Joining and Leaving the International Ecumenical Movement – A Story of the Georgian Orthodox Church

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ABSTRACT

The Georgian Orthodox Church, to this day, is one of the most trusted institutions in Georgia, and its patriarch - the most trusted figure in the country. Decisions made by an institution with such influence affect not only the church itself but the Georgian society. The GOC was a member of the WCC for more than 30 years. Leaving the international ecumenical movement was coupled with anti-ecumenical rhetoric, aggression toward other Christian congregations, and increasing ethnoreligious nationalism.

The thesis argues that for the GOC, becoming a member of the WCC was a step coordinated and closely controlled by the Soviet authorities but the membership in the WCC also provided the GOC with international connections and access to resources to aid the weakened institution and a chance to end the church's isolation. The relationship between the state leaders and the GOC. In the 1990s, the GOC became a primary legitimizing tool for political leaders in a context where personalities gained public support, not political ideas or programs. the context of independent Georgia, in combination with local anti-ecumenical sentiments both from the hierarchs of the GOC and the anti-ecumenical groups, increasing ethnoreligious notions of nationalism, led to the decision to leave the WCC.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CARC – Council of the Affairs of Religious Cults
CAROC – Council of Religious Affairs
CEC – Council of European Churches
ECBG – Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia
The BOC – the Bulgarian Orthodox Church
The CRA - Council of Religious Affairs
The GOC – the Georgian Orthodox Church
The ROC – the Russian Orthodox Church
The SOC - the Serbian Orthodox Church
The WCC – the World Council of Churches

CACH – Central Archive of Contemporary History
CHAG - Central Historical Archive of Georgia
MIA – Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia
MIAA – Ministry of Internal Affairs Archive
NAG – National Archives of Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

The Georgian Orthodox Church, to this day, is one of the most trusted institutions in Georgia, and its patriarch - the most trusted figure in the country.[1] Decisions made by an institution with such influence affect not only the church itself but the Georgian society as a whole. The GOC was a member of the WCC for more than 30 years. Leaving the international ecumenical movement was coupled with anti-ecumenical rhetoric, aggression toward other Christian congregations, and increasing ethnoreligious nationalism. Discussing the details of this story brings light to the larger context of the post-Soviet state-building as well. To fully understand the departure from the international ecumenical movement, we must first look at when the GOC joined it.

In this thesis I will focus on the period from 1961 to the end of the 1990s (which, in Georgian context, came with the 2003 Rose Revolution). I will argue, that becoming a member of the ecumenical organization, namely the World Council of Churches, was first and foremost a political act directed by the Soviet regime to pursue its international goals through different platforms in the context of the Cold War. However, I will claim that it was also a symbolic act that associated the GOC with the goal of uniting Christians of different faith traditions. It was also a decision that brought the GOC international connections and ended its isolation of more than 100 years.

As I will demonstrate in the thesis, the decision to leave the organization was made in a completely different context. In 1997 Georgia was already an independent country. The Council of Religious Affairs no longer directed the church. Keeping that in mind, this decision brings together a different set of issues: Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement, changing

[1] "66% of Georgians Fully trust the Patriarch, 28% Express Trust Towards the Patrairchate" Tabula, (Georgia), April 3, 2019. https://tabula.ge/ge/news/622266-patriarks-mosakhleobis-66-endoba-srulad Last Accessed 30 May 2023.
It should be noted here, that the trust in both is decreasing.

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political settings after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the influential political role of the GOC in Georgia. On a smaller scale, this is a conflict between several monasteries and the patriarch – on this level, this is a story of asserting authority over religious matters.

This thesis is intended as a political history of the GOC, looking at it as a political actor. This research, on one level, aims to understand the complicated story of the GOC in the context of the Soviet Union and the context of the first decade of independent Georgia. On another level, this is a story of how the GOC opened the doors for ecumenical relations in the early 1960s and closed the same door in 1997. Participation in the international ecumenical movement is an important subject for several matters: it brings together international and national political settings; it brings the GOC, a small church from a small state to the sphere of large-scale events.

Before moving on further with discussing the thesis topic itself, a general overview of the history of the GOC before the Soviet Union is in order. Georgia has always been a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, most of its existence spent on the edge of empires.[2] According to tradition, Christianity officially came to Georgia in the 4th century, and since then, the Georgian kingdoms associated themselves with Christianity, defending it from the neighboring Muslim empires. It was because of being of the same faith that, in the 18th century, a Georgian king entrusted Georgia's protection to the Russian Empire. This agreement ended with the annexation of Georgian kingdoms, with the abolition of the autocephaly[3] of the GOC and its placement under the Russian Holy Synod. During the 19th century, the Russian exarchate unsuccessfully tried to end Georgian language services in the church. The second half of the 19th century marked a Georgian national revival. The elite at the forefront of this endeavor did not disregard the place of the GOC in Georgian history, but they did not make religion one of

[2] Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).
[3] "Independent of external and especially patriarchal authority. used especially of Eastern national churches"- "Autocephalous." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autocephalous. Accessed 12 Jun. 2023.

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the nation's founding principles. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the GOC declared autocephaly, and soon after, the Georgian state followed and declared independence. The autocephaly was too fresh, not yet internationally recognized, and the independent Georgian state too new to gain protection from the other countries when in 1921, the Red Army occupied Georgia. The Autocephaly was only fully recognized after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A 9th-century Georgian ecclesiastic figure wrote that Georgia was everywhere, where the prayer was in the Georgian language. The fate of the Georgian church and the Georgian state have been intertwined for centuries. However, it was not until the 20th century that other religious groups started disappearing from the national narrative. This thesis examines a particular aspect of this narrative, through the lens of the changing relationship of GOC and the international ecumenical organization.

Theoretical framework

Secularization theory seems to be inescapable when writing about religion. The Soviet Union is usually seen as a forcefully secularized society[4], while the 1990s' Georgia would fit the description of a post-Secular one. Both claims, however, untrue. To explain this, we must first look at the secularization theory.

The general idea that religion would decline with modernization has already been refuted. However, Jose Casanova formulated three propositions of secularization, which Talal Asad then questioned. Casanova argued that secularization comprised three elements: 1. Differentiation of the secular sphere from religious institutions and norms; 2. Secularization as the decline of religious beliefs and practices;[5] 3. Secularization as the marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere.[6] Asad wrote that the secularization theory was challenged by

[4] On directed or imposed secularization - Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[5] This element was refuted by Casanova himself, as Asad noted.
[6] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

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politicized religion. Political religion was also seen by the defenders of the secularization theory as a revolt against modernity.[7] Asad explained that the first and third elements of the theory fail because there is no clear differentiation between religious and non-religious spheres. Nor is the significance of religion only measured by measuring church attendance.[8] Post-Secularism still stands with secularism but deals with the limitations of the theory by claiming that there is a resurgence of religiosity – after the decline.

So what framework would be the most suitable to discuss the history of the GOC in the Soviet Union and the 1990s? According to Sonja Luehrman (analyzing Charles Taylor's definition of secular), the plurality of the existing worldviews proves that religious convictions are not shared by everyone, just as secularists need to acknowledge that religion is not disappearing.[9] The Soviet state did forcefully close down churches, executed clergy and believers, conducted active atheist propaganda, and saw the future of Soviet citizens without religion. However, it is also clear from Soviet history that the state took different turns dealing with religious institutions. It coopted them, cooperated with them, and agreed on concessions if they fit the needs of the state. Ascribing the characteristics of the first decades to the entirety of the Soviet period would be a mistake – as much mistake as disregarding the oppression of that period would be. It would be a simplification of a complex picture, to speak about decreased religiosity among Georgian citizens of the Soviet Union. Various factors can explain smaller numbers attending the church or declaring affiliation with the church – a small number of open churches remaining, dangers of publicly associating with religion.[10] After the independence,

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[7] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 182.
[8] Asad, 182.
[9] Sonja Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*, 1. ed, Oxford Series on History and Archives (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 15.
[10] In the article Was Soviet Soviety Secular we read about the religious characteristics of the Soviet rule itself. However, it brings us to questions of defining religion, whether communism should be discussed as religion, and whether including Communism stretches definition of religion too far.
Sonja Luehrmann, "Was Soviet Society Secular? Undoing Equations between Communism and Religion," in *Atheist Secularism and Its Discontents*, ed. Tam T. T. Ngo and Justine B. Quijada (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 134–51, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137438386_7.

the Secularization theory is no longer fit for the independent state of Georgia and the place and role of the GOC in it. To speak about the 1990s in terms of de-secularization would imply that Georgian society was ever secularized. Once the state restrictions were lifted, people started associating themselves with the church again, to the extent that being Orthodox Christian became an integral part of being Georgian.

The fact that the Soviet state encouraged the churches from the Soviet Union to enter the international ecumenical movement removes the clear division between the religious and secular spheres – the churches were participants in spreading Soviet-directed narratives in the West. Besides that, once the active fight against the religious institutions ceased, they were deeply infiltrated by the State and controlled by it. It would also be a misrepresentation to call the increased numbers of religiously affiliated people an increase in religiosity – we can only conclude that the churches, and in this case, the GOC, found themselves free of Soviet constrictions. Therefore, it was free to operate and establish its primacy over other religious communities and in the public sphere. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not end the complex relationship between church and state. Beginning of the 1990s brought with it a political and ecclesiastic reconfiguration of this relationship under national sovereignty. Therefore, instead of adding to the criticism of the Secularization Theory, it is more fruitful to investigate the actual relationship of the church and state, and the key moments in the history of the GOC in the Soviet Union, and in the newly independent Georgia. The story of the relationship of the GOC and the WCC provides a useful lens to do so.

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Research Method and Literature Review

Archival sources have been vital for this research. The primary sources were retrieved from the National Archives of Georgia, the Ministry of Internal Affairs Archive in Tbilisi, and the World Council of Churches Archives in Geneva. The Articles in the Georgian periodicals from the 1990s kept in the National Library of Georgia and publications of the Keston Institute, provided the possibility to answer the questions left after looking at the archival sources. Felix Corley's 1996 publication Religion in the *Soviet Union – An Archival Reader*[11] must also be mentioned here – translated primary sources in this book provided much-needed information.

Sonja Luehrmann's book on *Religion in the Secular Archives* brings the complexity of working with Soviet sources to light. She explains that "archival files do not simply contain true or false descriptions of historical circumstances but are evidence of a crucial process of documentation".[12] In Georgian National Archives, I was primarily interested in the documents under the section titled The Representative of the Council of Religious Affairs in Georgia. Since the CRA was tasked with mediating between the state and the religious institutions, most documents regarding religious affairs are kept there. Especially those regarding international endeavors – all the visits, local priests going abroad, or international guests coming to Georgian SSR are kept there. In the MIA Archive, I came across files regarding religious celebrations and anti-religious campaigns in Directory N14 during the research for a different topic. My primary interest in these documents was to see how the Soviet state pursued its religious policy – what were the intentions for sending the priests to the international assemblies? What did the reports written by those priests convey? The archives do not hold the complete picture, but for the purposes of this research, which was to understand the relationship between the two

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[11] Felix Corley, *Religion in the Soviet Union: An Archival Reader* (Springer, 1996).
[12] Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives*, 23.

institutions – church and state and look into the event of the GOC joining the WCC, these archives provided invaluable information.

The WCC Archives presented a different challenge - the official letters, notes, memos, and reports were the only primary sources I could access before the time of CRA and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was vital to keep in mind the position of the WCC position of the GOC, especially when it came to understanding the decision to leave.

In addition to the archival sources, I used several sermons and epistles by Patriarch Ilia II and the official church publication Jvari Vazisa (Cross of Vine).

Literature on the history of the GOC is scarce. Still, interest has been rising regarding the relationship with the WCC, the Soviet past, and the experience of the 1990s. For the analysis of the Soviet period, I used the volumes edited and authored by Sabrina Ramet and John Anderson.[13] Their analysis of the Soviet religious policies of church-state relations during the Soviet Union created a base on which I could build my work. For the Georgian case, among other texts, I consulted the works of Georgian Church historians Sergo Vardosanidze and Mikheil Kartvelishvili. In addition to that, the book *Witness Through The Troubled Time*[14]*s* proved to be one of the most coherent texts written about the GOC. Since the GOC Patriarchate archives are not open to everyone, the texts based on these archival sources were essential to analyze – to retrieve the information without repeating the biases presented in the texts.

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[13] Sabrina P. Ramet, *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Sabrina P. Ramet, *Cross and Commissar: The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Sabrina P. Ramet, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Christianity under Stress 1 (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1988); John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); John Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and the Successor States, 1953-1993* (Cambridge University Press, n.d.); John Anderson, "Soviet Religious Policy under Brezhnev and After," *Religion in Communist Lands* 11, no. 1 (March 1983): 25–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637498308431055.

[14] Zaza Abashidze and Tamara Grdzelidze, *Witness through Troubled Times: A History of the Orthodox Church of Georgia; 1811 to the Present;[Two Centuries of Struggle]* (Bennett & Bloom, 2006).

Malkhaz Songulashvili's work on the Evangelical Christian-Baptists[15] brought the layer of experience of the religious minorities to the picture.

The secondary literature was more complicated to find for Georgia in the 1990s, especially those addressing the decision of the GOC to leave the WCC. Davit Tinikashvili's and Shota Kintsurashvili's chapters[16] on this very event provided useful insights for the second chapter of the thesis. The WCC archival sources allowed me to look deeper into the issue and bring the materials to the story that were not addressed by these authors. Volumes *Religion in an Expanding Europe*[17] and *Eastern Christianity in the Twenty-First Century*[18] were some of important sources to analyze the religious setting of the 1990s and place the Georgian case in it. I consulted Stephen F. Jones's works on Georgian state-building for the Georgian political context, where he discussed the key events and political actors in the first decades of independence. This thesis will hopefully add to the scholarship regarding the church's history in the Soviet Union and the 1990s.

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the decision of the GOC to join the WCC, and the second part discusses the decision to leave the organization. Each decision is placed in a historical, political context they were made in.

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[15] Malkhaz Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia: The History and Transformation of a Free Church Tradition* (Baylor University Press, 2015).
[16] Davit Tinikasvhili, "Sakartvelos Martlmadidebeli Eklesia da Ekumenuri Modzraoba (1997 Tslamde da Shemdeg) (the GOC and the Ecumenical Movemet (before and after 1997)" *JOURNAL" ORBELIANI"* 3, no. 1 (2021).ვShota Kintsurashvili, Antiekumenizmidan Ethnophiletizmamde – antiekumenuri modzraobis roli sakartveloshi religiuri natsionalizmis formirebashi. (Khiluli da ukhilavi religia sakartveloshi (From Anti-Ecumenism to Ethnophiletism – place of anti-ecumenism in the formation of religious nationalism (Visible and Invisible religion in Georgia, ed. Sopho Zviadadze. Tbilisi, Ilia State University, 2021)).
[17] Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein, eds., *Religion in an Expanding Europe* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[18] Lucian Leuştean, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series 54 (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

PART 1: THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE SOVIET UNION: JOINING THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

The Soviet Orthodox Churches joined the WCC in the early 1960s, after its initial decline in 1948. To understand the decision, one needs to look into the Soviet context, of the state of Soviet religious policies, at the international context – that of the Cold War, at the ecumenical organization itself, and the interests of the churches. Addressing the continuities and changes in the Soviet religious policy draws a clearer picture of how religious institutions were treated and what type of relationship was prevalent between the church and state, rather than staying on the level of "religion was oppressed throughout the existence of the Soviet Union", which obscures the complexities of church-state coexistence. It would be equally a fallacy to assume that the history of the church in the Soviet Union is only that of resistance, dissent, of the fight against the regime. While these aspects were evidently present, there were also times of cooperation and/or subordination to the regime. This might have been because of the personal interests of the church hierarchy or their hopes to benefit the church by accepting to cooperate with the system. The history of the GOC under Soviet rule and its membership in the WCC exemplifies these complexities of the history of religion in the Soviet Union.

