

# Blessed are the Peacemakers

## The Role of the Orthodox Churches in the Russian-Georgian Conflict



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<sup>1</sup> Meeting in Baku in November 2009 between Patriarch Ilia II of the Orthodox Church of Georgia (left) and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church (right). Third person in the picture is Metropolitan Gerasim of the Orthodox Church of Georgia. The meeting took place only a year after the Russian-Georgian war and both emphasized the strength of the relations between the two churches and the importance of restoration of the relations between the states and peoples of Russia and Georgia. In: Department of External Church Relations, 'Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church Meets with Catholicos Patriarch of All Georgia Iliya II', 7 November 2009, <https://mospat.ru/en/2009/11/07/news8001/> (accessed on 03-07-2017).

## Introduction

'Orthodox Christians have been killing each other!'<sup>2</sup> exclaimed the Georgian Patriarch Ilia II after the start of the war in August 2008. The conflict between Russia and Georgia was the result of years of worsening relations and a strong disagreement about the two breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In both Russia and Georgia the Orthodox church was an important factor in the development of the newly independent state and the national identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Orthodox Church of Georgia (OCG) supported the political stances of their respective states during the war. The OCG stated that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are an inseparable part of Georgia, the ROC insisted that the Georgians started the war and Russia had the right to defend the Ossetians. However, this did not prevent both churches from stating their grief about the killings and their hopes for peace and reconciliation. This attitude led to the situation that when all diplomatic relations were broken off the Orthodox church was the only remaining diplomatic channel.

This study will discuss the relations between Russia and Georgia and what the role was of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Georgia between 2008 and 2013. 2008 will be the starting point for this research because that year the Russian-Georgian war broke out and the last meeting between the two presidents took place.<sup>3</sup> Besides, it is most certainly the year with the worst relations between Russia and Georgia in post-Soviet history. The period ended in 2013 because elections took place in Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili leaves office and Bidzina Ivanishvili became Prime Minister. He normalized the relations with Russia though maintaining a pro-Western course that focused on membership of EU and NATO.<sup>4</sup> Relations between Russia and Georgia improved and a new meeting between the presidents of both countries was suggested, but never took place.<sup>5</sup> The ROC and OCG were important agents in this process, especially because of the important influence both have in their own countries, their close alignment with the respective states and the fact that they were an important channel of diplomacy during this period. All in all,

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<sup>2</sup> Kishkovsky, Sophia, 'Conflict Tests Ties Between the Georgian and Russian Orthodox Churches', *The New York Times*, 5 September 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/06/world/europe/06orthodox.html> (accessed on 25-05-2017).

<sup>3</sup> The Kremlin, 'Beginning of Meeting with President of Georgia Mikhail Saakashvili', 21 February 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/page/229> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>4</sup> Rozin, Igor, 'Russia's relationship status with Georgia: It's complicated', 8 August 2013, *Russia Direct*, <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/russia-s-relationship-status-georgia-it-s-complicated> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>5</sup> Sushentsov, Andrey, 'Limits of Normalization between Russia and Georgia', *Foreign Policy*, 16 October 2014, <http://www.foreignpolicy.ru/en/analyses/limits-of-normalization-between-russia-and-georgia/> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

the role of the ROC and the OCG on the relations between Russia and Georgia deserves a closer look.

In this thesis I will conduct a case study to two different countries. What makes this case study relevant is that both Russia and Georgia are post-Soviet states where Orthodoxy gained a lot of influence after the fall of communism. The ROC and the OCG were and are connected as Orthodox churches and maintain good relations. Both maintain close relations with the political leaders in their country. The fact that war broke out between these two countries in 2008 makes it a unique case, especially since both churches supported their respective state but still maintained relations with each other. Studying this offers an excellent opportunity to achieve a better understanding of how state and church interact and cooperate in and between two different post-Soviet states. Since this conflict had a lot of impact worldwide, this is relevant, particularly because Georgia was applying for EU and NATO-membership made that the war was closely followed by the EU, NATO and their member states.

In order to look further into what the role of the ROC and the OCG was, it is first necessary to look into the relations of Orthodox Churches and their respective states in general, to achieve a better view of the close but complex alliance between church and state in Orthodox countries. Only then it is possible to distinguish what tendencies and relations are typically Orthodox or unique in the case of Russia or Georgia. Consequently, it is necessary to investigate the relations between the different Orthodox churches and those between the ROC and OCG in specific. Furthermore I will analyse the position of the ROC in Russia and that of OCG in Georgia. The first chapter will be dedicated to this analysis. In the second chapter the function of these churches in this conflict will be discussed and the part the Orthodox churches played in the relations between Russia and Georgia between 2008 and 2013 will be analysed.

### **Hypothesis**

In this thesis I will make use of the following research question:

What role did the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Georgia play in the relations between Russia and Georgia between the 2008 war and the stabilisation of the relations in 2013?

Using this question, I will be making a comparative analysis within a case study of the function of the Orthodox churches in two different countries and the influence on the relations between these countries. Based on studies like that of Daniele Kalkandjjeva and others, I expect to encounter an entangled network of co-dependent actors: church, nation and state. Comparing these two countries during a conflict is a good way to gain more insight in this network. Kalkandjjeva explains

the interaction between church and state in Orthodox countries as a symphony in which both partners cooperate and strengthen each other.<sup>6</sup> That is, of course, the theoretical concept. In practice this relationship of symphony depends very much on the country, the church and various other factors. John Anderson argues that this symphony in the case of, on the one hand, Russia is very asymmetric and the state is far more influential than the church.<sup>7</sup> In Georgia, on the other hand, the Patriarch is far more popular and influential than political leaders.<sup>8</sup> A closer view is necessary to draw conclusions of how this works in Russia and Georgia. I expect that this relationship is not so much asymmetric as well as complex, because there is a lot of interaction between church and state on many different levels. This makes it also very interesting to analyse what happens when two Orthodox Churches, both closely aligned with the state as well as with each other, find themselves in a war between their states. Therefore this period between 2008 and 2013 offers a good opportunity to analyse the relation between church and state in Russia and Georgia, the diplomatic relation between Russia and Georgia and the relation between the ROC and the OCG.

## Theory

The political theory of Realism will inform and guide this study. Realism is a theory that is based on the idea that international relations is defined by different states having different interests. According to one source, quoted by the influential American scholar Hans Morgenthau, the absence of clashing interests is the only way two states could have an enduring bond.<sup>9</sup> The reason for this is that relations between Russia and Georgia are dominated by political interests and spheres of influence. Or as Prime Minister of Russia Dmitri Medvedev calls them: spheres of privileged interests.<sup>10</sup> One important interest for Russia is that it considers Russians living in the post-Soviet states as citizens of Russia and it therefore claims the right to protect them.<sup>11</sup> At the same time

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<sup>6</sup> Kalkandjieva, Daniela, 'A Comparative Analysis on Church-State Relations in Eastern Orthodoxy: Concepts, Models and Principles', *Journal of Church and State*, 2011, vol. 53 (4), 587-614, 589.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, John, 'Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia?', *Journal of International Affairs*, Fall/Winter 2007, vol. 61 no. 1, 185-201, 195-196.

<sup>8</sup> Paroslavie.ru, 'The Most Popular Person in Georgia is Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II', 14 May 2015, <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/79408.htm> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>9</sup> Morgenthau, Hans, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, (New York 1948), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Trenin, Dmitri, 'Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence', *The Washington Quarterly*, October 2009, 3-22, 4.

