radical groups and contribute to escalating violence against pro-democracy activists as a repressive measure with the sole purpose of limiting public protest and political ructions in the country.**

**The second trend that may coincide with increased engagement of pro-Russian groups in the public sphere is substantial growth in anti-liberal and anti-Western propaganda narratives serving the Kremlin interests in the country.** These messages are instrumental in Russia's information warfare tactics to pry Georgia away from its Western partners and, consequently, make it a vulnerable target for the Kremlin's growing influence. The same strategy of alienating liberal and democratic values assisted the Kremlin in strengthening its domestic political power. **The further Georgia continues down this path, the likelier it becomes that the entire country's capacity to deter Russian influence will decrease.**

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

### 4.5

European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations have evolved as a cornerstone of Georgia's foreign policy and strategic choices. The domestic public strongly favors establishing and preserving close ties with its Western allies. Georgian citizens could not be more explicit with their choice - in a polarized Georgian society, the single idea that enjoys the greatest support is the EU and NATO membership. However, the ruling Georgian Dream Party fails to reflect these attitudes in its strategic posture. More so, the **Georgian government's actions have prevented the country from gaining candidate status for EU membership along with Moldova and Ukraine. Any policy decision by the Georgian government that targets liberal and democratic values and institutions will be**

**perceived as a deviation from the country's European path, including the law in question.**

Reviving the debates surrounding this draft law indicates how the Georgian Dream deliberately tries to sabotage the prospects of receiving a candidate status at this pivotal time in Georgia's history. If this law goes through, it will essentially halt Georgia's efforts to join the European Union, which may as well be the long-awaited outcome for the ruling Georgian Dream coalition.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ The proposed legislation is unambiguously designed to prohibit the right to peaceful assembly prescribed by law and further increase the repressive practices in Georgia. In this sense, the questions of belief are instrumental as the means to assist the government in concentrating power. It is critically important to promote this argument among the general public in order to avoid advancing the conservative agenda and further authoritarian consolidation amid the upcoming elections.
- ▶ It is expected that things will unfold according to the Russian scenario in Georgia, resulting in intensified anti-liberal narratives and deterioration of human rights. On the broader question of European integration, the Georgian government's effort will drift the country further away from its Western allies and make it a vulnerable target for the Kremlin's growing influence. Under these circumstances, the appliance of domestic and international pressure will be crucial in mitigating the damaging impacts of the government's policy choices.
- ▶ The reminder about the global context of contemporary Orthodoxy, in which a significant part of dioceses are located in the Global West, and believers are citizens of the European Union and the USA. The adherence to Orthodoxy does not inevitably mean the support of anti-Western politics and especially pro-Russian views. While the GOC fails to adjust to the liberal agenda and demonstrates an unwillingness to cut off its ties with the radical groups, it would be highly productive if the liberal participants of the Georgian Orthodox Church engaged in public discussions devoted to these issues.
- ▶ It is of vital significance to avoid the radical gap between the "conservative majority" and the "progressive minority" to make possible agreements and compromises in order to unhook the far-right agenda and the mainstream of Georgian Orthodoxy.



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