First, I will look at Soviet religious policies before and after Nikita Khrushchev, and analyze how they influenced the GOC. Afterwards, I will investigate the Khrushchev era in more detail, his anti-religious campaign, and the decision to allow churches to become members of the WCC. I will also look closely at Patriarch Ilia II of the GOC, who became a co-president of the WCC and led the church since 1977 through Perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union and into independence and was the one who made the decision to leave the organization in

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1997. Lastly, I will analyze the complex relationship between the church and the Georgian national liberation movement.

In this chapter, I will argue that the decision to join the WCC was a political one dictated by the Soviet authorities. The membership, however, also lead to certain benefits for the member churches from the Soviet Union. At the same time, increased control of the churches by the state sparked criticism of the church among the dissident movements. Georgian dissidents became the key actors in the Georgian national liberation movement that was based mainly on the ethnoreligious understanding of a nation.

1.1 Soviet Religious Policy – Before and After Khrushchev

1.1.1 Soviet Religious Policy Before Khrushchev

The issue of religion in general, the issue of churches in particular, and the Soviet politics towards the matter were, to say the least, complicated. While the overarching idea of eliminating religion from the lives of Soviet citizens was never entirely abandoned, the reality of church-state relations and Soviet religious policies was much more complex and defined mainly by the political needs of the regime. Soviet regime oppressed and accommodated religions, depending on the state leadership and circumstances in which they operated. Philip Walters outlines two main trends defining Soviet religious policy – fundamentalists, and pragmatists. According to him, the fundamentalists were mainly in the Communist Party's agitation and propaganda organization, while the executive apparatus of the party was more pragmatist.[19] The pragmatists "realized that the religious believers could be more easily controlled when allowed a limited legal existence rather than being driven underground".[20] The

[19] Philip Walters, "Survey of Soviet Religious Policy" in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Cambridge University Press, 1993) 4.
[20] Walters, Survey of Soviet Religious Policy, 4.

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decision to join the international ecumenical movement in the 1960s was arguably a pragmatist decision. A similar division can be observed in the leadership of the Orthodox Churches of the Soviet Union. Some defied the Soviet regime, and a renovationist movement advocated cooperation with the state.

Another later of complexity must be considered: discussing church-state relations superficially obscures the complex dynamics inside each body. As Sabrina Ramet puts it, "Both political elites and the sundry church bodies themselves are often factionalized, so that it becomes impossible to speak of church-state relations in a simple sense".[21] Therefore, when addressing church-state relations in the Georgian case, I will be speaking about the leadership of the GOC. One would think that speaking about the state becomes more manageable once it covers the time when the religious matters were handed over to the governmental body in 1965 – the Council of Religious Affairs (CRA).[22] The CRA had representative bodies in the republics – religious affairs of Georgia were handled by the Representative of the CRA in Georgia. In 1987 Sabrina Ramet wrote that if "one were to blend the church-state relationships of the eight East European Communist states and the Soviet Union", the general picture was that religion was seen by the state as a private affair of the individual, with guaranteed rights of worship; and religion had no public role, believers were being treated as second class citizens.[23]

At first, the Soviet officials employed a "push-and-pull strategy" with religion; in the 1920s and 1930s, "the Soviet regime pushed religious competitors out of the ideological market through sheer force and brutality", then in "pre-Gorbachev era, Marxist-Lenninists attempted

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[21] Ramet, *Cross and Commissar*, 3.
[22] John Anderson, "The Council for Religious Affairs and the Shaping of Soviet Religious Policy," *Soviet Studies* 43, no. 4 (1991): 689.
[23] Ramet, *Cross and Commissar*, 5.

to pull in loyalists" towards an atheist alternative to religion.[24] With Gorbachev came the state's "divorce" from atheism and the return of religion in the public sphere.[25]

The "Decree on the separation of church and state, similar to the one introduced in the RSFSR in 1918," was one of the first legislative acts by the new Georgian government in 1921, which remained the guiding framework in the 1920s.[26] C.J. Peters wrote in 1988 that this legislation was more liberal than the ones that followed afterward – religion was seen as a private business of each citizen, while all church property was nationalized.[27] There was a limitation to the freedom of practicing one's religious beliefs – as long as it did not "encroach on the rights of the citizens of the Soviet Republic".[28] In practice, something that appeared sensible and, to some extent, vague was utilized to repress believers and religious institutions in brutal forms. Another important document that regulated religious activities was the 1926 Georgian criminal code, which made it easier to regulate the lives of religious institutions and their congregations by making the language of the law even vaguer. It was the law that introduced terms such as "socially dangerous act", and "counterrevolutionary crime"; the law also made it a crime to "deceive masses into opposing Soviet law" and teach religion in public institutions.[29] Laws passed in 1928-1929 further limited religious activity to the point where almost every kind of religious activity became illegal. Law on Religious Associations was passed in 1929 and was active until 1990 when Gorbachev implemented drastic changes in legislation about religion.[30] As for the registration of the religious communities – every group

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[24] Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 47.
[25] Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, New Jersey ; Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3–4.
[26] C. J. Peters, "The Georgian Orthodox Church" in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet. N.C. Duke University Press, 291.
[27] Peters, the Georgian Orthodox Church, 291.
[28] Peters, the Georgian Orthodox Church, 291.
[29] Peters, the Georgian Orthodox Church, 292.
[30] Walters, Survey of Soviet Religious Policy, 13.

numbered 20 or above was obligated to register officially. The demand for registration split opinions in some congregations since not everyone agreed to registration.

Bolsheviks started dealing with religion step by step; the first target for them became Orthodox Church for its association with the Tsarist rule and because the majority of the population formally adhered to it.[31] Because the primary target was the Orthodox Church, Bolsheviks tried to "secure the neutrality of the other religious groups that had been persecuted by the Orthodox Church under the Tsarist regime".[32] Studying the history of Georgian Baptists, Malkhaz Songhulashvili notes that the Baptist church was quite happy with the church-state separation decree and enjoyed a certain amount of liberty from 1917 to 1928.[33] The joy soon turned sour. Although the authorities targeted the GOC, other religious communities – Baptists, Pentecostals, Molokans, Muslims, etc. – did not have an easier time.[34] A successful elimination of religion from the lives of the Soviet citizens "depended on the elimination of religious monopolies", a fact celebrated by smaller religious groups throughout the Soviet Union.[35] The non-Orthodox groups suffered under the old regime, and they were seen as committed to "hard work, sobriety, strict moral standards and communal forms of organization", traits that were perceived to "facilitate work discipline and the growth of agricultural communes".[36] Such treatment was temporary; all religious communities soon found themselves brutally oppressed until the Second World War and Stalin's decision to lift the harsh religious measures.

The rapprochement was the beginning of the new Soviet strategy towards religious communities, the beginning of a more pragmatic approach, where the state not only more efficiently controlled them but also used the institution to advance the state interests. The shift

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[31] Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*, 93.
[32] Songulashvili, 92.
[33] Songulashvili, 93.
[34] Sergo Vardosanidze, "Restoration of Autocephaly and times of trial 1917-1952", in *Witness through Troubled Times*, ed. Zaza Abashidze, Tamara Grdzelidze. Bennett & Bloom, 219.
[35] Froese, *The Plot to Kill God*, 37.
[36] Stephen A. Smith, "Communism and Religion", *The Cambridge History of Communism*, The Cambridge History of Communism, Silvio Pons, ed., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 311.

of 1943 towards religions was prompted by Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, violating the earlier pact between the two powers. Stalin's rapprochement was caused by the need for the church's support in propaganda to defend the *motherland* and stir patriotic sentiments and the need for military support from the West.[37] On the other hand, Germans were opening the churches in their occupied territories in the western borderlands of the Soviet Union, encouraging "the revival of church life, at least initially, as a way of undermining Soviet regime".[38]

From the start of the invasion, Orthodox Churches started to express support for the Soviet government. It was true for the Russian Orthodox Church, and it was true for the GOC as well. The support was not only verbal but material as well. In 1941, Patriarch Kalistrate publicly denounced Fascism and its aggression against the Soviet Union.[39] The Churches' support of the state and their material support for the war efforts lead to a new step in the church-state relationship. Stalin instructed that "A special organ must be set up which would ensure a link with the leadership of the church", an organ that would be attached to the Soviet government.[40] According to this document, Stalin himself named the unit Council for the affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, which would be the link between the government and the patriarch (ROC was without one at the time. The election of the patriarch was allowed at this meeting), and that the Council would not make decisions independently, but follow the directions from the government.[41] Stalin also allowed the ROC to elect a patriarch. The election of the patriarch of the ROC was beneficial for the GOC – it could continue its pursuit of recognition of autocephaly by the ROC. In February 1943, the negotiations started between the

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[37] Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*, 156.
[38] Smith, Communism and Religion, 313.
[39] Mikheil Kartvelishvili, Sabchota Religiuri Politika da Sakartveloshi Misi Asakhvis Taviseburebebi 1953-1964 Tslebshi (Soviet Religious Policy and its Implications in Georgia in 1953-1964), (Tbilisi: Tbilisi State University, 2022)p.72
[40] Document 89, Corley, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, 140.
[41] Document 89, Corley, 140.

two patriarchs.[42] In October 1943, the Russian Orthodox Church officially recognized the autocephaly of the GOC.[43]

Khrushchev changed Stalin's late policies towards religion. He claimed that Stalin had abandoned the principles Lenin followed, therefore, he was going to return to the true path. His anti-religious campaigns were the last attempt at eliminating religion from the lives of Soviet citizens. Khrushchev's policies will be discussed in further detail in the next sub-chapter.

1.1.2 Brezhnev, Gorbachev and the end

Under Brezhnev, the state control over religion was further centralized - In 1965, the CRA was formed and then legally acquired regulatory functions – those that it was already fulfilling since its establishment but codified now in 1975.[44] V. A. Kuroedov's (head of CRA) 1969 report is an important document, bringing light to the religious life at the time. According to the report, "the sects such as Dukhobors, Skobtsi, Molokans were on the verge of disappearing, that fewer people adhered to religious rituals".[45] He also pointed out that churches now had started to indicate that communism and Christianity were not too different from each other, both having strong faith in equality and support of the oppressed.[46] As Kuroedov evaluated, this meant two things – on the one hand, the clergy declared its loyalty to the state; on the other – they tried to prove that Christian moral was not against Communism.[47]

With the rise of Brezhnev's successor, Andropov, a particular Georgian politician rose with him – Eduard Shevardnadze, who was to become the second president of independent Georgia. Shevardnadze became the first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party in 1972 –

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[42] Kartvelishvili, Soviet Religious Policy and its Implications in Georgia, 75-76
[43] Vardosanidze, Restoration of Autocephaly, 221.
[44] Walters, Survey of Soviet Religious Policy, 24.
[45] CACH, Fond N1880, Directory 1, File 305, p.14
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid. p.20-21

with him, a wave of anti-religious campaigns came.[48] 1975 report of one of the regional committees talked about a successful ideological campaign against the "remnants of the past"- meaning religion and religious rituals.[49] Even though the Atheist propaganda was being actively implemented, more and more young people found religion interesting – "we don't want to believe that our daughters and sons, who are endowed with the mission of building Communism, have unexpectedly found respect for God and Godly powers" wrote a Young Communist paper in 1974.[50] Claims about the religion disappearing and the growing worries of more young people being attracted to the church paradoxically overlapped.

Gorbachev brought with him Perestroika, Glasnost, and the law on religious liberty – "Law of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,[51] that finally ended the Soviet state's war against religion. The latter came only a year before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But before the law, the pressures on religions had already started to lift.[52] Gorbachev saw the church as an ally in his plan of reforms – the celebration of the millennium of ROC marked the change. "Gorbachev readily granted Moscow patriarchate permission to put on an international "show".[53]

Through time, the Soviet regime gave up on attempts to combat religion but devoted attention to Atheist propaganda and more sophisticated control systems of the religious organization to use them for their interests. With this, the churches found a way to negotiate their positions, not completely liberate their activities, but better their situation, compared to the violent anti-religious campaigns.

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[48] S. F. Jones, "Soviet Religious Policy and the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church: From Khrushchev to Gorbachev," *Religion in Communist Lands* 17, no. 4 (January 1989): 299, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637498908431439.
[49] MIAA, Fond N14. Directory 1, File N195, p.10
[50] CACH, Fond N1880, Directory 1, File 249, p.7
[51] Igor′ Aleksandrovich Troi͡anovskiĭ, ed., *Religion in the Soviet Republics: A Guide to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Other Religions*, 1st ed (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 23.
[52] Michael Bourdeaux and Alexandru Popescu, "The Orthodox Church and Communism," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. Michael Angold, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 573, https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521811132.024.
[53] Bourdeaux and Popescu, 573.

1.2 The Paradox of Khrushchev – Anti-Religious Campaigns and Joining the International Ecumenical Movement

1.2.1 Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign

The period of Thaw is primarily associated with the time of Khrushchev's leadership of the Soviet Union. In reality, the shifts were already felt in the last years of Stalin's rule. It can be argued that the primary source of changes was the Second World War itself. It is certainly true for religious policies. "The Thaw certainly did originate in the late Stalin years – most importantly perhaps, in the Soviet experience of the Second World War," as Kozlov and Gillburd argue.[54] How does the concept of Thaw – the overall liberalization of life in the Soviet Union – apply to religious policies? Stalin's softened policies did not last long. While the churches had relative freedoms and rights, soon after the end of the War, atheist propaganda started to mobilize again. "When the victory over Germany was beyond doubt, the Central Committee issued a decree calling for renewed efforts in scientific-educational propaganda".[55] Znanie Society was founded, a society for spreading scientific and political knowledge as a replacement or a successor of the League of Militant Atheists.[56] Stalin's death in 1953 ended the War-and-Post-War calm of church-state relations. The death of Stalin sparked a wave of uncertainties, and a power struggle followed, ultimately ending with the arrival of Nikita Khrushchev as the new head of the state.

With Khrushchev came de-Stalinization and waves of anti-religious campaigns.[57] The paradox here is that it was under Nikita Khrushchev's rule that the churches from the

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[54] Eleonory Gilburd and Denis Kozlov, "The Thaw as an Event in Russian History," in *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*, eds. Kozlov and Gilburd (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 18-81), 26
[55] Walters, Survey of Soviet Religious Policy, 18.
[56] Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty*, 62.
[57] Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, "De-Stalinization and Religion in the U.S.S.R.," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 20, no. 3 (September 1965): 312–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/002070206502000302.

Communist space were allowed to participate in the international ecumenical movement – be present and have a voice on the international level. It is a question, however, whether this was indeed a paradox. With anti-religious campaigns, allowing access to such platforms at first seems so; however, once we look closer to the reasoning behind this decision, it becomes clear that this paradoxical step was perfectly in line with one of the general lines of Soviet religious policy – which was to utilize religious institutions for the needs of the Soviet regime.