<sup>11</sup> This is repeatedly called a priority by Vladimir Putin in for example his speech after the incorporation of Crimea: The Washington Post, 'Transcript: Putin says Russia will protect the rights of Russians abroad', 18 March 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-putin-says-russia-will-protect-the-rights-of-russians-abroad/2014/03/18/432a1e60-ae99-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.95162095fe68](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-putin-says-russia-will-protect-the-rights-of-russians-abroad/2014/03/18/432a1e60-ae99-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19_story.html?utm_term=.95162095fe68) (accessed on 26-05-2017) and Dmitri Medvedev linked this element directly to the Russian-Georgian war when he said: 'This is not a war between Russia and Georgia. This is the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, which we had to interfere in to force Georgia to stop killing people whom they view as their citizens and who at the same time were the citizens of Russia. This was an operation to restore the peace.' (<http://www.russia->

Georgia has been wanting to become part of the big geopolitical alliance NATO to ensure its own security. This opposes Russia's interests in the region, since Georgia's accession to EU and NATO would make it much harder for Russia to exert power and influence over Georgia.

Russia's policies towards Georgia and the rest of the Near Abroad are strongly influenced by a realpolitik that is aimed at exerting as much power of the region as it can and preventing countries in the region from slipping to another geopolitical block.<sup>12</sup> In 2008 the situation escalated, because several of these interests collided. First, there was the control over actual territory that is a fifth of the territory of Georgia, the self-established states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both requested to be part of Russia but this request was denied. According to international law these regions are part of Georgia and president Saakashvili tried to regain control over them. Russia saw this as a threat to the ethnic Russians living there and therefore as a threat to its interests. Finally the pro-Western policies of Georgia, applying for EU and NATO memberships was an important factor in the tensions between Russia and Georgia.

Both the ROC and the OCG had and still have their own agenda, despite their traditional loyalty to the state. Both churches have been arguing strongly for the defence of traditional family values. In Georgia the OCG protested heavily when the government was shaping a law to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, which was a requirement for Georgia to be granted a short-term visa-free regime by the EU.<sup>13</sup> The ROC tried to push the same agenda and has had substantial success.<sup>14</sup> It is nonetheless hard to distinguish where the agenda of the church stops and that of the state begins. A close analysis of this relationship is needed and will be conducted in this thesis.

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direct.org/analysis/russia%E2%80%99s-relationship-status-georgia-it%E2%80%99s-complicated based on: <https://rg.ru/2013/08/05/premier.html>, accessed on 03-07-2017).

<sup>12</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N., 'NATO Expansion: A Realist's View' in: Ruchhaus, Robert W., *Explaining NATO Enlargement*, (Abingdon 2001), 31-32.

<sup>13</sup> Funke, Carolin, 'The Georgian Orthodox Church and its Involvement in National Politics, 14 August 2014, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13023-the-georgian-orthodox-church-and-its-involvement-in-national-politics.html> (accessed on 22-05-2017).

<sup>14</sup> For example: the introduction of a 'family flag': Moodley, Kiran, Vladimir Putin's United Russia Party unveils 'straight flag' to rival gay pride symbol, *The Independent*, 9 July 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/vladimir-putins-united-russia-party-unveils-straight-flag-to-rival-gay-pride-symbol-10377440.html> (accessed on 23-05-2017) and a law banning 'gay propaganda': Elder, Miriam, 'Russia passes law banning gay 'propaganda'', *The Guardian*, 11 June 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/11/russia-law-banning-gay-propaganda> (accessed on 23-05-2017).

## **Methodology**

In order to answer the thesis question, this study will offer a comparative analysis within a case study of two countries. To be able to analyse the relationship between these two countries and two churches in this period, it is necessary to look at the primary and secondary literature sources about the 2008 war, relations between church and state in Orthodoxy and the relations between Georgia and Russia since 2008. More specifically I will use the following methods. I will draw literature sources from official documents and statements by church and state leaders to look at and analyse the position and the role of the ROC and the OCG during this conflict. I will also make use of existing interviews with these state and church leaders during this conflict and later. I will additionally look for primary sources in Russian and Georgian media, like *Tass*, *Russia Today*, *Georgia Today* and *Civil Georgia*. Finally, I will use opinion polls, because they offer valuable insights in the opinion the people and general tendencies in society.

## The Orthodox Church and the Eastern Europe State

In this chapter I will first go into the background of the Orthodox churches and their relationship with the state. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the relationship between the ROC and Russia, the OCG and Georgia and between the ROC and the OCG.

The Orthodox Church is the largest traditional church in Christianity after the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). The former came to be in the Middle Ages when the Eastern part of the Catholic Church drifted apart which eventually led to the Great Schism of 1054.<sup>15</sup> Nowadays the church has between 200 and 300 million members around the world.<sup>16</sup> The church is divided in 13 autocephalous<sup>17</sup> churches of which four are the ancient Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch. There are also five new patriarchates, those of Moscow, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia. Finally, there are the churches in Greece, Poland, Albania and the Czech Republic/Slovakia.<sup>18</sup> These latter ones all have an exclusive territory of jurisdiction and are equal,<sup>19</sup> though the Patriarch of Constantinople is based on the second and fourth of the ecumenical councils considered to be the first among equals.<sup>20</sup>

### The Hierarchy and Relations between the Orthodox Churches

One large difference between the Orthodox church and the RCC is that in the Catholic church there is a clear primacy in authority of the Bishop of Rome. In the Orthodox Church the primacy lays with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, but he does not have a formal authority over the other patriarchates within the Orthodox Church. Of these patriarchates, the ROC is generally acknowledged to be one of the most important and influential churches.<sup>21</sup> This is largely due to its numerical dominance with 80 million members so being the largest church in Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Roudometof, Victor, 'Greek Orthodoxy, Territoriality, and Globality: Religious Responses and Institutional Disputes', *Sociology of Religion*, 2008 (69:1), 67-91, 70.

<sup>16</sup> Roudometof, Victor, *Globalization and Orthodox Christianity Today: The Transformation of a Religious Tradition*, (New York 2014), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Autocephalous is a term used in Eastern Orthodoxy to describe a church that is able to elect its own head and is therefore independent from the other Orthodox churches. It's based on the Greek word 'αὐτοκεφαλία' meaning 'self-headed'.

<sup>18</sup> Curanović, Alicja, 'The attitude of the Moscow Patriarchate towards other Orthodox churches', *State and Society*, 20 november 2007 (35:4), 301-318, 302.

<sup>19</sup> Curanović, 302.

<sup>20</sup> Roudometof, 'Greek Orthodoxy, Territoriality, and Globality: Religious Responses and Institutional Disputes', 77.

<sup>21</sup> McGucking, John Anthony, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*, (Chichester 2011), 47.

<sup>22</sup> Curanović, 306.

According to some this number is even as high as 160 million, but that takes into account the members of the ROC outside Russia.<sup>23</sup> The position of the Ecumenical Patriarch is highly disputed among others by the ROC. And this theological dispute does have a practical dimension, which focuses on three issues: the jurisdiction, the right to mediate in disputes and representing the Orthodox Churches in the international arena.<sup>24</sup> The ROC has been challenging the position of the Ecumenical Patriarch on these issues. In the 1990s the disagreement about jurisdiction has even led to a temporary schism in the 1990s when the Ecumenical Patriarch announced the resumption of Constantinople's jurisdiction over the Orthodox Churches in Estonia. The ROC ceased prayers for the Ecumenical Patriarch (for the first time in 1000 years deliberately) in the Cathedral of the Epiphany in Moscow and suspended its ties with Constantinople. The conflict was resolved by letting each parish choose the jurisdiction it preferred.<sup>25</sup> The ROC is very cautious about schismatic movements and has a reason to be so. The separation of the churches outside the territory of Russia would lead the ROC to lose 60% of its parishes.<sup>26</sup> In general, therefore, the ROC does not recognise the other Orthodox churches aspiring autocephaly. Among these are the churches of Poland, Macedonia, Ukraine or Bulgaria.<sup>27</sup>

### **Connections between Orthodox Churches and States**

Michael Radu, former Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, points at the strong links between the Orthodox Church and the national identity of a state.<sup>28</sup> The Polish scholar Irena Borowik adds to this the traditional strong links with the state were a problem for the Orthodox church during communism. The church tended to be submissive and cooperate with the state, 'whatever the state might be'.<sup>29</sup> Radu also writes that this led to collaboration with the state and during the rule of communism even with the leaders of the ROC being on the KGB's payroll.<sup>30</sup>

Daniela Kalkandjieva states that though the Orthodox churches have strong nationalistic tendencies, this does not mean they are inherently nationalistic. She argues rightly that in these two phenomena 'nationalism is a modern one, while Orthodoxy has a much longer history.'<sup>31</sup> She does, however, point at the spread of phylethism in the nineteenth century, a concept that arose in Orthodoxy and

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<sup>23</sup> McGucking, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Curanović, 307.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, Nathaniel, 'The Russian Orthodox Church: Opportunity and Trouble', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 29, no.3 (1996), 275-286, 279.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Borowik, Irena, 'Orthodox Confronting the Collapse of Communism in Post-Soviet Countries', *Social Compass*, 53 (2) 2006, 267-278, 274.

<sup>28</sup> Radu, Michael, 'The Burden of Eastern Orthodoxy', *Religion in World Affairs*, Spring 1998, 283-300, 290-292.

<sup>29</sup> Borowik, 269.

<sup>30</sup> Radu, 290-292.

<sup>31</sup> Kalkandjieva, 595.



means that every nation has the right to establish its own Orthodox Church. This idea came up in the age of nationalism and links church and state closer together. The condemnation of this concept by the Great Local Synod of Constantinople in 1872 did not stop its growing dominance.<sup>32</sup> Victor Roudometof writes that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the membership of the church became equivalent with the membership of the nation and religious symbols like feast days were redefined and linked to nationalism.<sup>33</sup> Alicja Curanović explains that this strong bond between church and state is traditionally caused by a common sphere of interest. This is partly a consequence of the relative freedom of Orthodox Patriarchates, being decentralized and equal to the other patriarchates. Kalkandjieva agrees with this and adds that the close bonds between church and state are rooted in the ecclesiastic structure of the Orthodox churches. Decentralization serves according to her as a condition for closer relationships with the state.<sup>34</sup> According to Curanović as a consequence of acting on the same territory churches and states share some interests 'which motivates them to cooperate in both domestic and foreign policy.'<sup>35</sup> This concept is called symphony and is a very old Orthodox concept that 'presupposes mutual penetration between the sacred and the civil, thus facilitating the cooperation between church and state in the Orthodox lands.'<sup>36</sup> This concept of symphony results in a complex triad of state, church and nation which are all related and co-dependent. The church sees the nation as its 'flock' and has an agenda of making the nation as Orthodox as possible. That also reflects on the state, the church needs their support for achieving this. Orthodoxy is an important part of the national identity and the nation is part of the church. The state is Orthodox and can cooperate with the church and this can be a way to have impact on opinions and ideas of the nation. Because there is exchange between church, state and nation on many different levels it is hard to distinguish where the one stops and the other begins.

The close cooperation between state and church led to the establishment of national Patriarchates in the new states on the Balkans and Eastern Europe.<sup>37</sup> The independence of Ukraine in 1991 led to the belief that they should establish their own national Patriarchate as well, resulting in a split off of the Moscow Patriarchate and the coming to be of a Kyiv Patriarchate.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, Ukraine tried to get the Kyiv Patriarchate recognised by the other Orthodox Patriarchates, an attempt that the Moscow Patriarchate unsurprisingly strongly opposed. The head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

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<sup>32</sup> Kalkandjieva, 595-596.

<sup>33</sup> Roudometof, Victor, 'Nationalism, Globalization, Eastern Orthodoxy: 'Unthinking' the 'Clash of Civilizations' in Southeastern Europe', *European Journal for Social Theory*, 2 (2), 233-247, 240.

<sup>34</sup> Kalkandjieva, 600.

<sup>35</sup> Curanović, 302.

<sup>36</sup> Kalkandjieva, 589.

<sup>37</sup> Radu, 283-300.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, 277-278.

Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) was even excommunicated by the ROC.<sup>39</sup> This idea is so strong in Orthodoxy that even breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia are claiming to have their own Patriarchates, though according to canon law they belong to the OCG. They tried to join the ROC, but were rejected and now claim their own Patriarchate with their own historical narrative.<sup>40</sup>

The other side of the coin of division in the Orthodox Church is that these national churches played a large and important role in state building. This is also acknowledged by the states in the way in which they strongly support their own national churches or strive for the establishment of one. An example of how this nation building can work is in Georgia, where Ilia II when asked in an interview by *CNN* what his greatest accomplishment was answered to be of help in unifying Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup> An achievement that was acknowledged by former president Mikheil Saakashvili when he praised the OCG in 2007 for its function as ‘a beacon’ for and ‘the driving force’ behind Georgia’s future renewal and reunification.<sup>42</sup>

### **The ROC in the Near Abroad**

The idea that every country should have its own church is very strong in contemporary Orthodoxy, even though this behaviour was originally condemned.<sup>43</sup> The largest exception to this rule is the ROC. The ROC covers large parts of the post-soviet area, except for Georgia. Therefore, the administration of the ROC has to deal with 13 neighbouring countries.<sup>44</sup> These countries include Belarus, Ukraine<sup>45</sup>, Moldova and parts of Estonia.<sup>46</sup> This can be problematic since the ROC maintains a close alliance with the Russian state. This leads, according to the Dutch scholar Marcel van Herpen, to the ROC being a very important soft power instrument of the Kremlin and working hand in hand with the Russian state in foreign policy.<sup>47</sup> Daniel Payne writes that because of its close alignment, not only with the state, but also with the foreign ministry, the church has signalled to be united with the

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<sup>39</sup> Borowik, 274.

<sup>40</sup> Conroy, Kristina M., ‘Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches: The Orthodox Church in South Ossetia and Abkhazia’, *Journal of State and Church*, vol. 57 no 4, 621-639, 628-633.

<sup>41</sup> Watson, Ivan, ‘Patriarch Ilia II: ‘Most trusted man in Georgia’, *CNN*, 26 April 2010, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/04/23/georgia.powerful.patriarch.ilia/> (accessed on 24-05-2017).

<sup>42</sup> Civil Georgia, ‘Saakashvili Praises Georgian Orthodox Church’ 14 October 2007, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=16020> (accessed on 23-05-2017).