The first wave of anti-religious campaigns came in 1954, in July, and was stopped by the authorities soon after, in November. Joan D. Grossman explains that this campaign was connected initially to the opposition of Khrushchev (namely Malenkov), and the fact that Khrushchev stopped it marked the rise in his authority – the end of the power struggle after Stalin's death.[58] But as he concludes, the halt of this campaign did not mean that the anti-religious campaign stopped at large, but it was just the first wave of what was to become general rule under Khrushchev.[59] In 1958 another wave started that lasted until 1965 – the campaign was not a terror, but it resulted in closing down large numbers of churches and other places of worship.[60] Khrushchev saw the anti-religious campaigns as the return to Lenin's true path, a return to the policies of the first decades after the Stalinist deviation (the idea fitting into Khrushchev's de-Stalinization).[61]

This was the context in which the churches were allowed to join the World Council of Churches. Khrushchev's anti-religious campaigns ended with him. After he was removed from his position, the approach to religion changed with policies more reminiscent of Stalin's – focused on control rather than elimination.

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[58] Joan Delaney Grossman, "Khrushchev's Anti-Religious Policy and the Campaign of 1954," *Soviet Studies* 24, no. 3 (January 1, 1973): 374.
[59] Grossman, "Khrushchev's Anti-Religious Policy and the Campaign of 1954."
[60] Smith in Pons, *The Cambridge History of Communism*, 315.
[61] Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and the Successor States, 1953-1993*, 20.

1.2.2 The World Council of Churches, Cold War, and the Georgian Orthodox Church

Membership of the Soviet churches in the WCC was their chance to have a voice internationally, and it was also a way for the Soviet regime to influence the policies of the WCC. How much of a difference did it make for the Orthodox Churches from the Communist countries to be represented in the WCC? For instance, according to J.A. Hebly, the ROC did not experience significant relief or positive changes in the situation.[62] For the GOC, it was a way to end isolation, establish new connections, and look for international recognition.

The World Council of Churches is an ecumenical movement founded in 1948. The word ecumenical comes from Greek, meaning "whole world".[63] The ecumenical movement is a process of seeking unity between different Christian Churches and overcoming the divisions and conflicts among them.[64] The early 20th century saw several organizations dedicated to this aim. The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 and the foundation of the Faith and Order movement and the Life and Work movement in the 1920s – movements that were to bring together Anglican, Protestant, Old Catholic, and Orthodox Theologians,[65] are considered to be the predecessors of the World Council of Churches. The first Assembly of the WCC was in Amsterdam, an unprecedented event in modern church history" – the assembly brought together 147 churches from 44 countries; attendees were of Orthodox, Anglican, and most Protestant traditions.[66] The second meeting was more constructive – in 1950, in Toronto, the assembly outlined what the WCC was, the purpose, meaning, and membership principles, which resulted in creating a document called the Toronto Statement.[67] In the Toronto statement,

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[62] Hebly in Ramet, *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, 120.
[63] Thomas E. FitzGerald, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Introductory History*, Contributions to the Study of Religion, no. 72 (Westport, Conn: Praeger Conn, 2004), 2.
[64] Salome Esebua and Malkhaz Songhulashvili, "Involvement of the Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement in the Context of the Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches," *SOTER: Journal of Religious Science* 84, no. 112 (2022): 40, https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8785.84(112).3.
[65] FitzGerald, *The Ecumenical Movement*, 2.
[66] FitzGerald, 109.
[67] FitzGerald, 110. The statement about the definition of the WCC will become an important factor later in the 1990s, when the GOC and other Orthodox Churches express their doubts on the nature of the WCC.

it is outlined that the purpose of the Council is to "serve the churches as an instrument" of unity in Christ; furthermore, it underlines that the Council has no functions of a church itself but serves as the space where the churches can come together – "the Council disavows any thought of becoming a single unified church structure" and "WCC is not and must never become a superchurch".[68] Obviously, not all the churches had similar opinions about the WCC. In the Orthodox world, for instance, some theologians supported participation in the ecumenical movement, but others opposed it. There is a teaching in Orthodox theology about the infallibility of the Church, therefore, accepting other churches as equals in the organization posed a challenge.[69] This was the reason why the Toronto statement also outlined that the member churches were not obliged to recognize other churches as churches.[70]

In 1948 the hierarchs of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches gathered in Moscow to celebrate the anniversary of the autocephaly of the Russian Orthodox Church, where the ROC advised the other Orthodox Churches to refuse participation in the ecumenical movement.[71] An Archbishop of the ROC condemned the ecumenical movement in 1948, stating that since the church could only be a community of true believers and that since "heretics were never considered as the body of Christ", the ecumenical movement (consisting of the "heretical societies" calling themselves churches) was not in line with Orthodoxy.[72] This argumentation is in line with the opinions of the groups that demanded the Orthodox Churches to withdraw from the WCC in the late 1990s, a point that I will return to in more detail in the following

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[68] "Toronto Statement," The World Council of Churches, the WCC, Last Accessed 25 May 2023, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/toronto-statement
[69] Esebua and Songhulashvili, "Involvement of the Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement in the Context of the Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches," 41.
[70] Esebua and Songhulashvili, 42.
[71] J. A. Hebly "The state, the church, and the oikumene: the Russian Orthodox Church and the World Council of Churches, in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*,106.
[72] Archbishop Serafim, Should the Russian Orthodox Church participate in the ecumenical movement? In Bryn Geffert and Theofanis G. Stavrou, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: The Essential Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 410.

chapters. Before leaving, however, the Orthodox Churches started actively participating in the ecumenical movement from the 1960s.

At the New Delhi Assembly in 1961, Russian, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Polish Orthodox Churches became members of the Council.[73] The GOC joined in 1962 as a result of an official request from the Georgian Patriarch - The WCC archives keep the original and the English translation of the letter from the Georgian patriarch applying for membership of the WCC, stating how important the close relationship between all the Christians was for the GOC.[74] A correspondence had started between the WCC and the GOC after the ROC became a member, as a result of which the GOC was invited to participate in the New Delhi Assembly. The letter stated that this was the opportunity for the GOC to come and observe the work of the WCC.[75] The Georgian delegation was not present at the assembly since the Soviet authorities did not allow it.[76]

A document kept in the National Archives of Georgia summarized the participation of the GOC in the WCC, dated 1979 (Around the time when the Patriarch of the GOC became a co-president of the WCC – a highly symbolic but important position). This document offers valuable insight on several levels – first, it points out that the churches were involved in the Soviet foreign policy of supporting peace; and that the churches were actively opposing the claims that there was a problem with human rights, particularly that of churchgoers and clergy inside the Soviet Union.

> The Georgian Church is on the path of modernization, and it is supporting the state policy of peacebuilding. . . it (the GOC) is participating in the assemblies supporting peace on the national, state, and international levels; In addition, the church is

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[73] FitzGerald, *The Ecumenical Movement*, 112.
[74] Appendix N1
[75] WCC Archives, 42.4.026. F4, To his Beatriture Patriarch Catholicos of Grusia Ephrem II, February 21, 1961.
[76] Sergo Vardosanidze, Utsmindesi da Unetaresi Ephrem II (1960-1972) (The most holy Ephrem II 1961-1972), (Tbilisi: Chronograph, 2000),13

> systematically present at international church conferences, is involved in the ecumenical movement. It is a member of the WCC (since 1962), of Conference of European Churches, and of the Christian Peace Conference … All this proves that international organizations are showing interest in religious life in the USSR, especially in the Georgian SSR. Soviet clergy is supporting the Soviet foreign peacebuilding policy and is opposing the imperialist accusations, that want to create an artificial conflict between the state and church.[77]

It is evident that the membership of the WCC could not have been achieved without approval by the Soviet authorities. It is further argued that the churches were ordered to join the movement during a strong anti-religious campaign.[78] Keeping in mind that, at the time, the GOC was barely surviving, allowing it to become a member of the WCC meant that more Soviet churches would have seats in the WCC Central Committee, giving the Soviet Union more control over its actions.[79] Whether the Orthodox churches would have joined the movement of their own free will, is an interesting question. There was a difference of opinions inside the churches about the matter. Still, evidently, international platform offered them a voice. A voice that, at large, served the Soviet state and was in line with its position. J. A. Hebly argues, that the reasonings between the Soviet participation in UNESCO's work and participation in the WCC were the Soviet efforts for international peace were at the forefront.[80]

Within the Cold War context, the division of the world in two, as the division between democracy and the totalitarian regime, was also seen as the division between religion and

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[77] CACH, Fond N1880, Directory N1, File N 364, p. 16-17
[78] Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*, 172.
[79] Jones, "Soviet Religious Policy and the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church," 297. In 1997 one of the reasons of GOC leaving was that Protestant churches had more votes, because of their numbers, therefore the Orthodox voices were not properly heard.
[80] Hebly, The State, the Church, the Oikoumene, 107.

communism.[81] The World Council of Churches saw it as its mission to stay above this Manichean divide and provide the platform for the churches from the two sides to meet. Secretary General of the WCC, Visser 't Hooft, explained that WCC taking sides in this division would have been against the very idea of the organization.[82] Because of this position of the WCC, it faced criticism and much doubt about whether the organization was doomed to become the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union.

Criticism was not entirely ungrounded. Before the churches from the Communist states joined the WCC, the organization was vocal about the churches' persecution in these countries; The New Delhi Assembly issued one of the last declarations about this matter.[83] Afterward, the focus shifted. The 1968 Uppsala Assembly focused on the issue of racism.[84] Since most of the funding from the WCC was directed towards the liberation movement in South Africa, criticism emerged that blamed the Council for paying no heed to the problems in the Communist bloc countries.[85] At the 1975 Nairobi Assembly, the topic of human rights was debated, where religious freedom was indeed stated as one of the fundamental human rights.[86] However, the Nairobi report shows that there was a disagreement about whether the final document of the Assembly should speak about the issues with the freedom of religion in the USSR – in the end, the document only briefly mentioned it.[87] 1975 was an important year for human rights – it was

[81] Dianne Kirby, "The Churches and Christianity in Cold War Europe" in Klaus Larres, ed., *A Companion to Europe since 1945*, Blackwell Companions to European History (Chichester, UK ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 186.
[82] Kirby, The Churches and Christianity in Cold War Europe, 191.
[83] Hebly, the Church, the State, the Oikoumene, 117.
[84] The Assembly was attended by the Patriarch of GOC Ephrem II.
Norman Goodall, Ed. The Uppsala Report 1968 – Official Report of the Fourth Assembly of Churches. (Zurich: CVB-Druck, 1968) p.416
[85] Antti Laine, Lyha Meriläinen, Matti Peiponen. "Ecumenical Reconstruction, Advocacy and Action: The World Council of Churches in Times of Change, from the 1940s to the early 1970s." (Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte 30, no. 2 (2017): 327-341.)336-339
[86] Bastiaan Bowman, "Nairobi 1975: The World Council of Churches and Human Rights", Online Atlas on the History of Humanitarianism and Human Rights, Leibniz-institut für Eurossische Gecchichte, Last Accessed: 25 May, 2023. https://hhr-atlas.ieg-mainz.de/articles/bouwman-nairobi
[87] David M. Paton Ed. Breaking Barriers Nairobi 1975 – The Official Report of the Fifrth Assembly of the WCC. (London: SPCK, 1975)

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the year of the Helsinki Accords. Since the WCC had close connections to the ROC, the organization "refused to join in the recasting of human rights as a language of public denunciation, even as it embraced this approach in other parts of the world".[88] Some have argued, that failure on the WCC's side to press on the human rights issues in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, was connected to its focus on the Third World, with support of "radical renewal", which was in turn associated with Marxist concepts and the criticism of western society.[89] It was also in the interests of the Soviet Union to redirect the focus of the human rights problems from itself, to another part of the world, towards the discussions where the West would be criticized more. A critical piece was written in the 1880s, accusing the WCC of being "actively engaged in a global network of militant, left-wing groups that gave aid and comfort to the communist cause and ran counter to the legitimate objectives of the United States and the West", the author further stated that "the WCC was able to provide left-wing totalitarian movements with a cloak of moral sanction and legitimacy".[90] Soviet religious dissidents also appealed to the WCC, demanding their attention, "rather pointedly asking why the WCC was capable of expressing concern about every form of injustice in the world except persecution of believers".[91]

As was already stated, the Soviet authorities saw the WCC as one way of expanding their influence internationally. However, there was suspicion towards the organization from the side of the Soviet Union as well. J. A. Helby analyzed two books by Soviet ideologists, N.S. Gordienko and Y.V Kryanev argue that these authors saw the WCC as a tool in the hands of the Western political groups and the membership – an opportunity to counter Western

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[88] Bastiaan Bouwman, "Between Dialogue and Denunciation: The World Council of Churches, Religious Freedom, and Human Rights during the Cold War," *Contemporary European History* 31, no. 1 (2022): 29.
[89] Hans Hebly, "Liberty or Liberation: The Dilemma of the WCC," *Religion in Communist Lands* 13, no. 2 (June 1985): 137, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637498508431185. The author here puts more responsibility on the Western Churches rather than just on the WCC.
[90] Lefever, Ernest W. "Backward, Christian Soldiers! The Politics of the World Council of Churches." *The National Interest*, no. 14 (1988): 72–82. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027129, 80-81
[91] Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and the Successor States, 1953-1993*, 84.

influence.[92] Gordienko wrote in 1972 that membership in the WCC for the Soviet churches was an opportunity to establish and strengthen their positions internationally and spread the "true information" about the conditions of the religion in the socialist society – "in order to bring light to the bourgeois false propaganda about the persecution of churches under socialism".[93] These views did not stay as merely written views, but were realized – a 1969 report prepared by the head of the Council of the Religious Affairs, clearly stated that "the church channels were used to uncover the enemy propaganda, and to raise awareness about the state policies towards religion and churches".[94] This report touches upon several important topics. It speaks about the challenges of the Cold War and the difficulties faced because of the Prague Spring; it accused the "Imperialists" of using religious organizations for anti-Soviet, antisocialist aims. Kuroedov (the head of CRA) noted that the "imperialists were trying to push the WCC towards the right".[95]

The aim of the WCC to remain above the divide of the Cold War resulted in upsetting both sides. While it provided the platform for the churches from the Communist states, it did not succeed in advocating for their rights inside their countries. There is a short letter kept in the WCC archives in 1978, titled "On the status of the church in the USSR and Inadvisability for the West to Interfere in the Affairs of Religion in that Country" that formulated the following claims: 1. the involvement of the West in the affairs of church-state relations inside the USSR might result in "negative reaction of the leaders of the church in the Soviet Union", causing the churches to close their doors to international ties.[96] 2. That the Western writers addressing the problems of the believers in the USSR were writing under a "fallacious, often deliberately

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[92] J. A. Hebly in Ramet, *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, 111–12.
[93] Nikolai Gordienko, Sovremenni Ekumenizm: dvijhenie za edinstvo khristianskikh werkvei (Modern Ecumenism – movement for the unity of Christian Churches) (Nauka,1972) .41-45.
[94] CACH, Fond N1880, Directory N1, File N305. Pp.28-30
[95] CACH, Fond N1880, Directory N1, File N305. Pp,28-30; This document also speaks about sending the representatives and establishing Soviet connections with the international Muslim and Buddhist organizations. use of these organizations by the Soviet state is, unfortunately, outside the scope of this research.
[96] WCC Archives, 42.3.125, Folder 4, On the status of the church in the USSR and Inadvisability for the West to Interfere in the Affairs of Religion in that Country, 1978. p.1,

distorted premise, that a conflict between the church and the Soviet state must necessarily exist".[97] 3. While "confrontation of the church and authorities" was undisguised after the Revolution, now the "religious circles understand that to be at peace with the state was more to their advantage".[98] 4. Religion in the Soviet Union is provided with a "fairly broad legal basis for its activities".[99] The paper has no author indicated, but the points addressed in it coincide with the messages that the Soviet Union tried to convey to the West via the churches to ensure that there was no doubt in freedom of religion in the socialist society. No published versions of this paper were found, but if this document is to be seen as an explanation of why the WCC directed less attention to the religious issues in the Soviet Union, one can argue, that the Soviet propaganda about the freedom of religion.

1.2.3 Georgian patriarch as the Co-president of the WCC

An example of mastering cooperation with the state[100] while expanding its international presence and starting the period of revival in the GOC was the Patriarch Ilia II. He is one of the most prominent and controversial figures in modern Georgian history.

He became a patriarch in 1977 and remains one to this day, holding immense influence. Ilia (Shilashvili) was born in 1933 in Vladikavkaz. Upon graduation from the Moscow Theological Academy in 1960, he came to Georgia.[101] In 1963 he was appointed as the head of the "theological courses" that were opened by patriarch Ephrem II.[102] After the death of his predecessor, Patriarch David V, he was elected to the position. It is worth noting here that

[97] Ibid, p.1
[98] Ibid. p.3
[99] Ibid.
[100] He was allegedly in close contact with the KGB. In Felix Corley's archival reader (p.353-360) there are KGB cards, from the Archives of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, that he kept in Grozno before he died. Among these cards there is one belonging to Irakli Georgevich Shilashvili – the patrairch, with code name IVERIELI. The originals of these cards are not possible to find, a photocopy exists but there is no way of telling if it is authentic. Corley writes, that the cards are considered authentic, but it is impossible to prove it completely.
[101] "The Biography of the most holy Patriarch Ilia II", first published in Sapatriarkos Utskebani, Saiubileo Gamotse,a N52 (205), 2002. Last Accessed 3 Jun 2023. https://www.orthodoxy.ge/patriarqi/patriarqi_bio.htm
[102] Ibid.

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Ephrem II saw Ilia as his successor; however, upon his death, the elections were conducted in a suspicious manner, as a result of which David V became the patriarch. The Keston Archives[103] keeps a few articles about the de\terioration of the GOC under David V, the corruption that was reported by Georgian dissidents, and the report by the assistant procurator in Tbilisi.[104]

Ilia II's ordination as a patriarch is seen as a period of revival. It is worth mentioning that the members of different Christian confessions were present at his enthronement.[105] The WCC congratulated the newly elected Patriarch, to which he responded with a heartfelt letter of gratitude, stating:

> Our church will continue to contribute with all responsibility towards the rapprochement of the different Christian churches and denominations within the framework of the WCC and inter-church relations. The problem of strengthening peace will be our constant preoccupation to work together with all people of goodwill towards. . . peace on earth.[106]

Due to the initiatives of the new Patriarch, all 15 eparchies started to function, new clergy was ordained, new churches were built, and lives in the monasteries were renewed.[107] Ilia initiated a new Bible translation into modern Georgian, an ecumenical project: the group working on the translation included Jewish, Orthodox, and Baptist scholars.[108] Soon after his enthronement, he was chosen as a co-president of the WCC. After the death of the Patriarch Nikodim of ROC,

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[103] "The Keston Institute, founded in 1969 as the Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism, became the "voice of the voiceless" by reporting regularly on the situation and status of persecuted believers in communist countries, including the USSR. The Institute collected primary source materials and documentation in order to ensure accuracy in its reports" https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=978005

[104] Peters, the Georgian Orthodox Church, 300. See more:
Peter Reddaway, "The Georgian Orthodox Church : Corruption and Renewal," *Religion in Communist Lands* 3.4-5 (1975): 14-23; "Georgian Writes to Professor Lang," *Religion in Communist Lands* 4.1 (1976): 49-50.;

[105] Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*, 208.

[106] WCC Archives, 42.4.026, Folder 4 Georgia. Translation of the letter from Patriarch Ilia II

[107] Sergo Vardosanidze, "From Oppression to Rebirth" in *Witness through Troubled Times*, 238.;
World Council of Churches. 1979. Thirty-First Meeting of the Central Committee. Internet Archive. (Accessed June 20, 2022) https://archive.org/details/thirtyfirstmeeti00unse/page/102/mode/2up?q=Ilia, 102

[108] Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*, 209.

the position was offered to Ilia II because he was from the same "area of Christianity".[109] Ilia II was one Orthodox Christian of the 6 co-presidents (other presidents were from a Presbyterian Church in Ghana, Methodist Church in Argentina, Indonesian Christian Church, Church of Sweden, and Episcopal Church in USA).[110] His new position was celebrated by the GOC, Jvari Vazisa – the official GOC publication detailed his travels as a new co-president, celebrating the international recognition that this would bring the church.[111] Ilia II actively advocated for disarmament, for peace, talked about the place of religion in Georgia and the connectedness of the church and the nation, and extended the church's connections as seen in the paper reporting on his first tour as a co-president.[112] The Patriarch also used the connections with the WCC to provide aid for the GOC. For instance, as the archival letters of the WCC note, the GOC seminary was provided with volumes of the writings of the Church Fathers.[113] Under the leadership of Ilia II, the GOC also became a member of the Conference of European Churches.[114] The patriarch wrote to the CEC that the GOC had been monitoring the organization's work, that the church agreed with "all progressive aims" of the CEC and wanted GOC to become a member[115] - furthering the international presence of the GOC.

The GOC followed the Soviet guidelines on what messages were to be supported and expressed internationally. Patriarch Ilia II publicly supported the Soviet regime and was loyal to it on local and international levels. However, for instance, along with representatives of other churches from Communist countries, Ilia II signed a statement of the WCC condemning the

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[109] Vardosanidze in Abashidze and Grdzelidze, *Witness through Troubled Times*, 237.
[110] David Gill, *Gathered for Life: Official Report VI Assembly [of The]* (Geneva: World council of churches, 1983), 279.
[111] Jvari Vazisa, 1979, N2
[112] Ibid.
[113] WCC Archives, 42.4.027. F1. Library Development, April 23, 1980.
[114] "The Conference of European Churches emerged as a peacebuilding effort in 1959, building bridges between the East and the West during the Cold War. This original mission carries us forward today as we continue to work for a humane, social and sustainable Europe at peace with itself and its neighbours." https://ceceurope.org/who-we-are/introduction
[115] WCC Archives, File 218/3.2.2.1.4/3, Letter to the Presidium of the Conference of European Churches. November 20, 1979

invasion of Afghanistan.[116] The membership of the WCC was a complex process of Soviet-controlled church activity, with attempts by the churches to use the international connections for their own benefit.

1.3 Revival of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the National Liberation Movement

The GOC in the Soviet Union went through the phases of protest, resistance, and cooperation. The relationship with the state defined its place in the Georgian dissident movement. Religion was an important issue for the Georgian dissidents, religious oppression - was one of the key focuses. The dissidents saw the church's cooperation with the state as problematic.[117]

The GOC was forced under Soviet jurisdiction after the Red Army invaded the Democratic Republic of Georgia in 1921. It declared autocephaly in 1917, after more than a century under the authority of the Russian Holy Synod, which established an exarchate in Georgia.[118] After the GOC declared autocephaly, it started actively seeking international recognition of the church's independence. Soviet takeover halted these endeavors, continuing the isolation of the GOC for several decades. The idea of the church-state separation was

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[116] Jones, "Soviet Religious Policy and the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church," 307.
[117] Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the future first president saw the ideal state as one where church was actively involved in its life. However, or maybe because of it, he had a complicated relationship with the GOC and the patriarch. There is a letter, where Ilia II demanded action from the Soviet authorities against Gamsakhurdia, because of his constant protest regarding the conditions in the church – the letter has been circulated by opposition party Girchi https://liberali.ge/news/view/44179/girchi-zviad-gamsakhurdiastan-dakavshirebit-sapatriarqos-tserilit-mimartavs in the letter, the patriarch allegedly wrote that "Gamsakhurdia was acting in a way that was unfit for a Soviet citizen – was criticizing clergy and the church". There are letters in the archive titled "letters to Ilia II by Kostava and Gamsakhurdia" (both dissidents), however I was denied access to them, because the files are under restoration. For more than a year now.
[118] Since the annexation of the Georgian kingdoms by the Russian Empire, the GOC was ruled by the Russian exarchs who were sent to Georgia. The one and only Georgian exarch was the first one – Varlam (Eristavi), 1811-1817.

already being implemented; however, the Social-Democratic leadership of the first republic had no aim of completely eliminating religion from the state but simply aspired to establish a secular state with equal footing for all religious communities (an aim that later was analyzed by the GOC as oppressive measures against it). Once the Democratic Republic of Georgia became the Georgian SSR, the church found itself in a completely different context.

Because of the oppression of the Orthodox Church and persecution of the clergy, anti-Soviet attitudes were prevalent in the GOC in the first decade of Soviet rule. Some members of the clergy also participated in the 1924 August Uprising, which was brutally suppressed by the Soviet army, even though the insurgents had taken control of some towns in west Georgia.[119] Some scholars argue that religious issues were one of the key reasons for the revolt.[120]

When speaking about the opposition to the Soviet takeover and the church's involvement in the issues of Georgian independence at the time, Patriarch Ambrosi (Khelaia) is one of the key figures to address. He was elected Patriarch in 1921, only months after the Soviet occupation. In his sermon on the day when he was ordained as a patriarch, Ambrosi spoke about the oppression of the church and the connection between the church and the nation. He underlined the strong ties between the Georgian people and the church, as well as pointed out the atrocities done against the church in the present.[121] The Patriarch had a strong anti-Soviet position. He addressed the Inter-Allied Conference in Genoa[122], expressing his concerns about the conditions of the believers, of the Georgian language, and of the violation of the right of self-determination of the Georgian nation. "The occupiers want to assure everyone inside and

[119] See: Giorgi Chkadua, The August 1924 Uprising – Plan, Outcome, Interpretation; Access: https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/pdf/The-August-1924-Uprising:-Plan,-Outcome,-Interpretation-3198.pdf
Mikheil Kartvelishvili, Eklesiis Sakitkhi 1924 Tslis Agvistos Adjankebashi, (Question of Church in the 1924 August Uprising), (Tbilisi State University, 2011), 325
[120] See: Mikheil Kartvelishvili, 1924 wlis ajankeba eklesiis sakitkhi
[121] Ambrosi Khelaia speech in Sergo Vardosanidze, Sruliad Sakartvelos Katolikos-Patriarqi, Utsmindesi da Unetaresi Ambrosi (1921-1927), (Patriarch of All Georgia, the most holy Ambrosi), Tbilisi 2009, p.76-68
[122] Genoa Conference in 1922 was a post-World War 1 meeting, in order to "discuss the economic reconstruction of central and eastern Europe and to explore ways to improve relations between Soviet Russia and European capitalist regimes" https://www.britannica.com/event/Conference-of-Genoa

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outside that they have liberated Georgians and brought them joy, but how joyous is Georgia now, I, their spiritual father, know it well."[123] The Patriarch underlined the struggles Georgian people and the Georgian church faced under the Soviet regime and formulated two demands for the Conference: 1. To remove the "Russian occupier army" from within the Georgian borders and 2. The Georgian nation be given the right to "lead its own life, how it wants to," according to the "psyche, spirit, traditions and national culture".[124] The appeal was followed by the campaign against the church in the Soviet press, and later, in 1923, Patriarch Ambrosi and several members of the church council were arrested.[125] The show trials were held in the theater in Tbilisi.[126] The Communist published the court proceedings with the following introduction:

> Merchants of Jesus's name, the disciples of slavery and darkness, have stood against the will of Georgian workers of the peasant-worker government. Servants of the King, the rich, and the landowners are not abiding by the government's rules armed with the trust of the Georgian peasants and workers and have declared war against it inside and abroad.[127]

After Ambrosi, the Soviet authorities got involved in the election of the new Patriarch, who led the clergy advocating for reform and modernizing the church – a movement similar to one in Russia (Obnovlentsy - Renovationists).[128] Because the renovationist and reformist movement was associated with the Communist government, "ideas of reform and modernization were inseparably associated with the collaborationist church".[129] Kristepore, who was leading the reformist movement inside the Georgian church, became the Patriarch after Amrbosi, with the support of the Soviet authorities. The new Patriarch was ready to

[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Peters, Georgian Orthodox Church, 293.
[126] Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*, 102.
[127] Communist, 1924, March 12 N59 in Tsminda Agmsarebeli Ambrosi (Khelaia) Komunisturi Martlmsajulebis tsinashe, (Holy Ambrosi Khelaia before the Communist judges) ed. Jemal Gamakharia, Georgian National Library, 2011. .50-58
[128] Vardosanidze, Restoration of Autocephaly, 211.; T'at'ia Kekelia et al., *Mart'lmadidebeli Eklesiis Roli K'art'uli Nac'ionaluri Identobis Č'amoqalibebaši (XX Saukunis Bolo-XXI Saukunis Dasacqisi)* (T'bilisi: Ilias saxelmcip'o universiteti, 2013), 28.
[129] Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*, 102.

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cooperate with the Soviet regime; he denounced his predecessor's anti-Soviet activities and the Genoa appeal.[130] In 1932, Kalistrate Tsintsadze became the patriarch. He was an interesting choice, keeping in mind that he was one of the clergies that were arrested along with Patriarch Ambrosi. Adopting a collaboration path did not stop the attacks on the church, clergy, and congregation. 1929-1939 "saw the most savage persecution of religion in the entire Soviet period".[131]

Since the Second World War, the policy towards religion was no longer aimed at elimination but more at control, infiltration, Atheist propaganda, and using religious institutions for state interests. After Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign and increased international presence of churches, the Soviet Religious policy became the policy of "divide and rule" under Leonid Brezhnev, more resembling Stalin's approach.[132] Brezhnev's era was also marked by increased international pressure and a call for the protection of human rights. This factor did not completely alter the course of the policies inside the Soviet Union, but it affected the Soviet citizens, resulting in growing hopes and activities.[133] This was also the time when the connection between religion and nationalism grew in different parts of the Soviet Union – in Lithuania, Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia, among others.[134] Secular and religious dissent was converging more and more.[135] The members of the dissident movement in the Soviet Union criticized the increased infiltration and control of the church by the Soviet state.

The emergence of the dissident movement focused on religious issues is connected to the 1960s as a protest against Khrushchev's campaigns.[136] The response from the state was different from the Orthodox and Protestant dissent – the former was tolerated, while the latter

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[130] Peters, the Georgian Orthodox Church, 193.; Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*, 102.
[131] Walters, Survey of Soviet Religious Policy, 13.
[132] Walters, 23.
[133] Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and the Successor States, 1953-1993*, 100.
[134] Anderson, "Soviet Religious Policy under Brezhnev and After," 26.
[135] Anderson, 26.
[136] Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and the Successor States, 1953-1993*, 82.

was harshly repressed.[137] The dissident movement in Georgia covered the issues of the church and the nation.