<sup>43</sup> Kalkandjjeva, 595-596.

<sup>44</sup> Curanović, 303.

<sup>45</sup> Davis, 278.

<sup>46</sup> Radu, 298-299.

<sup>47</sup> Herpen, Marcel H. van, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, (London 2016) 136-138.

state in promoting the idea of a greater Russia.<sup>48</sup> Kalkandjieva reflects on how problematic it can be when the concept of symphony is still prevailing, while the church is situated in a different country.<sup>49</sup> To gain more insight in this problem, I will briefly look at how the ROC functions in Belarus and Ukraine.

## **Belarus**

In the 1990s there was a genuine hope that Russia and Belarus would evolve into one state, which led Patriarch Alexey II to personally bless the treaty on special cooperation between the two countries, the so-called Union State.<sup>50</sup> It was also during that time that Lukashenka declared the ROC to be the official religion of Belarus.<sup>51</sup> In the last few years Lukashenka has tried to assert Belarus' independence from Moscow and searched for a closer alliance with other partners. Which has led to a very interesting balancing act in which some public rows between Russia and Belarus could be witnessed.<sup>52</sup> One of Lukashenka's intended partners is the RCC, which he showed by visiting the pope in 2016.<sup>53</sup> According to the Belarusian analyst Siarhei Bohdan this tendency is a political choice that has been causing the ROC to lose believers in Belarus.<sup>54</sup> Belarus is therefore an interesting example of how this relationship between church and state works. In Belarus this relationship does not work, because Belarus does not profit of the natural benefits a state church offers. The loyalty and support of the ROC does not strengthen Belarus, but is enhancing Russia's influence in Belarus, because it's first and foremost loyal to the Russian state. The interest for Lukashenka to support the ROC is for that reason almost non-existent, because a strong ROC in Belarus threatens the independence of Belarus and thereby also Lukashenka's own position and influence.

## **Ukraine**

Ukraine is another interesting example of a situation in which the influence and functioning of the Orthodox church is shown. In Ukraine, the Orthodox people tried to establish their own church in 1918, but this attempt failed because of the lack of an independent nation state.<sup>55</sup> A substantial part

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<sup>48</sup> Payne, Daniel P., 'Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation', *Journal of Church and State*, 9 November 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Kalkandjieva, 607.

<sup>50</sup> Curanović, 306.

<sup>51</sup> Marples, David, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, (New York 2012), 113.

<sup>52</sup> Waal, Thomas de, 'A Belarusian Balancing Act', *Carnegie Europe*, 20 February 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/68054?lang=en> (accessed on 25-05-2017).

<sup>53</sup> Vatican Radio, 'Pope Francis meets with President of Belarus', 21 May 2016, [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/05/21/pope\\_francis\\_meets\\_with\\_president\\_of\\_belarus/1231492](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/05/21/pope_francis_meets_with_president_of_belarus/1231492) (accessed on 25-05-2017).

<sup>54</sup> Bohdan, Siarhei, 'The Orthodox Church Is Losing Belarus', *Belarus Digest*, 1 March 2012, (<http://belarusdigest.com/story/orthodox-church-losing-belarus-8036>, checked on 23-05-2017).

<sup>55</sup> Kalkandjieva, 607.

of the ROC in Ukraine established an autocephalous Ukrainian Patriarchate after the establishment of an independent Ukraine. Clergy and laity separated themselves from the Moscow Patriarchate and declared own local autocephalous church.<sup>56</sup> This Kyiv Patriarchate is not recognised by the other Orthodox Patriarchates, in part because the ROC resisted its tendency to split off and claims that Ukraine still falls under the Moscow Patriarchate. There is however a third large church, mostly situated in Western Ukraine which is the Ukrainian Greek Catholics, also called the Uniates and this church submits to the authority of the RCC.<sup>57</sup> The case of Ukraine shows the importance of having an own Orthodox church for an independent state and what a struggle it is to achieve that. The Orthodox church is important in particular since according to a 2014 poll 70% of the Ukrainians consider themselves Orthodox, the share of them being part of the Kyiv Patriarchate being slightly larger than those of the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>58</sup> A figure that probably changed in the advantage of the Kyiv Patriarchate since 2014. These cases of Ukraine and Belarus show two different states attempting in various ways to deal with withstanding the influence of the ROC and asserting their own independence which shows how problematic this relationship between the Russian state and the ROC can be.

### **The Position of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian Politics and Society**

Since the fall of communism the ROC has replaced communism as one of the main features of the identity of state and nation. This is not only shown by the spectacular growth of Orthodox believers, but also by the close alignment of the ROC with the state. The official reason president Putin used in the media for not being able to watch American president Donald Trump's inauguration was that he had to be at an ice swimming event to celebrate the Orthodox feast of Epiphany.<sup>59</sup> Aleksei Makarkin adds to this that the Patriarch is 'the only religious figure in Russia that has direct access to the president'<sup>60</sup> and at that point one can get an impression of how important the ROC has become in Russia.

An interesting example in which the interaction between state and church can be seen is the

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<sup>56</sup> Kalkandjieva, 607.

<sup>57</sup> Radu, 286.

<sup>58</sup> Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 'Ukraine-2014: Socio-Political Conflict and the Church: Positions of Religious Figures, Experts and Citizens', 23.

<sup>59</sup> The Moscow Times, 'Putin Blows off Trump Inauguration for Russian Ice-Swimming', 20 January 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/putin-blows-off-trump-inauguration-for-traditional-russian-ice-swimming-56878> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>60</sup> Makarkin, Aleksei, 'The Russian Orthodox Church: Competing Choices', *Russian Politics and Law*, January-February 2011, 8-23, 8.

documentary<sup>61</sup> made by Fr. Tikhon, an influential monk that according to some is the confessor to Vladimir Putin.<sup>62</sup> In this documentary Fr. Tikhon explains why the Byzantine Empire fell and in his view there are apparently a lot of similarities with contemporary Russia. He describes the problem of oligarchs and corruption, the betrayal of the country by opposition politicians and 'the West' that destroyed the empire by its politics aimed at financial and material power. He also argues that the Byzantine Empire was flourishing when they had a strong and centralized government. Towards the end of the documentary Fr. Tikhon states that the most important reason for the fall of Byzantium is that the Byzantine Empire lost its soul over the years. They forgot to worship God in the Orthodox way. This documentary is very loyal to and very positive about the state and the current government. But it also contains a warning for the state not to neglect the Orthodox church. The warm relationship between church and states is subsequently shown when the documentary is broadcasted three times on primetime Russian national TV.<sup>63</sup>

The church already has gained a lot of influence in the post-Soviet era because of the increase of Orthodox believers in Russia since 1991. With 70-80% of the country identifying as Orthodox,<sup>64</sup> church representatives like priests and monks are not only nation-wide, but also locally and regionally important actors. Church leaders or representatives also have a personal influence that should not be underestimated. A 2016 study by the Levada Center, a Russian NGO that regularly conducts sociological research in Russia, showed that 71% of the people in general approved of the actions of Patriarch Kirill.<sup>65</sup> According to another open question survey by the Levada Center, Patriarch Kirill is among the ten most trusted people in the country, even though only named by 3% of the respondents.<sup>66</sup> Patriarch Kirill is a public figure and even has his own television programme.<sup>67</sup> By this he can exert a lot of influence on Russian society. At the same time should the influence of the presence of the ROC everywhere in Russia not be underestimated. Individual priests and monks are also important. Because it is unthinkable that an Archpriest in Kazan was able to get embroiled in

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<sup>61</sup> Documentary 'The Fall of an Empire – the Lesson of Byzantium', *PravoslavieRu*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1CWG-2GLU4> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>62</sup> Clover, Charles, 'Putin and the Monk', *The Financial Times*, 25 January 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/f2fcba3e-65be-11e2-a3db-00144feab49a> (accessed 26-05-2017).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Freeze, George L, 'Russian Orthodoxy and Politics in the Putin Era', *Carnegie*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/09/russian-orthodoxy-and-politics-in-putin-era-pub-67959> (accessed on 05-07-2017).