From the 1970s, the extensive oppression of religion was gone, but the state infiltration of religious institutions was at high levels. It was also when the dissident movement was shaping into the national liberation movement. According to an interesting observation by Giga Zedania, the National Movement started integrating religion into their idea of ethnic nationalism, which means that Orthodox Christianity was the key part of this, but the GOC as an institution only became its embodiment after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[138] Reisner and Jawad summarize this period as the church being torn between two positions – on the one hand, it was supported by the state to fill the ideological vacuum with Orthodox nationalism and weaken the dissident movement; on the other, it was under the scrutiny of the dissidents because of its association with the Soviet regime.[139]

The GOC and the dissident movement had a complicated relationship. Since the anti-religious campaigns of Khrushchev, believers linked with the nationalist and civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s – many of them becoming the leaders of those movements.[140] In Georgia, it was Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Valentina Pailodze, among others, who connected the two and became key members of the dissident movement.[141]

April 9, 1989, marks a watershed moment in the history of Soviet Georgia – it is remembered as the day of the beginning of independence. Stephen Jones compares this to

[137] Anderson, 83.
[138] Zedania, Giga. "The rise of religious nationalism in Georgia." *Identity Studies in the Caucasus and the Black Sea Region* 3 (2011). 124.
[139] Jawad, Pamela, Oliver Reisner, and Nikoloz Ghonghadze. Translated from: Pamela Jawad, Oliver Reisner, Die Nationalisierung der Religion in der Orthodoxen Apostolischen Kirche Georgiens– Begünstigung oder Hindernis im Demokratisierungsprozess?, Religiöse Akteure in Demokratisierungsprozessen Konstruktiv, destruktiv und obstruktiv, Julia Leininger (Hrsg.), Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE ...." *JOURNAL" ORBELIANI"* 3, no. 1 (2021)., 39.
[140] Jones, "Soviet Religious Policy and the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church," 299.
[141] Jones, 299.

Bloody Monday in Hungary in 1956.[142] It started with Abkhazians demanding the status of a union republic, which meant separation from Georgia, which led to clashes between Abkhazians and Georgians; on April 4th Georgian students started demonstrations in Tbilisi, which was joined by Zviad Gamsakhurdia.[143] The demonstration "transformed into a demand for Georgian independence, the abolition of Abkhazian autonomy, and the introduction of NATO troops into Georgia".[144] On April 9, the Armoured Personnel Carriers Of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs appeared on Rustaveli, violently dispersing the demonstrators – 19 people died, most of them women, and 427 were injured.[145] This event proved that Gorbachev's Perestroika was not as free of violence as it promised; the event completely delegitimized Soviet power in Georgia. This event became one of the critical events in the history of Georgian statehood and Georgian nationhood.

Interestingly, on the morning of April 9, right before the Soviet tanks rolled in, Patriarch Ilia II addressed the crowd, which was holding pictures of Ilia Chavchavadze[146] (the founding father of the Georgian nation), of St. George (the patron saint of Georgia), and the posters demanding independence. He said, "I have come here to bless you so that this meeting ends; I have come here so that we all go together to the church and thank God for saving us. I was just told that a threat is real. It might be that only a few minutes remain before this happens. So, my children, I give you a blessing to go to the Qashueti church together". His address was met with a noise of disapproval. The Patriarch left, and the tanks entered Rustaveli Avenue.[147] On April

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[142] Stephen Francis Jones, *Georgia: A Political History since Independence* (London ; New York : New York: I.B.Tauris ; Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 83.
[143] Jones, 84.
[144] Jones, 84.
[145] Jones, 83.
[146] Ilia Chavchavadze is a fascinating figure in Georgian history. He was at the forefront of the group that lead the revival of the national consciousness in the late 19th century. How different periods in Georgian history changed the meaning of his figure is even more interesting. He advocated for the civic nationalism. In the 1980s the idea of nationalism acquired the religious and ethnic undertones. Ilia Chavchavadze was recognized as the Saint Ilia the Righteous by the Orthodox Church, and the Society of the Saint Ilia the Righteous played the important role in Georgian history in late Soviet and early independence period. Georgian National Archives keeps the decision of the Holy Synod to make him a saint. CACH N1880, Directory 1, File N561, p.1
[147] Jones, *Georgia*, 82.

11, Shevardnadze came to Georgia with a message from the Soviet authorities that declared that they had nothing to do with crushing the demonstrators, but it was the local authorities that ordered the tanks in.[148] Soon after, in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, and from the ruins emerged independent states with new challenges facing them on all fronts.

Concluding Remarks

The Soviet religious policy is a complex thread to navigate. Different party leaders brought different approaches based on historical circumstances. The changing state attitudes drove the churches in different directions. Stalin's rapprochement started a phase of cooperation between the church and state. Khrushchev's anti-religious propaganda was actively ongoing when the churches were allowed to participate in the international ecumenical movement in the context of the Cold War. The GOC as a member, brought another vote to the Soviet side inside the WCC. However, the church also benefited from the membership – it ended the isolation that lasted since the Russian Empire annexed the Georgian kingdoms and abolished the autocephaly of the church and allowed access to resources to translate the Bible, provide books for the seminary, and so on.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, national liberation movements emerged, uniting the issues of the nation, religion, and ethnicity. The figures that played a prominent role in this movement became the ones governing the fate of the independent state of Georgia in the 1990s.

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[148] Tornike Tchumburidze, "Ori Tragedia, Ori Otsneba – 9 Aprilis Dargveva Dasavlur Presashi," (Two Tragedies, Two Dreams – Disruption of the April 9 Demonstrations), Indigo. Published: 16 April 2020. https://indigo.com.ge/articles/ori-tragedia-ori-ocneba

PART 2: THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA: LEAVING THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

The first part of the thesis examined the Soviet past of the GOC, the influences of the Soviet policies on it, and the context of the increased anti-religious campaign, in which the church joined the WCC, along with the other churches from the Soviet Union. The international context, changing Soviet religious policies, and the church's need to establish connections internationally after a long period of isolation contributed to the fact that the GOC became a member of the WCC in 1962. The ties with the WCC grew when the Patriarch was chosen as a co-president of the organization. The latter coincided with the dissident movement in the Soviet Union. In Georgia, the dissident movement that turned into the national liberation movement adopted the idea of ethnoreligious nationalism, which became the driving ideology once Georgia became independent in 1991. In the first section of this chapter, I will look at the church-state relations in Georgia in the 1990s and discuss the role the GOC played in the first decade of independence. This section will provide the context in which the GOC decided to withdraw from the international ecumenical movement. In the second section, I will investigate why the GOC decided to leave the WCC – I will observe the growing dissatisfaction with the WCC inside the GOC and in the Eastern Orthodox sphere in the 1990s and provide possible explanations of why the decision was made. Furthermore, I will look at the consequences of this decision regarding the inter-confessional relations inside the country.

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2.1. Church and State in the 1990s Georgia

Overall, one of the key stories of the 1990s is how the GOC returned to and dominated the public sphere in Georgia in the 1990s (arguably, since the 1990s) after the oppression under the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union collapsed, and the emerging independent states were tasked

to deal with the ruins. At the time of economic, social, and political turmoil, religion created an "illusion of consistency" and a tool for legitimation for those who introduced into the debate new ideas instead of the "rapidly disappearing Marxist discourse".[149] It became a source of political legitimation and mobilization since it (re)entered the public sphere after the 1980s (which also influenced the differentiation between private religiosity and public religion).[150] Indeed, this is in no sense a story unique to Georgia: many post-Soviet/post-Communist states, especially those with a dominant Orthodox Church, went down a similar path of the close association of religion and nation with each other, increased religious influence on politics and society, and attempts of the dominant churches to ascertain the dominant position in their respective states. The early 1990s was also marked by the ethnonationalism that some have called "ethnodoxy".[151] Along with the Georgian language, the church was one of a few continuous things that connected Georgia to its past before the Soviet Union and the past before the rule of the Russian Empire, providing an argument for the continuous exitance of Georgia as a state and nation. A Tandem of ethnic and religious nationalisms, along with the struggles of building a democratic state, was the political and religious context in which the GOC decided to leave the international ecumenical movement.

The GOC became influential in the context of the "power vacuum and crisis of legitimacy" as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union.[152] The church bred the notion that if the Georgian state was to succeed, it had to be done as a Christian state, with a notion of "Georgian Christianity."[153] However, this statement does not represent the whole picture – while the church actively promoted and underlined the idea, it was also the political figures that

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[149] Alexander Agadjanian, "Revising Pandora's Gifts: Religious and National Identity in the Post-Soviet Societal Fabric," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 3 (May 2001): 477, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130120045898.
[150] Agadjanian, 477.
[151] Karpov et al in Nutsa Batiashvili, "Between Europeanisation and the Russian-Georgian Brotherhood", in Tobias Köllner, ed., *Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Eastern Europe: On Multiple Secularisms and Entanglements*, First [edition], Routledge Religion, Society, and Government in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet States 7 (New York: Routledge, 2019), 157.
[152] Batiashvili, Between Europeanization and the Russian-Georgian Brotherhood, 166
[153] Ibid.

actively participated in connecting the future of the state with the church. Not unlike in the Soviet Union, in the early years of the independence of Georgia, political culture was defined by personalities, personal connections, influences, etc. This is why, in this chapter, the personalities play a critical role – the first president, the second president, and the patriarch. Indeed, popular support was necessary as well. People supported personalities rather than state institutions, political ideas, or programs.

There was a notable rise in religious adherence in the 1990s, and Orthodox Christianity became a vital part of being Georgian in the process of forming the Georgian nation-state.[154] Research on religion in post-communist countries provides statistics that show how religious adherence numbers grew over time from the 1970s to the 1990s up to 2005.[155] Numbers in Georgia show that religious adherence grew among the Orthodox from 34.5% in the 1970s to 54.0% in the 1990s and up to 81% by 2005.[156] The statistics do not help look at personal belief or religiosity in general, but evidently an increasing number of Georgian citizens identified themselves as Orthodox Christians. Popular support gave the church a source of influence and increased the role and power of the GOC in Georgian society and politics. The church also took on an influential role in the process of identity formation: national identity came to include being Orthodox as its integral part.[157] It has to be outlined here that it was not merely the church pushing for its crucial role in the processes of the 1990s, but the politicians themselves strongly associated themselves with the church, increasing its influence in search of legitimization granted by it. A Georgian church historian, Sergo Vardosanidze, sees the role of the GOC in the 1990s as that of a reconciler of the warring political opponents, helping to find peaceful

[154] Ibid. 70

[155] A. Sarkissian, "Religious Reestablishment in Post-Communist Polities," *Journal of Church and State* 51, no. 3 (June 1, 2009): 488, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csp096.

[156] Sarkissian, 488.

[157] Tatia Kekelia, "Building Georgian National Identity." (in *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (2015): 120-134) p120

resolutions to the many conflicts that occurred at the time.[158] Difference of opinion exists on this matter. Still, it is evident that during the instability in Georgia after gaining independence in 1991, when the matters of unity, legitimacy, and power distribution were under negotiation, "the qualities of the majority religions were highly relevant," and so was that of the GOC.[159]

In this part of the thesis, I will focus on two presidents – Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991-1992) and Eduard Shevardnadze (1995-2003), and their relationship with the church. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the former dissident, became the first president of Georgia. He was soon removed from his position by force. Eduard Shevardnadze was a former Soviet official who managed to stay in power before the Rose Revolution of 2003 ended his reign. Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze both came to their positions as pro-Western figures with promises of democracy. After failing to build a functional state, both were removed from the presidency, the former by violence and the latter by revolution.[160] The persona of Gamsakhurdia "generated popular support that bordered on a cult of mass adulation".[161] Gamsakhurdia's supporters – Zviadists almost had religious characteristics to them, but this is not a focus of this research. The point is that he was an immensely influential figure, and how he defined the relationship between the state and the church, more precisely between the Georgian state and the Georgian church, has a long-lasting effect. Shevardnadze came to head the country during the crisis and aimed to bring calm to the chaos that preceded him. He saw the GOC as a useful instrument to legitimize his politics; therefore, he officially gave the church the legal status of "the first among equals," giving it all the benefits of a state religion without establishing it as one.

In the 1990s, during a politically unstable time marked by insecurity, social and economic hardships, and changing leaderships, the GOC remained one constant, unshifting

[158] Vardosanidze, From Repression to Rebirth, 243–46.
[159] Ansgar Jodicke, "General Trends in the Interaction of Religion and Politics as applied in the South Caucasus"(in *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus pp. 23-37. Routledge, 2014.)* p.28
[160] Stephen F Jones, "The Rose Revolution: A Revolution without Revolutionaries?," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19, no. 1 (March 2006): 39, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570500501754.
[161] Jones, 39.

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institution that served as legitimizing actor for the politicians. In this sub-chapter, I will first look at Gamsakhurdia's presidency and views on religion and state as a driving force in building Georgian ethnoreligious nationalism. Then, I will analyze Shevardnadze's approach to the church, which ended with the signing of the Concordat between the GOC and the Georgian Government in 2002.

2.1.1 The First President and the Ethno-Religious Nationalism

Zviad Gamsakhurdia became president in 1991, after the elections, with a participation rate of 83,59%, with 86,52% supporting his candidacy.[162] Gamsakhurdia, as some evaluate it, was a populist. His policies were a "radical amalgam of nationalism, populism, religiosity, and nationalism".[163] Several factors played a part in Gamsakhurdia's rule: the fact that he was a product of the very imperial system he was fighting against, how politics at the time were defined more by personal connections than by institutions; another critical issue was that Gamsakhurdia was a head of a sovereign state until the collapse of the Soviet Union. He had to navigate complex dynamics between empire and state, a state that was politically and ethnically fragmented while facing economic struggles.[164]

Gamsakhurdia was a dissident, and active supporter of human rights in the 1960s and 1970s, imprisoned and kept under active KGB surveillance.[165] Jones, analyzing Gamsakhurdia's early writings, concludes that the focus of Gamsakhurdia was not on human rights as such but on the rights of Georgians, focusing on the threat of Russification, a decline of birth rate and the danger it posed for the Georgian nation, problems in Georgian church, and

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[162] Sakartvelos Sakhelmtsipo Khelmtzgvanelebi Vol.2, – Opitsialuri Dokumentebi, Mimartvebi da Interviuebi. Zviad Gamsakhurdia Sakartvelos Respublikis Prezidenti. (Leaders of Georgian State – official documents, memos, intervies. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, President of the Republic of Georgia). Tbilisi: Irida, 2013, p.10
[163] Jones, *Georgia*, 143.
[164] Jones, 142–43.
[165] Jones, 146.

struggles of Georgian communities abroad.[166] This would explain the confusion between his advocating for human rights in the late Soviet period and his role in fueling ethnic-based animosities in the early 1990s. The dissident movement in the 1970s and 1980s played a significant role in forming the Georgian national liberation movement, where the future first president also played a key role.

Soviet past, in general, and the Soviet notion of a nation had a massive impact on Georgian nationalism. The late 19th-century notion of a Georgian nation was primarily based on civic principles rather than ethnic or religious. Texts written by the intelligentsia at the forefront of the revival of the national consciousness – the Tergdaleulebi – were devoid of ethnic or religious formulations of a nation.[167] Soviet approach to the question of a nation was quite paradoxical – on the one hand, nations were to disappear. Nationality constituted a false consciousness while organizing nations along with ethnic lines, placing them in a hierarchy of titular and non-titular ones.[168] "ethnic nation was treated as organic given, as the most natural of human associations".[169] For the Georgian national liberation movement, nationalism, defined by ethnic and religious terms, was "the only genuine, anti-communist force", that would advocate for the rights of Georgians.[170] At the time, nationalism was formulated as ethnocentric and remedial; "remedial because it wanted to undo the injustice inflicted by the Soviet regime, and ethnocentric because it presented Georgians as the primary victims of the injustice."[171] Soviet Union collapsed, but the Soviet-influenced framing of a nation stayed, infused with religion. Georgian nationalism bloomed under Gamsakhurdia, a nationalism that removed the

[166] Jones, 146.
[167] See: Zedania, Giga. "The rise of religious nationalism in Georgia." *Identity Studies in the Caucasus and the Black Sea Region* 3 (2011), Suny, R.G., 1994. *The making of the Georgian nation*. Indiana University Press; Manning, Paul. *Strangers in a Strange Land: Occidentalist Publics and Orientalist Geographies in Nineteenth-Century Georgian Imaginaries*. Academic Studies Press, 2012.
[168] Natalie Sabanadze in Stephen Francis Jones, ed., *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012: The First Georgian Republic and Its Successors*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series (New York: Routledge, 2014), 120.
[169] Sabanadze in Jones, 121.
[170] Natalia Sabanadze in Jones, 126.
[171] Sabanadze, 127.

difference between being Georgian Orthodox and being Georgian; the president spoke about the "spiritual mission" of the Georgian nation, describing the origins of Georgian civilization in messianic terms.[172] In 1990, he gave a lecture in Tbilisi with this title. First, he refuted the idea that the Georgian nation was created in the 19th century, but he connected Georgian people to the different peoples that lived in the area of the Caucasus and the Black Sea thousands of years ago.[173] In his lecture, he spoke about the importance of Christianity for Georgia and the importance of Georgia for Christianity.[174] Gamsakhurdia explained that as Lazarus was raised from the dead, the Georgian nation would rise in the "same conditions as it was before the third millennium"[175]. He endowed Georgia with a mission of uniting "Western and oriental cultures". He grounded the exceptionality of the Georgian nation in the tradition of allotment to the Mother of God and St. George.[176] The lecture endowed the Georgian nation with a special mission and established a primordial conception of the Georgian nation.

In his political program, Gamsakhurdia spoke extensively about the cooperation between the state and religion. Gamsakhurdia claimed that it was "impossible for the civilized society to exist without the unity of religious and lay life, the former being regulated by the church, the latter – by state. "[177] He associated characteristics of the Georgian state with Christianity, blamed Soviet invasion for disrupting the unity of the two.[178] "Georgian national movement is a religious-national movement," it was declared in the program.[179] Gamsakhurdia

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[172] Jones, *Georgia*, 155.
[173] Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Spiritual Mission of Georgia. Full text: https://www.allgeo.org/index.php/en/865-zviad-gamsakhurdia-the-spiritual-mission-of-georgia
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid.
[176] According to the Georgian Chronicles, Mother of God was supposed to come and preach Christianity in Georgia, but she sent apostles Andrew and Simon in her stead.
[177] Political Program of Gamsakhurdia, in the Leaders of Georgian States vol.2, 71
[178] Ibid. p.72
[179] Ibid.

promised to return the unity of church and state and allow the church active participation in the nation's life.[180]

In his inaugural address in 1991, he once again outlined his understanding of church-state relations, explained how the union between the church and the state has been traditional, and how the two have helped each other carry out their respective missions: church protecting the state and state supporting the church's apostolic mission.[181] The president also wanted the church to participate in education (though he did not have time to execute this vision).[182] From all these, one would expect a peaceful, cooperative coexistence of the GOC and the Georgian state, but the situation was more complicated – the church as an institution did not remain supportive of the president. [183]

While at first glance, the relationship between the GOC and the Georgian state seemed idyllic since 1989, it was, in fact, not so.[184] During the process of the collapse of the Soviet Union, while the national movement was being formed as, the elite at the forefront of the said movement drew on religion to fuel their ideology, criticizing anti-religious policies of the past, praising the freedoms allowed to religion in the present, in the meantime "sacralizing the figure of Gamsakhurdia".[185] GOC was not actively involved in this process but was indeed actively using growing nationalism to its own benefit – defining it in ethnic terms.[186] The GOC at first was not an ally to the national movement during the Perestroika. "On the one hand, the church hierarchs with the leadership of Ilia II retained the position of the supporters of the state and fought the attempts of the national movement to influence it".[187] The national movement, however, became increasingly interested in religion. Orthodox Church united "Orthodox

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[180] Ibid, p.73
[181] Paul Crego in Leuştean, *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, 142.
[182] Paul Crego in Leuştean, 142.
[183] Kekelia et al., *Mart'lmadidebeli Eklesiis Roli K'art'uli Nac'ionaluri Identobis Č'amoqalibebaši (XX Saukunis Bolo-XXI Saukunis Dasacqisi)*, 119.
[184] Kekelia et al., 119.
[185] Kekelia et al., 119.
[186] Kekelia et al., 119.
[187] Raisner, Jawad, 40

nationalism" and "non-Orthodox nationalism", the first tolerated by the state and the second being the reason for the persecution of the dissidents.[188]

Because of Gamsakhurdia's nationalistic politics, the autonomous units of Abkhazia and South Ossetia grew increasingly wary about their fate, resulting in problems in the territorial unity of Georgia.[189] However, Gamsakhurdia was not an "irredeemable fanatic", since he promised children born in Georgia of non-citizen parents citizenship, guaranteed protections for non-Georgians; he tried to come to an agreement with Boris Yeltsin on the issue of South Ossetia and allowed Abkhazian minority in the autonomous republic to have the majority seats in the legislature.[190] Although at the same time, South Ossetian autonomy was abolished in 1990, which caused the first ethnic clashes due to which the region seceded; and relations with Abkhazia were also strained.[191]

Gamsakhurdia's end of the presidency came with civil war. Supporters of the opposition and the president fought each other in the streets of Tbilisi, and in the end, the opposition won. The now-former president was forced to flee the country. Gamsakhurdia as a political figure had longer history, that Gamsakhurdia as a president. But his work and his ideas have influenced the very idea of what Georgia is. His complicated legacy is still in need of proper analysis.

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[188] Ibid.
[189] Reisner, Jawad, p.43
[190] Jones, *Georgia*, 169.
[191] Sabanadze in Jones, *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012*, 127.

2.1.2 Former Communist Official Becomes a President: Shevardnadze and the Church

Corruption, criminalization, and further economic decline characterized Shevardnadze's time of presidency.[192] After the coup against Gamsakhurdia in 1991, the Military Council took control of the country, restoring for a short period the constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921).[193] The difference between the constitution of 1921 and that of 1995 is striking in terms of the relationship between the church and state, the difference that will be discussed in more detail shortly. Eduard Shevardnadze, upon invitation of the now-ruling opposition forces, returned to Georgia in March of 1992 to take over the control of the government,[194] effectively becoming a head of the state without democratic legitimization.[195] Shevardnadze, a former Soviet official, stayed in power until the 2003 Rose Revolution. His return was marked with promises of Westernization, stability, financial support, and international recognition; the ethnic minorities in Georgia hoped he would bring guarantees of peace.[196] Unfortunately, instead of peace, armed conflicts took place, which in turn turned into frozen conflicts. The military campaign against Abkhazia resulted in the de facto separation of Abkhazia; Russian peacekeeper troops were placed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The ceasefire agreements between Georgia and Abkhazia, and South Ossetia turned into "frozen conflicts".[197]

During this time, the church, as the "only institution that survived the crumble of the Soviet Union unharmed, thus attaining the role of the creator of the common opinions and

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[192] Malkhaz Toria, "The Soviet Occupation of Georgia in 1921 and the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008: Historical analogy as a memory project" in The Making of Modern Georgia, 319.
[193] Toria in Jones, 319.
[194] Jones, *Georgia*, 166.
[195] Reisner, Jawad, 45
[196] Natalie Sabanadze "Georgia's Ethnic Diversity: a Challenge to state-building", *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012*, 127.
[197] Sabanadze, 128.

national values," did not use its position to attempt and calm the animosities[198] but it aided giving Abkhazian conflict an ethnic character, a conflict that at first was primarily economic and geopolitical.[199] In the period of conflict, the GOC became particularly popular, preaching a national form of religion, uniting notions of Orthodox Christianity and being Georgian.[200] In the state that was crumbling, the church remained the institution that became the unifier of Georgians (however, it has to be underlined here that it was a particular understanding of the term, with strong ethnic and religious characteristics) not only in time but through time – serving as national identifier not only at present but from the "mythical past".

Just how important the support of the GOC was for the state leaders at the time is clearly illustrated by the decision of Eduard Shevardnadze, a former Soviet official, to be publicly baptized by the patriarch himself soon after he returned to Georgia. Emzar Jgerenaia argues that this baptism was an ironic act since Shevardnadze did not believe in the mystery of "turning Saul into Paul"; he was only baptized because, in the Church, he recognized the institution that would help strengthen his grip on the power.[201]

Even though Shevardnadze's inauguration did not draw any particular attention to the church, it maintained a good relationship with the church – providing it with better legal footing and, in the end, a constitutional agreement that would secure in the constitution the primacy of the GOC above all other religious institutions in the country.[202]

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[198] Reisner, Jawad, 44
[199] Ibid.
[200] Kekelia et al., *Mart'lmadidebeli Eklesiis Roli K'art'uli Nac'ionaluri Identobis Č'amoqalibebaši (XX Saukunis Bolo-XXI Saukunis Dasacqisi)*, 40.
[201] Emzar Djgerenaia, "Foreword" in the Leaders of Georgian State, Vol.7, Eduard Shevardnadze (National Library of Georgia, Tbilisi 2017) 17
[202] Crego, "The Georgian orthodoc Church" in Leuştean, *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, 143.

2.1.3 Constitutions of 1921 and 1995, and the Constitutional Agreement of 2002

As mentioned above, for a brief period 1921 constitution was brought back, but soon after, in 1995, a new constitution was adopted. The two constitutions clearly illustrate how different the first republic (1918-1921) and the second republic[203] were in terms of their ideas about church-state relations. Both constitutions were crafted after Georgia became independent from an Empire – the first was created after Georgia gained independence from the Russian Empire, and the second – from the Soviet empire. The contexts were obviously different, and these differences were also reflected in the place and role of the GOC in these constitutions.

After the February Revolution of 1917 and the resulting political changes, it was possible for the GOC to declare autocephaly after almost 100 years of domination by the Russian Synod. 1917 marked the end of Tsarist Russia and the end of the existing church-state relationship.[204] A historian of the GOC writes that the leader of the Georgian Social Democrats, Noe Jordania, encouraged the clergy of the GOC to use the opportunity created by the revolution and declare independence.[205] Soon after, in 1918, Georgia declared independence with Social-Democratic power in its leadership.[206] At the time, the national narrative did not rely strongly on religion but on the civic sense of nationalism, incorporating all the ethnic and religious minorities in the imagined community of the newly independent state. [207]

[203] Stephen Jones in his book Making of Modern Georgia offers a following periodization of the independent Georgian state: the First Republic – 1918-1921, Second Republic – Gamsakhurdia's time, Third Republic – Interregnum between Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze, Fourth Republic – 1995-2003, Fifth Republic – 2003 and after. For the purpose of this thesis, second republic will mark the whole timeframe of the second independence – since 1991 to present.
[204] Andrea Graziosi, "A Contradictory and Multifaceted Relationship: Russian Orthodoxy and 1917 Adriano Roccucci," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 36, no. 1–2 (2019): 89.
[205] Abashidze and Grdzelidze, *Witness through Troubled Times*, 193.
[206] See: Stephen Francis Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883-1917* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005).
[207] The nationalism of the First Republic was the continuation of the tradition of the Tergdaleulebi, the group at the forefront of the revival of Georgian national consciousness in the late 19th century, when Georgia ruled by the Russian Empire.

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Relationships between the state and the church were complicated at the time – while the state was built on secular principles, the leadership had a more pragmatic approach to the issues of religion because of the ethnic and religious diversity in the country. At the National Assembly of Georgia, only the Patriarch was invited from the GOC. In contrast, more members of the Georgian Jewish and Muslim communities were present, as well as Catholics. Moreover, while generally governmental funding for religious organizations was restricted, the government still financially supported the Orthodox Church in Abkhazia and the Muslim in Batumi since these religious institutions were seen as a tool to strengthen the Georgian agency in these parts of the country.

Some church historians negatively assess the steps taken by the Georgian Social-Democratic government towards the church – they blamed the government for moving in an "atheistic direction", accusing it of waging war against the church since it was afraid of the Church's influence.[208] In reality, it was hardly a war against the Orthodox Church – the Georgian state was searching to implement a form of secularism that would ensure equal footing for all religious groups while also considering the historic place and role of the GOC. This attempt is visible from the discussions around the law banning religious education from public schools.[209]

The 1921 Constitution was adopted only a short time before the occupation by the Red Army. Chapter 16 was the product of the process present after the establishment of the independent state of Georgia – it was the chapter that codified church-state separation. In the parliament, there was an ongoing debate about religion-related matters. However, there was a consensus among the political parties that, at some point, it was absolutely inevitable and necessary for the church to be separated from the state. One of the most important topics was the government spending money for religious purposes. The discussions show the government was cautious about altogether banning the funding of religious institutions. During the debates

[208] Sergo Vardosanidze, Sakartvelos Martlmadidebeli Samotsikulo Eklesia 1917-1952. Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church 1917-1952. Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 2001. 33
[209] CHAG, Fond N1836, Directory N1, File 261

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on the issue of allowing self-government bodies in the republic to finance religious institutions, one of the members of the Social Democratic party, R. Arsenidze, declared that it was vital to take into consideration special conditions of particular regions of Georgia, where forbidding the funding would cause problems, where such funding might come necessary in the future, and such law would restrict even the possibility of it.[210] Others completely opposed any kind of allowances or exceptions in the matter because this would get in the way of the complete separation of church and state.

This was the final version of the chapter incorporated into the constitution:

Chapter XVI Relations of State and Church

Article 142 - The State and the church are separate and independent from each other.

Article 143 - No confession or creed enjoys special privileges.