<sup>65</sup> Levada Center, Survey named 'Church', 21-24 October 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/en/2016/04/05/church/> (Accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>66</sup> Levada Center, Survey named 'Approval Ratings', 12-15 February 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/en/2016/12/02/approval-ratings/> (Accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>67</sup> Makarkin, 14.

such a massive corruption scandal if he was not an influential regional figure.<sup>68</sup> This shows that the church has extensive influence on all levels of society and is linked to both nation and state by a myriad of different connections. The importance of the ROC on society as a whole can therefore barely be exaggerated.

Between the ROC and Russia one might well speak of the traditional symphony between church and state. And it is often hard to distinguish where the interests of the state stop and those of the church begin. The ROC has since long called for Russia to shift to traditional national-Orthodox values as opposed to Western liberal values.<sup>69</sup> Anderson claims that there is indeed a congruence on the area of personal morality between the church and the state.<sup>70</sup> This fits well in the idea of symphony between church and state, as the Greek sociologist Kokosalakis defines it: the Church provides the state with moral values and the state grants material support to the Church.<sup>71</sup> According to Anderson this is a very asymmetric symphony. He argues that as long as the church plays a supportive role, the president is happy with giving it a privileged position.<sup>72</sup> But according to him it is obvious that Putin is the dominant partner in the relationship.<sup>73</sup> Anderson does, however, acknowledge the existence of a symphony, as he adds 'the policies of Putin largely suit the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, though in some there are differences of emphasis.'<sup>74</sup> This is a strong analysis, but it omits the exchange that is taking place all the time. Since the state considers itself Orthodox, state officials might not pursue policies the church opposes as they as part of the church oppose these ideas as well. Also, the influence of the church on policies in an earlier stage should not be underestimated. This happens not only by meeting state officials at various occasions, but also by state officials listening to a sermon or watching a television programme.

The ROC is an important tool for Russia in foreign policy. It is especially in this sense that the ROC has an important role in 'strengthening our Fatherland' as Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov once

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<sup>68</sup> Osborn, Andrew, 'Russian Orthodox Church embroiled in corruption scandal', 26 September 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/8790457/Russian-Orthodox-Church-embroiled-in-corruption-scandal.html> (accessed on 05-07-2017).

<sup>69</sup> Verkhovsky, Aleksandr, 'The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Nationalist, Xenophobic and Antiwestern Tendencies in Russia Today: Not Nationalism, but Fundamentalism', *Religion, State and Society*, 30:4, 333-345, 341-342.

<sup>70</sup> Anderson, 195-196.

<sup>71</sup> Kokosalakis, Nikos, 'Orthodoxy and Modern Life,' *Religioni e Societa* 98 (1996): 110. Source used: Silvio Ferrari, 'Nationalism, Patriotism, and Religious Belief in Europe', *Law Review* 83, Issue 5 (Summer 2006): 633, fn. 23.

<sup>72</sup> Anderson, 195-196.

<sup>73</sup> Anderson, 195-196.

<sup>74</sup> Anderson, 186.

said in a press conference.<sup>75</sup> The influence of the ROC on the Near Abroad is also very significant, especially in the countries to which its autocephaly reaches. Greg Simons, however, disagrees with the notion that the ROC would merely be a tool of the Kremlin and calls it an oversimplification.<sup>76</sup> The reason that the ROC often seems a tool of the state is also due to the fact that the ROC and Russia have a lot of common interests. A good example of this is the Ukraine, whose own Kyiv Patriarchate is threatening the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate. In this case as well Russia as the ROC have an interest in strengthening each other's influence in Ukraine because church and state are connected. One particular point in which the state has a specific interest to use the church is in presenting itself as an international defender of traditional values as opposed to the liberal and individual values of the West. It is therefore not surprising that in his State of the Union speech in 2013 Vladimir contently argued that 'more and more people around the world are supporting Russia's defence of traditional values.'<sup>77</sup> By promoting these values, the ROC can, especially in the Near Abroad, play a significant part in and strengthen Russia's interests in the region.

### **The Position of the Orthodox Church of Georgia in Georgian Politics and Society**

In Georgia the OCG has a crucial position in society. This is among other things shown by the confidence people have in the church. An opinion poll in 2014 showed that people trust the church over any other national institution, with a confidence rate of 94%.<sup>78</sup> The leader of the church, Patriarch Ilia II, is the most trusted person in Georgia.<sup>79</sup> Besides that he is by far the most popular person in Georgia, receiving 87% of the votes in a poll. Prime Minister Margvelashvili followed with 52%.<sup>80</sup> Another significant figure is that according to the 2014 General Population Census 83,4% of the Georgians identified as Orthodox.<sup>81</sup>

The OCG has a lot of influence in Georgian politics, even though Ilia II announced the church does not interfere in political elections. Ansgar Jödicke argues that through sermons, meetings with

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<sup>75</sup> Herpen, 136-138.

<sup>76</sup> Simons, Greg, 'The Russian Orthodox Church: Toward a New Global Role?' *Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper*, September 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Luhn, Alec, 'President Vladimir Putin hails Russia's 'defence of traditional values' in his state of the nation speech', *The Independent*, 12 December 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/president-vladimir-putin-hails-russias-defence-of-traditional-values-in-his-state-of-the-nation-9001470.html> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>78</sup> Swieca, Arianne, 'LGBT rights and the long road to democracy in Georgia', 17 May 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/05/17/lgbt-rights-and-the-long-road-to-democracy-in-georgia/> (accessed on 25-05-2017).

<sup>79</sup> Watson.

<sup>80</sup> Paroslavie.ru, 'The Most Popular Person in Georgia is Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II', 14 May 2015, <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/79408.htm> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>81</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia, 'General Population Census 2014', *Geostat*, 28 April 2016.

politicians and speaking out about political debates the church has a large political significance.<sup>82</sup> Carolin Funke describes a case when the OCG influenced elections and laws. To get the visa-free travel deal with the EU Georgia had to make a bill against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The OCG opposed this and, according to Funke, made sure that the law, however approved, was inefficient in reaching its aims.<sup>83</sup> A 2016 opinion poll showed that the OCG has a lot of influence on politics when 74% of the respondents said they would not vote for a party that is 'seen as critical on the highly influential and increasingly more powerful OCG.'<sup>84</sup> This same poll also asked if people would vote for parties said people have the right to speak about sexual orientation, to which 78% of the people answered they would not.<sup>85</sup> Kristina Conroy confirms this, pointing at several occasions when the church publicly criticized the state. According to Conroy this shows some degree of separation between church and state, but it especially demonstrates the formidable esteem that the church has managed to gain in Georgian society.<sup>86</sup> Finally, an interesting difference between the ROC and OCG is that the level of churchgoers in Georgia is among the highest (17% attends a church service weekly) in Eastern Europe, while in Russia it is among the lowest (6% attends a church service weekly).<sup>87</sup> This confirms the notion that the relation between the ROC and Russia is a lot more complex and political, while in Georgia the church is very powerful and can influence politics strongly not only by getting involved in it, but also by releasing public statements with their views. The OCG is a much stronger independent political voice than the ROC, which is largely caused by the enormous respect it has gained in Georgia.