Article 144 - It is forbidden to make any levies from the budget of the state or local self-government bodies for the needs of any religious order.[211]

The fact that the Military Council adopted this version of the constitution for a short time does not mean that they firmly supported secular state-building principles. "The constitution was soon replaced with a Law on State Power and a temporary Regulation of the Georgian Parliament in November 1992".[212]

The 1995 Constitution carries an entirely different idea. While the constitution proclaimed freedom of belief and religion, Article 8 underlined the superiority of the GOC above other religious communities. Article 9 read the following:

"The state acknowledges the special role of the GOC in the history of Georgia, at the same time proclaims the full freedom of faith and religion, and independence[213] of the church from

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[210] CHAG, Fond N1836, 1, File 420, p.274
[211] The 1921 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia https://constcourt.ge/pdf/5f1fff7365947.pdf/1921%20Constitution%20of%20the%20Democratic%20Republic%20of%20Georgia%20-%20eng-fr.pdf
[212] Toria, Soviet occupation in 1921, 319.
[213] It is noteworthy, that the status of state church, or declaration of Orthodox Christianity as state religion, does not seem to be desired by the majority of the Orthodox clergy. In the research by Kekelia et. Al, there were interviews conducted with clergy, that voiced the arguments against it: 1. In their opinion it would turn the church in one of the governmental bodies and 2. Because of the non-orthodox values of the current government

state".[214] The Constitution "essentially enshrined the GOC as first among equals" while not mentioning any other religion or other churches having a role in the history of Georgia. Later, Article 8 read:

> Along with freedom of belief and religion, the State shall recognize the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the State. The relationship between the state of Georgia and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia shall be determined by a constitutional agreement, which shall be in full compliance with the universally recognized principles and norms of international law in the area of human rights and freedoms.[215]

This brings us to the Concordat of 2002, the end of Shevardnadze's rule and effectively the end of the "Dark 90s". Steady public support from the Church for President against his rival Gamsakhurdia translated for the GOC into "debts of gratitude" in the form of a constitutional agreement.[216] The Concordat ratified the special status of the GOC in the Georgian religious scene, which included "tax exemptions, clerical release from military service and special legal status of the Patriarch."[217] The debt was (and is still being) paid not only through the special agreement but in monetary terms as well. Article 11 of the agreement speaks about the "material and moral damage" to the Church during the time of "deprivation of statehood" from 1921-1991.[218]

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(Kekelia et al., *Mart'lmadidebeli Eklesiis Roli K'art'uli Nac'ionaluri Identobis Č'amoqalibebaši (XX Saukunis Bolo-XXI Saukunis Dasacqisi)*, 133.)

[214] The Constitution of the Republic of Georgia: 1995 edition. https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/30346?publication=0

[215] Ibid.

[216] Tornike Metreveli, *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia*, Routledge Religion, Society and Government in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet States (London: Routledge, 2022), 63.

[217] Ibid.

[218] Article 11 of the Constitutional Agreement in Metreveli, *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition*, 63.

Dimitri Gegenava, writing about the constitutional agreement, argues that even though more than a decade has passed since the signing of the Concordat, the document still has not been adequately analyzed through a

Concluding Remarks

The developments in Georgia in the 1990s described above were not unique – the patterns can be recognized in the histories of other post-Soviet countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union. More people associated themselves with Orthodox Christianity, as the numbers showed. After the collapse of the Sviet Union, the Orthodox Churches strived to dominate the religious sphere and influence the political sphere, which, combined with their intrinsically national character, combined well with growing ethnonationalism at the time. The Church, being the only institution remaining (somewhat) intact after the breakup of the Soviet Union, tying Georgian history all the way back to the 4th (or 1st in some traditions) century, served as a strong legitimizing tool. A tool that was actively used by the state leadership in Georgia. The growing ties between the state leadership and the church and the vital place of the church in the Georgian nationalistic narrative were expressed in the 1995 constitution, spelling out the special place for the GOC in the Georgian state. A place further solidified with the Constitutional Agreement of 2002 - in contrast with the First Republic, its idea of civic nationalism, and the attempt to separate church and state.

The increasing equation of being Orthodox Christian with being Georgian, in combination with the ethnic character, was the backdrop of the unfolding of the events of 1997. The departure from the World Council of Churches was one of the symptoms of the processes taking place at the time. The turn against ecumenical relations did not only affect international inter-religious, inter-confessional relations but also allowed certain fundamentalist groups to carry out violent attacks on religious minorities, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

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political, legal, and economic lens, and that the constitutional agreement causes some confusion. Dimitri Gegenava, Some issues of the constitutional agreement, (Samartlis Jurnali, N1, 2016 pp.185-195), 184.

2.2 LEAVING THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

After more than 30 years spent as a member of the WCC, the GOC decided to leave the organization in 1997. The anti-ecumenical movements became stronger in the Orthodox countries in the Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the setting of the political and social hardships.[219] Leaving the WCC was not an isolated incident unfolding in the GOC. Dissatisfaction with the organization was already growing among the Eastern Orthodox Churches. However, the GOC was the first Orthodox Church to withdraw in the 1990s.

As discussed previously, the 1990s provided a different context for the church-state relations in the sovereign state of Georgia. The collapse of the Soviet Union left Georgia with unresolved conflicts, political turmoil, and civil war, among other things. With the new beginning, the GOC found itself in a new position. After the collapse of the USSR, the church became one of the key political actors in Georgia, heavily involved in the political processes taking place.

According to the official narrative, the GOC left the WCC in order to save the church from the impending schism threatened by an anti-ecumenical group. In this chapter I will argue that this was not the only reason, and the situation was much more complex – both on national and international levels. The evidence shows, that the problems with international and local ecumenical relations were not limited to the anti-ecumenist group inside the church but were voiced by the Patriarch himself very soon after the collapse of

[219] Kalaitzidis, P., Fitzgerald, T., Hovorun, C., Pekridou, A., Asproulis, N., Werner, D., & Liagre, G. (Eds.). (2013). *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education*. 1517 Media. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddcpjz, 135

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the Soviet Union. His epistles from the early 1990s already showed negative attitudes towards the other Christian confessions in the country. On a larger scale, the member Orthodox Churches of the WCC were dissatisfied with the organization, claiming that the WCC listened more to the Protestant member churches.

Leaving an international organization happened the time when Georgian state was actively trying to establish more international connections. The WCC provided a platform for Christian unity beyond confessional divides, but also it provided a source for financial and material support for the GOC as a member and for the Georgian society. Leaving the organization was a political declaration of closing doors for such cooperation, which had real implications on Georgian society.

In this part of the thesis, by looking at the documents from the WCC archives regarding the GOC leaving the organization, and by analyzing the publications in Georgian periodicals regarding the conflict, I will look into the reasons stated by the anti-ecumenist monks and their demands; I will also analyze this conflict from the point of view of the GOC and the WCC and place the incident in larger context.

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2.2.1 A Threat of Schism in the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1997

"For love's sake, resolve to leave the World Council of Churches."[220]

In order to understand the complex picture, we first need to look into the threat of schism itself. Patriarch Ilia II wrote to the general secretary of the WCC, notifying him about the decision that the church decided to leave. The letter is an important source, because it also stated reasons behind this decision – reasons, that did not only include the problem of the anti-ecumenical group threatening schism. In this letter we read about "growing negative attitude towards the ecumenical movement" in the church, and how it caused rift not only inside the institution but in the society as well.[221] What is more interesting, Patriarch wrote another reason, that was never mentioned by the anti-ecumenical group: "since the interests of Orthodox are not often taken into consideration at the WCC, and since during the past years there are certain attempts to confer the WCC with an ecclesiological character, the GOC should leave the WCC".[222]

The letter came as a final step in a long process of conflict inside the GOC regarding its participation in the ecumenical organization. The GOC did not only leave WCC in 1997, but it also left the Conference of European Churches (CEC), organization that it joined in the 1980s.

According to this letter, there were two main reasons for the GOC to leave the WCC – first, the separation threat inside the church, and second, the WCC's neglect towards the

[220] WCC Archives, MEMO to Konrad Raiser, Document 2, p1.
[221] See Appendix 2.
[222] Ibid.

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Orthodox Churches and an "ecclesiological character" of the WCC. Notably, the Patriarch did not seem to distance himself or the church from the opinions of those who threatened to split the church. As for the neglect of the Orthodox Churches in the WCC – it was never mentioned as a reason why the ecumenical movement, or the WCC in particular, was unacceptable for the anti-ecumenists - why would it be, when the very participation of Orthodox Churches in this "heresy" as they called it, was unacceptable. From the archival documents of the WCC, it seems that the Patriarch himself also had differences of opinions with WCC, but not to the extent of threatening the departure of the GOC from the organization – but protest enough to include it in the abovementioned letter. The general secretary responded with a letter that will be discussed in more detail later. First, we need to look at the argumentation of the people who were behind the threat of schism, the monks and hieromonks of several Georgian monasteries, that opposed the participation of the GOC in the ecumenical movement and branded it heresy, threatening to sever the ties with the GOC because of it.

2.2.2 The Monks Against the Church

It appears that in the Orthodox world, in the monastic groups there have always been a certain negative attitude or at least suspicion towards the ecumenical movement.[223] In Georgia it was the brotherhoods of monks in monasteries that openly demanded to leave the membership of the WCC.

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[223] Kalaitzidis, the Orthodox handbook on Ecumenism, 135-136

from the beginning of the 1990s, increasing numbers of monks started agitating for the "purity of faith"[224] and against ecumenism.[225] On April 27, 1997, the monks from four monasteries and one eparchy (Monasteries of Betania, ShioMghvime, Davit Gareji, Zarzma, and the Shemoqmedy Eparchy) wrote an open letter to the Patriarch Ilia II, stating that because of the participation in the heresy[226], they were severing eucharistic ties with him and threatening to leave the church if the church did not leave the WCC.[227]

There are a few published materials to look at in order to understand the reasoning behind the demands for the GOC to leave the WCC. There is the abovementioned open letter[228], a letter titled "12 Questions of the Brotherhood of the Betania Monastery for The Patriarch of the Georgian Church Ilia II and the Synod", and "Anathematisms of the Ecumenic Heresy." These letters explained in detail the arguments of why the participation in the ecumenical movement is unjustified for the Orthodox Christians, proclaimed the participation in the WCC heretic, and severed the ties with the Georgian Patriarch and the patriarchate, "because of his heresy of ecumenism."[229] We most humbly beg you not to rend the robe of the Church of Christ by schism; For love's sake, resolve to leave the World Council of Churches"[230] – signed the authors.

The formulation of the questions directed toward the Patriarch and the Synod in these publications demanded definite answers, whether the addressees agreed if specific

[224] The term purity of faith is repeated several times in this discussion but is never clearly defined. Arguably, this meant eliminating outside influence on the church.
[225] Tinikashvili, Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement, 13
[226] "adherence to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma"- "Heresy." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heresy. Accessed 12 Jun. 2023.
[227] Tinikashvili p.13
[228] The open letter is available at http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/georgia.aspx and a copy is also kept at the WCC archives, as an appendix to the letter by Alexander Belopopsky to Konrad Raiser as Document 1, 2, and 3.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid.

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issues were heresy or not. For instance, one question asks whether the organization of the WCC is heretic and denying Orthodoxy; another question is about the name World Council of Churches itself, stating that "since the Orthodox Church has never seen heretic collectives as churches, acknowledging the oneness of Christ's Church."[231] Interestingly, the latter was one of the arguments, why the ROC at first refused to join the WCC, and encouraged other churches to do so as well. These arguments were not foreign, or new. However, they were not enough to stop the Orthodox churches from joining the WCC in the first place, in the 1960s. In the 1990s, situation changed. This is why, this calls for consideration of other causes. "Anathema to all heretics!" – the statement signed by monks declared.[232] The monks also pointed out that they were unwilling to discuss any of the points declaring anathema, for them, they proved self-explanatory. They urged the Holy Synod to make a hasty decision.[233]

Shota Kintsurashvili analyzes the theological footings of the anti-ecumenical group, arguing that even though prominent Orthodox theologians were supporting the ecumenical movement (Florovsky, Meiendorf, Schmeman), there were others vocally against it – one of them, St. Nikolai Velimirovic[234] was particularly popular among Georgian anti-ecumenic groups.[235] He explains, that the ideas of Velimirovic were influenced by his personal life experience, witnessing two World Wars convinced him that Europe was in this condition for neglecting God; Velimirovic viewed Europe as heretic, completely unacceptable. "The

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[231] Ibid. P.5
[232] „Ekumenuri Modzraobis Anatematizmebi" Betaniis Monastris Berta Tserili (Anathematisms, the letter from the brotherhood of Betania Monastery), Akhali Taoba, August 14, 1997. p6
[233] Ibid, 5
[234] Was declared a saint by the Serbian Church in 2003
[235] Kintsurashvili, Ecumenical movement, 30

ideas of Nikolaj were adopted by Georgian anti-ecumenical movement without considering any historical or ecclesiastic context."[236] Another influential anti-ecumenist figure was St. Justin Popovic[237], whose work was also tinged with anti-Western sentiments, criticizing belief in progress above all else.[238] The writings in Georgian publications about this issue supporting leaving the ecumenical movement are also lined with anti-Western attitudes. Another Georgian author also argues that it is not hard to find loopholes in the theology of the rebellious monks – as Davit Tinikashvili wrote, the monks were victims of what is called category error.[239] This is true. The WCC has never defined itself as a church, it is an organization of ecumenical movement. As already discussed previously, the Toronto statement made it clear that neither the WCC was a church, nor it forced any of the member churches to acknowledge other members as churches.

The GOC saw it unacceptable for this group to demand such things from the patriarchate. What is more important, the church pushed back on the issue of who had the authority to declare heresy. From the position of the church – it was definitely not the schismatic monks.

2.2.3 The Response of the Church – The decision to Leave

On the very day when the Synod made a decision to leave the Council (May 20, 1997), a newspaper, "Republic of Georgia," printed a sermon by the Patriarch, given on May 18, 1997, in the Sioni Cathedral. In the sermon he spoke about ecumenism, the religious

[236] Ibid.
[237] Serbian Church declared Popovis a saint in 2010
[238] Ibid.
[239] Tinikashvili, Ecumenical Movement, .15

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diversity of Georgia, the benefits of being part of the WCC, and the isolation the church suffered in the Soviet Union.[240] Some scholars refer to this sermon as one defending the membership of the WCC and contrasting it with the decision to leave merely a couple of days later. However, the Patriarch expressed that caution was needed from the Orthodox Churches when it came to participation in the ecumenical dialogues and assemblies. The Patriarch said:

> About 90% of the members of the Council are protestant; therefore, there is a discussion about leaving the Council. I personally support leaving, but some of the Orthodox churches say that leaving one by one would be unacceptable, that all of us – churches of Alexandria, Constantinople, Antioch, Russia, Serbia, etc. should leave at the same time.[241]

This statement shows that Ilia II himself was dissatisfied with the WCC, but did not wan to leave without consulting the other Orthodox Churches. The patriarch did point out the difference between his position and the position of the monks, explaining that "Blind Fanaticism has brought those people as far as to sever ties not only with the Georgian Church, but also with Russia, Constantinople, and all Orthodox Churches that are part of this Council."[242] It is noteworthy that he ended the sermon by stating that he was sure there were other forces behind the group demanding to leave and that an outside enemy was finding footing with that group's help.[243]

This sermon shows how the Patriarch himself was not against the idea of leaving, he was not fully supporting the membership at the time, and as we will also see below, he

[240] *Republic of Georgia*, 20 May 1997, P.1; 3.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.

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himself started to express sentiments of intolerance and displeasure about the existence of the other Christian confessions in Georgia. The letter below further proves that the Patriarchate was not entirely against the statements made by the monks, but he disapproved of the form of protest and the demands.

The patriarchate responded to the publications by monks. The theological group from the GOC took to newspapers to outline the wrongs in the argumentation of the monks. The letter from the Patriarchate underlined that the Betania brotherhood and others "abused the right to declare anathema." They claimed that the monks declared the teachings anathema primarily because of the lack of understanding of the matter and that some of issues mentioned by them were "already condemned by the church."[244] The group argued that the monks misunderstood and confused the principles of the basis of the constitution of the WCC and the constitution of a state – "the basic principles of WCC only outlined the membership basis in the organization . . . which in no way means ecclesiological or dogmatic unity".[245] According to the published response, Orthodox Church did "denounce ecumenical theology that became so widely accepted in the West."[246] Looking at the GOC argumentation, it does not seem clear where they completely disagreed with the monks – the church also saw the WCC problematic, it also did not accept ecumenical theology. The key issue here was that the monks were challenging the authority of the church and the patriarch – according to the church, the group declaring anathema had no right and authority to do so.