### **The Relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Georgia**

The relations between the ROC and the OCG are of an interesting complexity. Both churches maintain close relationships with the state and supported the political stances of their state in the 2008 war and on the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>88</sup> Ilia II, patriarch of the OCG, has repeatedly criticised the ROC for its close alliance with the Russian state and especially with the role it plays in Georgia's breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The OCG did not appreciate it

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<sup>82</sup> Jödicke, Ansgar, 'General trends in the interaction of religion and politics as applied to the South Caucasus', in: Agadjanian, Alexander, Jödicke, Ansgar and Zweerde, Evert van der, *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus*, (Abingdon 2015), 15.

<sup>83</sup> Funke.

<sup>84</sup> Svanidze, Tamar, 'Poll shows Georgians Reject Parties Critical of Church, Traditional Values', *Georgia Today*, 22 April 2016, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/3614/Poll-Shows-Georgians-Reject-Parties-Critical-of-Church%2C-Traditional-Values> (accessed on 24-05-2017).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Conroy, 628.

<sup>87</sup> Pew Research Center, 'Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe', 10 May 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>88</sup> Conroy, 622.



when Russian priests joined a military parade in 2005 in South Ossetia. South-Ossetia is not only the territory of Georgia, but also falls within the autocephaly of the OCG.<sup>89</sup> The relations between the ROC and OCG are nevertheless close. A striking example of the proximity of these relations is that when Patriarch Alexei II died, only months after the Georgian-Russian war, Patriarch Ilia II visited his funeral in Moscow nonetheless.<sup>90</sup> The relations between the ROC and the OCG are in general friendly, though Curanović describes this as a typical relationship between a stronger and a weaker partner.<sup>91</sup> This relationship is a significant factor in the relations between Russia and Georgia between 2008 and 2013, which will be reviewed in the next chapter.

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<sup>89</sup> Curanović, 311.

<sup>90</sup> Civil Georgia, 'Saakashvili Hails Church's 'Diplomatic Mission'', 12 December 2008, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20125> (accessed on 25-05-2017).

<sup>91</sup> Curanović, 311.

## The Role of the Orthodox Church in Russian-Georgian Diplomacy

In this chapter I will analyse the part the ROC and OCG played in the diplomacy and relations between Russia and Georgia. First I will give a brief introduction in the political relations between Russia and Georgia and consequently I will analyse the different ways both Orthodox churches have been involved in and exerted influence on the relations between Russia and Georgia.

Since Georgia gained independence in 1991 relations have been tense with Russia, especially with regards to the breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>92</sup> The relationship worsened when Georgia wanted to move away from Russia's sphere of influence, especially after pro-Western Mikheil Saakashvili was elected president in 2004.<sup>93</sup> The conflict escalated end of July 2008 with the exchange of several bomb blasts and artillery fire. This resulted in serious fighting beginning of August and both Georgia and South Ossetia accusing each other of starting the conflict on 7 August. Georgia took large parts of South Ossetia which led to Russia retaliating the next day and reoccupying South Ossetia and on 11 August even capturing the city Gori, which was in undisputed Georgian territory.<sup>94</sup> After five days of war a ceasefire agreement was reached by French president Sarkozy and signed on 15 August by Saakashvili and on 16 August by Medvedev.<sup>95</sup>

### The Relations between Russia and Georgia since 2008

Before 2008, the relations between Russia and Georgia were tense, but in the period between 2008 and 2013 relations are almost non-existent. Russia had recalled its ambassador in Tbilisi in October 2006<sup>96</sup> but he returned a few months later when the relations improved.<sup>97</sup> In November 2007 Saakashvili called back the Georgian ambassador to Moscow, Irakli Chubinishvili<sup>98</sup>, he would soon return, but not for long because on 11 July 2008 he was called back again.<sup>99</sup> Finally Georgia broke off

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<sup>92</sup> Rich, Paul B., *Crisis in the Caucasus: Russia, Georgia and the West*, (New York 2010), 107.

<sup>93</sup> Baylis, John, Smith, Steve and Owens, Patricia, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford 2011), 73.

<sup>94</sup> Nichol, Jim, 'Russia-Georgia Conflict in August 2008: Context and Implications for U.S. interests', *Congressional Research Service*, 3 March 2009, 5-6.

<sup>95</sup> Jones, Stephen F., *War and Revolution in the Caucasus: Georgia Ablaze*, (New York 2010), 68.

<sup>96</sup> Buckley, Neil, 'Russians raise the stakes in row with Georgia', *The Financial Times*, 3 October 2006, [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/40a8cdd4-527c-11db-bce6-0000779e2340.html?ft\\_site=falcon&desktop=true](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/40a8cdd4-527c-11db-bce6-0000779e2340.html?ft_site=falcon&desktop=true) (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>97</sup> Russia Today, 'Georgia welcomes back Russian ambassador', 19 January 2007, <https://www.rt.com/news/georgia-welcomes-back-russian-ambassador/> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>98</sup> Corso, Molly, 'Georgia: Government Uses Force to Restore Order, Pulls Plug on TV Broadcaster', *EurasiaNet*, 6 November 2007, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav110707.shtml> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>99</sup> Nichol, 4.

all diplomatic relations with Russia at the end of August and demanded Russia to withdraw their diplomats from Tbilisi beginning of September.<sup>100</sup> Of course a minimum level of diplomacy remained. The consulates stayed 'to ensure support for Russian and Georgian citizens respectively.'<sup>101</sup> Besides, both countries started an interest section at the embassy of Switzerland in each other's respective capitals.<sup>102</sup> First direct talks between the countries took place on 14 December 2012 when the special representative of Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Abashidze and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin met in Switzerland.<sup>103</sup> With this the relations normalised, but remained limited because Georgia has said not to restore relations fully until Russia recognises the territorial integrity of Georgia and stops recognising South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states.<sup>104</sup> Russia has at the same time been repeating that it is ready to normalizing relations with Georgia, but maintains its position on Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>105</sup>

### **Deteriorated Relations and the Role of the Church**

One could say that the relations between Russia and Georgia are at least frail. Interestingly the Georgian Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili was asked in 2010 by a Russian journalist if the recognition of the Circassian Genocide by Georgia would not further worsen relations with Russia. He replied: 'Why, is there any further?'<sup>106</sup> The relations between Russia and Georgia were at an all-time low and one of the main reasons it did not get worse was that the ROC and the OCG ensured that some level of interaction always kept going on. Greg Simons argues for this positive factor the ROC and OCG were 'at a time when secular politics and communication between the Georgian and Russian governments was virtually non-existent.' Both churches ensured that indirect

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<sup>100</sup> Russia Today, 'Georgia severs diplomatic links with Russia', 3 September 2008, <https://www.rt.com/news/georgia-severs-diplomatic-links-with-russia/> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>101</sup> Russia Today, 'Russia closes embassy in Georgia', 3 September 2008, <https://www.rt.com/news/russia-closes-embassy-in-georgia/> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>102</sup> In: Sputnik International, 'Switzerland confirms will represent Russia's interests in Georgia', 6 October 2008, <https://sputniknews.com/world/20081006117452518/> (accessed on 26-05-2017) and in: Interpressnews, 'Switzerland to Represent Georgian Interests in Russia', 12-01-2009, <http://www.interpressnews.ge/en/politicss/4992-swtzend-to-represent-geogn-inteests-n-russ.html?ar=A> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>103</sup> Civil Georgia, 'Georgian, Russian Diplomats Meet in Switzerland', 15 December 2012, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25550> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>104</sup> Rozin.

<sup>105</sup> Russian officials have repeatedly said this in media, but it is also in official documents, like: The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 1 December 2016, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk8B6Z29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk8B6Z29/content/id/2542248) (accessed on 26-05-2017), while similar text being in the earlier Foreign Policy Concept of 2013.

<sup>106</sup> Merlin, Aude, 'Relations Between the North and South Caucasus: Divergent Paths?', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 27 May 2011, 10.

communication between the governments continued through them.<sup>107</sup> When Patriarch Alexey II died in December 2008, only months after the war, Ilia II went to his funeral in Moscow and met president Medvedev there. Georgian President Saakashvili consequently praised him for what he called 'a diplomatic mission.'<sup>108</sup> He also said that the day before Ilia II departed to Moscow he had a conversation with him and discussed 'a message, which the Patriarch had to convey to the Russian President.'<sup>109</sup> So the Patriarch functioned here as an explicit channel of diplomacy. Another important element of this is that because both churches called from the start of the conflict for peace and reconciliation, (how hypocritical some might deem this because of their support for their respective states) there was no loss of face when meeting with officials from the other country, while for a politician it might have seemed he was giving in to the opposing country.

### **Symbolic function**

Kristina Conroy emphasizes the positive influence of the ROC and OCG, despite their nationalist elements and their support to their governments' political stances in the war. What was more important was that they both condemned the violence and protested against the warring of two Orthodox nations.<sup>110</sup> And Conroy continues: 'Their emphasis on Orthodox brotherhood makes it possible for them to work toward peace and reconciliation, even if their capacity to serve as peace builders has been handicapped by their national loyalties.'<sup>111</sup> A good example of how the churches positioned themselves was showed when Patriarch Ilia II in an interview with *Russia Today* called it a large sin if Georgia would be divided. He also emphasized that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are part of Georgia. At the same time he emphasized the fraternal relations, the shared cultural heritage and his hope for improving relations.<sup>112</sup> During the war both Ilia II and Alexey II called for peace and lamented this war between 'people of the same faith'.<sup>113</sup> This focus on the brotherhood of Georgians, Ossetians and Russians makes sure their countries and people could not alienate each other completely. This means that, besides a geographical proximity, the countries also have a

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<sup>107</sup> Simons.

<sup>108</sup> Civil Georgia, 'Saakashvili Hails Church's 'Diplomatic Mission', 12 December 2008, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20125> (accessed on 25-05-2017).

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Conroy, 621-622.

<sup>111</sup> Conroy, 622.

<sup>112</sup> Kevorkova, Nadezhda, 'Patriarch of Georgia: Our church and people never cut ties with Russia', *Russia Today*, 22 July 2013, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/patriarch-georgia-russia-ties-438/> (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>113</sup> The ROC in: ROC Department for External Church Relations, 'In Moscow Open Forum Club holds a session on 'Russia and Georgia after the war: prospects of relations', 3 September 2008, <https://mospat.ru/archive/en/2008/09/42481/> (accessed on 24-05-2017) and the OCG in: Kishkovsky, Sophia, 'Conflict Tests Ties Between the Georgian and Russian Orthodox Churches', *The New York Times*, 5 September 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/06/world/europe/06orthodox.html> (accessed on 25-05-2017).

cultural proximity.

### **Calls for peace**

The ROC released an official statement on 3 September 2008 in which it supports the view of the Russian state by, on the one hand, emphasizing that ‘neither Russia nor the Ossetian people initiated the recent massive use of violence after years of relative peace in the conflict zone.’<sup>114</sup> On the other hand, this statement shows that the church regretted the division of people of the same faith and urged to prevent anti-Georgian emotions in Russia.<sup>115</sup> In 2010 Patriarch Kirill planned a visit to Georgia to encourage closer relations between the two countries.<sup>116</sup> A year later he claimed that the relations between the ROC and OCG helped improve the relations between Russia and Georgia.<sup>117</sup> Patriarch Ilia II did something similar when he spoke out against the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia<sup>118</sup> but also criticized Saakashvili for the war.<sup>119</sup> Though this criticism did focus on the violence, it was clearly a call for peace and Ilia II is not someone that a person with ambition to be (re-)elected as president in Georgia would want to disagree with.

### **The Question of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the ROC**

The ROC and the OCG had a difficult issue to resolve in this period. The regions of conflict, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, had requested to become part of the ROC. The ROC denied their request because it wanted to respect the borders of the other Orthodox churches. This viewpoint of the ROC was appreciated by Ilia II.<sup>120</sup> According to Kristina Conroy this attitude of the ROC did not come from a pious respect for the autocephaly of the OCG, but more from a realist attitude. She writes: ‘Above all, the ROC wants to assert its primacy within the greater Orthodox community.’<sup>121</sup> The OCG has an unusual position in the Orthodox churches, being much older than the ROC that goes back to

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<sup>114</sup> ROC Department for External Church Relations, ‘In Moscow Open Forum Club holds a session on ‘Russia and Georgia after the war: prospects of relations’, 3 September 2008, <https://mospat.ru/archive/en/2008/09/42481/> (accessed on 24-05-2017).

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Radio Free Europe, ‘Russian Patriarch To Visit Georgia To Foster Ties’, 7 January 2010, [https://www.rferl.org/a/Russian\\_Patriarch\\_To\\_Visit\\_Georgia\\_To\\_Foster\\_Ties/1923332.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Russian_Patriarch_To_Visit_Georgia_To_Foster_Ties/1923332.html) (accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>117</sup> Civil Georgia, ‘Georgian, Russian Patriarchs Meet in Moscow’, 20 November 2011, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24164> (Accessed on 26-05-2017).

<sup>118</sup> Conroy, 628-633.

<sup>119</sup> Radio Free Europe, ‘Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch Criticizes Saakashvili For War’, [https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgian\\_Orthodox\\_Church\\_Patriarch\\_Criticizes\\_Saakashvili\\_For\\_War\\_/1853790.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgian_Orthodox_Church_Patriarch_Criticizes_Saakashvili_For_War_/1853790.html) (accessed on 23-05-2017).

<sup>120</sup> Interfax Religion, ‘Ilia II thanks Patriarch Kirill for recognizing Abkhazia as territory of Georgian Church’, 21 November 2016, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=13433> (accessed on 24-05-2017).

<sup>121</sup> Conroy, 635.

baptism of Vladimir in 988.<sup>122</sup> The OCG is believed to date back to the fourth century when St. Nino converted the country to Christianity.<sup>123</sup> Conroy explains that the ROC wants ‘to avoid a contest of authority with the Ecumenical Patriarch over South Ossetia and Abkhazia’,<sup>124</sup> especially not against a church that is much older than the ROC. Besides, the chances of winning this contest would have been low for the ROC and this would probably harm its status. At the same time has the OCG showed not to be ready to give up Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Patriarch Ilia II conferred with the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2013 and declared after that to visit Abkhazia as ruler of its diocese.<sup>125</sup> The American analyst Paul Goble has a different view on this. He claimed in November 2008 that the denial of the ROC to take control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia could lead to a worse relationship between church and state. He even went as far as saying that the ROC may lose its ‘privileged and hitherto unchallenged status as the Russian Federation’s religious representative to the international community.’<sup>126</sup> Kimitaka Matsuzato argues that the ROC had absorbed Georgia before so that it would not be impossible to take control over these regions. The reason for not doing this, he says, is that the ROC would lose its legitimacy to criticize ‘violations of canonical law’, for example by the aforementioned Kyiv Patriarchate.<sup>127</sup> Conroy quite rightly states: ‘Instead of annexation, the ROC (like the state) prefers de facto authority in this area, using friendly relationships between churches as a diplomatic channel.’<sup>128</sup> It is clear that the ROC did not want to provoke the OCG by absorbing these regions, which from a diplomatic perspective was a positive influence on the relationship between the churches and thereby also between on the relations between Russia and Georgia.

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<sup>122</sup> Shevzov, Vera, ‘The Russian Tradition, 15-40, 16 in: Casiday, Augustine, *The Orthodox Christian World*, (New York 2012).

<sup>123</sup> Grdzelidze, Tamara, ‘The Georgian Tradition’, 58-65, 60 In: Casiday, Augustine, *The Orthodox Christian World*, (New York 2012).

<sup>124</sup> Conroy, 635.

<sup>125</sup> Interfax Religion, ‘Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia says plans to visit Abkhazia with Ecumenical Patriarch’, 23 May 2013, <http://www.pravmir.com/catholicos-patriarch-of-georgia-says-plans-to-visit-abkhazia-with-ecumenical-patriarch/> (accessed on 24-05-2017).

<sup>126</sup> Goble, Paul, ‘Moscow Patriarchate Losing Privileged Status as Russia’s Religious Representative Abroad’, *The Moldova Foundation*, <http://www.moldova.org/en/moscow-patriarchate-losing-privileged-status-as-russias-religious-representative-abroad-162266-eng/> (accessed on 25-05-2017).

<sup>127</sup> Matsuzato, Kimitaka, ‘South Ossetia and the Orthodox World: Official Churches, the Greek Old Calendarist Movement, and the So-called Alan Diocese’, *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 52 no. 2, pages 271-297, 271-272.

<sup>128</sup> Conroy, 634.

## Conclusion

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Georgia have played an important role in the relations between Russia and Georgia. Church, state and nation are entangled in a complex myriad of exchange on many levels, in both countries. The Patriarchs of the churches are public persons, maintain good relationships with the leading figures of their country and both Patriarchs, but especially Ilia II are popular figures in their country. Nevertheless, it is hard to distinguish the power the church has over the state from the power the state has over the church. In Russia, it is highly unlikely that a documentary created by a monk, can be shown three times on national TV if this is not in the interest of the state. The Russian state also has a genuine interest in defending traditional values as a way to gain more influence of its Near Abroad. These values often gain a lot of support in the Orthodox countries in Eastern Europe. The relationship between church and state in Georgia might be even more interesting. The patriarch of the OCG has a lot of influence and is according to opinion polls the most trusted and most popular public figure in Georgia. Since its independence in 1991 the OCG has meant a lot for state building and nationalism in Georgia. Even though the church is loyal to the state it has in the last years been critical on laws they say would promote liberal values. The influence of the OCG is hard to overestimate. They are able to influence the law-making process and have a lot of support among the Georgian people.

A problem I encountered in this research is that in Russia and Georgia the state is so intertwined with the church and the church is so important in the identity of the nation that it is hard to say what would have happened in this conflict without the Orthodox Church. The ROC and OCG are not only churches, not only faiths, but they are also the identity of the state and the nation. The church is an important factor for both the nation and the state, since a large part of the nation identifies as part of the church and the state has to consider the position of the church when making laws or releasing statements on topic the church might not agree with. At the same time the church needs the state to ensure its material possessions and as a 'tool' to strengthen Orthodoxy in the country. Finally the nation is part of both state and church, unless one of these two loses the support of the nation. That is also why state and church are so closely aligned, because the idea behind the 'symphony' between church and state is that they're supposed to strengthen each other.

It is a significant factor that in both countries the Orthodox faith is an important part of the history of the state. Russia sees the baptism of Vladimir in 988 as an important point in the coming to be of Russia, while Orthodoxy in Georgia goes back to the fourth century when St. Nino is believed to have

converted the country. This means that the history of Orthodoxy is long, and more importantly, the perception on this history in Russia and Georgia suggests is ingrained in the national identity. In the post-Soviet period this idea has been brought back successfully, witnessing the large number of Russians and Georgians that identify as Orthodox now. Where the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century in Western Europe was accompanied by a separation of church and state, in Eastern Europe it led to an even closer entanglement of church, state and nation. It is remarkable that even the period of communism could not change this.

It is hard to tell how much influence the leaders of these churches had on the conflict between Russia and Georgia. After all, the war did happen despite their calls for peace so it is clear their calls were ultimately not decisive. Nonetheless, they played a significant role, especially in the reaching of a ceasefire agreement and in the aftermath. They were largely responsible for creating a perspective in their country that their war was not necessarily just and right. But that it was a war that should not take place, because Russians and Georgians are 'people of the same faith'. This helped creating an environment in which it was easier to end the war and to come to an agreement. The emphasizing of the cultural proximity between the countries, the calls for peace, the denial of violence and the focus on brotherhood by both churches prevented the countries from completely alienating themselves and each other.

The role of the ROC and OCG can also be deemed important because of the practical possibilities it offered. After Georgia broke off all diplomatic contacts with Russia, the Orthodox church transformed into the main diplomatic channel. This channel offered political leaders a low profile way of maintaining diplomacy. At the same time church leaders played a significant role. It was shortly after the conflict that Ilia II had to travel to Russia for the funeral of his colleague Patriarch Alexey II and conveyed a message of Saakashvili to Russian president Medvedev. For a political leader a meeting so soon after a war might have meant a loss of face, when a church leader does it, it is a hope for reconciliation.

At the same time during this period the churches maintained relative friendly relations and because of canon law this could not escalate. The ROC still supported the OCG's claim that Abkhazia and South Ossetia were part of its Patriarchate, even though at the same time they supported Russia's claim that the people in these breakaway regions had the right to be protected. By this attitude a provocation and a theological dispute was prevented and the churches could find agreement in a joint call for peace.



The role of the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe is only emphasized by the fact that most states, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have been trying to have their own church recognized. For that reason, the positive influence the Orthodox Church has in state-building more research. The revived and continuing significance of the Orthodox churches in the post-soviet time suggest that it might hold this important position for a long time to come. Fostering better relations between Georgia and Russia might yet be one of the greatest tasks of Orthodoxy, but it is doubtful if the close relations with the state will ever let the church achieve that.

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