[244] Kavkasioni, 30 August 1997, pp..1, 4, 5
[245] Ibid. p.4
[246] Ibid p.4, 5.

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In September 1997 the general secretary of the WCC received a letter containing a translated interview from the Press Secretary of the GOC. "I think you will find it the most revealing piece," wrote the author. .[247] The piece is indeed revealing. Father Basil Kobakhidze, who was at the time head of the Press Office of the Georgian Patriarchate and the Press Secretary of the Patriarch himself, gave the interview to the correspondent of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations.

This interview is a summing up of what happened and told by the Patriarchate side. According to Father Basil, the anti-ecumenical propaganda continued for decades and circulated within the church – texts both translated and originals, texts that "made an impression on the faithful".[248] According to Father Basil, after the monks and clergy openly demanded the withdrawal from the membership, the GOC started to attempt and explain to people the nature of WCC, but the "people were already taken in by the anti-ecumenical propaganda."[249] He claimed that for the anti-ecumenical group, the ecumenical movement was "only a vehicle; their real goal was the removal of the Catholicos-Patriarch from the Patriarchal throne, or if this did not succeed, the establishment of their own schismatic church."[250] He named Archimandrite Ioan (Sheklashvili) as the leading ideologue for the group.[251] In addition to this, Father Basil argued that it was not only a church matter, but external forces were involved in the conflict.

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[247] WCC Archives, 1979-2006 file, World Council of Churches programme unit 1, faith and orther, memorandum. P.1
[248] WCC archives, 1979-2006 file, turmoil in the Georgian Orthodox Church: Origins and Repercussions, p1. The same interview is also translated and published in W2G in German – Ökumenismus ist Häresie!" in WCC archives file 218/3.2.2.1.4/3
[249] Ibid.
[250] Ibid. p.2
[251] Ibid.

> Political forces have supported and continue to support and finance these people. Among these political forces are those who support our former President Gamsakhurdia. … the Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II and his Holy Synod were forced to make the decision to withdraw from the ecumenical movement, the WCC, and the CEC.[252]

In addition to that, Father Basil pointed out that, in his opinion, ecumenism was just a "vehicle" for the group, that they would choose other topics as vehicles to "satisfy their ambitions" just as easily.[253] "they want to initiate another "church" with its own "bishop" – said Father Basil in his interview.[254] He underlined as well, that participation in the ecumenical movement was not heresy, but a "pious task."[255]

From this narration of the event of schism, it seems that Patriarch Ilia II decided to save the church from polarization, from schism and therefore decided to leave the WCC and CEC. He, along with Holy Synod, also decided to punish the anti-ecumenists, after fulfilling their demands. A Georgian newspaper reported on this with the following sentiment:

> With one hand, the Synod got rid of the heretic ecumenism, but with the other, it reached the monks who cured the church from ecumenism. . . and the only reason for punishing the monks, as the Synod states, is causing of the conflict by severing eucharistic ties with the Church.[256]

A document kept in the WCC Archives titled "*Orthodox Task Force – Minutes, May 23, 1997"* contains an interesting analysis of the events by the ecumenical organization

[252] Ibid.
[253] Ibid. p5
[254] Ibid. p.2
[255] Ibid.
[256] Georgian Times, 1997. 28 May – 3 June, N29, 6

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itself.[257] According to the Minutes, there were signs of this decision well before the decision to withdraw was made by the Patriarch, as one Bishop refused to participate in the prayers where non-Orthodox were also present, explaining such prayers as "anti-canonical."[258] Similar to Basil Kobakhidze, the minutes also mention the schism to be a personal attack on Patriarch Ilia II himself.[259] The Task Force argued that keeping the peace was the sole basis of the decision to withdraw, and this step would possibly have further repercussions in other local Orthodox Churches since similar tendencies have been noticed in Serbian, Bulgarian, and Russian Churches (Georgian press wrote that Serbian and Bulgarian Churches withdrew as well – which was not true for the SOC).[260]

The Orthodox Task Force (OTF) also discussed whether the problem in the Georgian Church was a symptom of a more significant problem, as the one in 1948, since many in the churches still considered joining the WCC a problematic step.[261] The OTF proposed to write a letter in response to the Patriarch's letter about the decision of the GOC. The letter was sent by the General Secretary of the WCC. In the letter dated June 9, 1997, General Secretary expressed deep sorrow regarding the decision by the GOC but wrote that he understood the necessity, given the circumstances.[262] He also pointed out that anti-ecumenical sentiments were present not only in the Georgian Church but also elsewhere in the Orthodox world.[263] Raiser continued to explain that WCC was trying hard to listen to the complaints made by the Orthodox Churches, and he assured the Patriarch that the organization was ready to listen to all the Orthodox Brothers and Sisters about the concern

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[257] WCC Archives, 218/3.2.2.1.4/3, Orthodox Task Force. "Members present: FitzGerald, Tsetsis, Ionita, Chatzopoulos, Lemopoulos, Pirri-Simonian, Talvivara, Belopopski, Sauca, Mr. Dimitri Kirov (Bulgaria) as special invitee (in Geneva for the Unit IV Commission meeting), and Mrs. Kyriaki FitzGerald". (p1)
[258] Ibid.
[259] Ibid. p.2
[260] Ibid.p2
[261] Ibid. p.3
[262] WCC Archives, File 1979-2006, Fax – Geneva, 9 June 1997, p1
[263] Ibid.

"that Orthodox interests are not often taken into consideration at the WCC"[264] and underlined that the WCC was willing and committed to considering Orthodox concerns.[265]

As this letter illustrates, the GOC decided to leave even though the WCC was willing to cooperate and listen to its concerns. If the decision to leave was based on the theological argumentation, than the GOC should have never joined. On the other hand, if it had concerns and the WCC was willing to listen, such step seemed illogical. The issue of protecting the church from schism seems further unconvincing, since most of the clergy of the anti-ecumenical group were excommunicated, and as a result the Orthodox Church in Georgia was created, a small congregation, but nevertheless – a schism still happened.

2.2.4 The Orthodox Dissatisfaction with the WCC

As the Patriarchate messages show, the Eastern Orthodox Churches generally were not all too satisfied with the work of the WCC. This is also clear from the letter that Patriarch Ilia II sent to WCC to notify them about the decision of the GOC to leave the organization. Furthermore, Bulgarian Orthodox Church and Serbian Orthodox Church also expressed their desire to leave around the same time as the GOC, both cases actively reported by the Georgian press.

For example, in the 1998 paper, "Iveriis Gabrtskineba" (ივერიის გაბრწყინება) reported on both Bulgarian and Serbian Churches leaving. Assembly of the Orthodox Churches in Thessaloniki in 1998 gathered autocephalous Orthodox Churches, discussing the attitudes of the Orthodox Churches towards ecumenical movement generally and their

[264] Ibid. p2
[265] Ibid. p.2

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relationship with the WCC – "the subject was raised because of the decisions of the Georgian and Serbian churches leaving the WCC, and because of the demand by the Russian and Serbian Churches to discuss this issue at the meeting."[266] There is a noteworthy passage in the article sharing a statement of the Bulgarian Church:

> Leaving does not mean that the membership of the ecumenical council . . . should be seen as heretic. The WCC has exhausted its capabilities. It did not fulfill the hopes of the Orthodox Churches. The Protestant world did not become closer to the Orthodox faith but immersed itself deeper into its misconceptions. The World Council of Churches became a haven for Protestant modernism and innovationism, where the speeches by the Orthodox church representatives were not considered.[267]

The concern of the Orthodox Churches was that the the member Protestant churches outnumbered them, therefore had more power to sway the WCC decisions in their preferred direction.

Ivan Dimitrov in his article lists 6 main reasons why the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) rejected ecumenism[268] and they overlap with Georgian reasons: "Orthodox Church is the undivided Catholic Church of Christ", "All non-Orthodox are heretics and Orthodox canons prohibit praying with heretics", "As we talk to heretics, we legitimize them" and by communicating there was a danger of falling under their influence, "Inter-Confessional communion leads to syncretism", "the WCC is trying to become a superchurch".[269] The reasonings are very similar to those stated by the Georgian anti-ecumenists. Dimitrov explains, that in the Bulgarian case, the decision of the Synod to withdraw was criticized

[266] Giorgi Andriadze, 1998, N4 p.2 Bulgarian Orthodox Church Leaves Ecumenical Wolrd Council.
[267] Giorgi Andriadze, Iveriis Gabrtskineba, 1998, N4 p.2 Bulgarian Orthodox Church Leaves Ecumenical Wolrd Council.
[268] Ivan Dimitrov, in Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism p375
[269] Dimitrov, 375

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for its "helplessness" and for the decision to solve the problems faced by membership, by not being the members anymore.[270]

The same paper printed a decision of the Serbian Orthodox Church to leave the WCC. A portion of an interview given by bishop Artem to the newspaper "Rononezh" in November 1997 was translated into Georgian and published. In the interview, the bishop said:

> The Serbian Church was the last to join the WCC (in 1965). All of the churches, of course, joined the ecumenical movement because of the pressure from the government and other events. But I always felt that the Orthodox churches should have never been members of the organization because the ecumenical movement presumes the existence of multiple different churches, but the Church of Christ is only one – aren't we acknowledging the one, holy catholic universal church?[271]

Bishop's statement on the reason of joining is plausible – as we saw in the first part of the thesis, the Soviet regime needed churches to represent it on the international level. Communist leaderships followed the same suit. The bishop continued to say that since the GOC already left in 1997, it was time for the Serbian Church to make the final decision, to protect the "purity of faith."[272] The same Georgian newspaper printed another piece with more information on the reasons for the Serbian Church's decision. The reasons stated remind one of the reasons (and questions) posed by the Georgian monks. The reasons were following: the Serbian Church officially stated that it was leaving because, in their opinion, the WCC was no longer pursuing the principle of unity in faith; because the organization

[270] Dimitrov, 376
[271] Ibid. Serbian Church Decided to leave the WCC, 3
[272] Ibid.

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was acquiring characteristics of a superchurch; was equating some protestant traditions with those of eastern Orthodox living traditions; the organization was being strongly influenced by secularism; the structure of the organization caused the Orthodox to be outnumbered; the WCC was addressing faith matters with "worldly pragmatism"; because some members of WCC were trying to introduce new traditions – for instance, the ordination of women as clergy; the WCC was welcoming to Christian organizations that were not against "homosexuals and lesbian marriages"; because of the instances of shared communion with Orthodox and other churches; and lastly because the membership in the WCC was polarizing the Orthodox churches.[273]

It is evident that the issues of ordination of women and the LGBT rights were sensitive for the member Orthodox Churches, contributing to their fear that this Western influence would endanger the *purity of faith.* In case of Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) there were other particular difficulties. Rastko Jovic explains, that after the civil war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Serbia was held responsible for the atrocities, which in turn developed anti-Western sentiments.[274] There were demands inside the WCC to expel SOC in relation to the war.[275] The SOC never left, however – Georgian media reporting otherwise served different purposes, clearly. The church was indeed displeased with the WCC just like other Orthodox churches, and in cooperation with the Russian Church it initiated an inter-Orthodox meeting in Thessaloniki, 1998.[276]

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[273] Serbetis Eklesiis Gamosvla. Departure of the Serbian Church From the WCC. Iveriis Gabrtskineba, 1997, N20, .2-3 The whole piece was originally published in newspaper Radonezh, by Deacon Andria Kuraev
[274] Rastko Jovic, "Ecumenical Dialogue in the Perspective of the Serbian Orthodox Church" Orthodox Handbook on ecumenism, p358
[275] Ibid.
[276] Radivoje Simić, "The Serbian Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement: An Overview." *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 40, no. 10 (2020): 5. 56

Russian Orthodox Church was obviously not free from the anti-ecumenical sentiments, either. Since the 1980s and the 1990s ecumenism was accused of being heresy, "ultra-conservative and anti-ecumenical voices became louder."[277] Vladimir Fedorov connects it increasing interactions of Russians with believers form the West – from the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR).[278] Fedorov explains that the enti-ecumenism of ROCOR came from their contact with the members of Old Calendar Greek Schism.[279]

The WCC's Staff Executive group requested a report in 1998 to understand the concerns of the Orthodox Churches and contextualize the problem in broader terms.[280] The report came after the meeting in Thessaloniki – the meeting that was called by the Russian and the Serbian Churches to deal with the Orthodox problem, in preparations of the Eighth Assembly of the Council. The Thessaloniki meeting decided to participate in it, but to limit their participation unless the demands of restructuring of the organization[281] were met. The paper argued that same restructuring demands were present also in other member churches.[282] The paper pointed out as well, that the recent historical events in the Central and Eastern Europe were to be taken into consideration with regards to the Orthodox

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[277] Cyril Hovorun, "Official Texts on Ecumenism - A Systematic Introduction"
in Orthodox Handbook..355
[278] Vladimir Fedorov 155, "Distorted Images of Ecumenism – Historical and Theological Reasons
for the Difficulties in developing a proper Understanding
of Ecumenism in the Russian Context
Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism
[279] Ibid.
[280] Orthodox Task Force, The World Council of Churches. Accessed May 2023,
https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/orthodox-participation-in-the-wcc
[281] WCC voting procedure was simple – one church one vote, and since there were more protestant churches present than the Orthodox, the latter was dissatisfied, that the decisions were being made without taking into consideration Orthodox stances.
[282] Orthodox Task Force.

problem: "The fall of communism resulted both in renewed opportunity and spiritual renaissance, as well as retrogression and wall-building".[283] Furthermore, globalization influenced fundamentalism along religious lines, just like in other spheres, proselytism became an issue – whether "real or perceived".[284] The WCC understood the particularities of the Orthodox problem, but the response to this issues were not effective.

2.2.5 Anti-Ecumenism from Above

> I am here to show that not all Orthodox Christians in Georgia are fundamentalists. Patriarch Ilia . . . because of certain fundamentalists and extremists was forced to lead his church out of the WCC in order to avoid internal schism. He still has great sympathy and hope for you. We hope to be able to come back.[285]

This was part of a speech by Father Basil on the Eighth WCC Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1998. Hopes declared by him have not yet come true, nor is it clear if they ever will. It has to be noted here, that Basil Kobakhidze left all his positions in the GOC to protest that the GOC left the international religious organizations in 1997, and later in 2007 he removed his priestly garments as a form of protest to the direction the Patriarchate and the Holy Synod were steering the church and left the church.[286]

The anti-ecumenical sentiments were not confined to the small groups of monks who threatened a schism, a schism that happened even though the GOC left the WCC. It is noteworthy that Patriarch Ilia II himself started to express concerns about other Christian

[283] Orthodox Task Force
[284] Ibid.
[285] WCC Archives, 1979-2006 file, December 12, report of policy reference committee I, p1
[286] Short bio - http://www.nplg.gov.ge/bios/ka/00006731/ ; video from the tv archives how he left the church: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKr0lysdoSk&t=1s

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denominations existing in Georgia. These sentiments were vocalized and intensified after the declaration of independence by Georgia. Before that, under the Soviet Union, the 1970s and the 1980s saw close partnerships and cooperation between different Churches – example of this would be a theological dialogue between the Evangelical Christian Baptists and the GOC. The two churches were the most active religious communities at the time. The goal of this dialogue was to conduct a common service and bring better understanding between the two churches. During this period, a Baptist pastor was invited to preach in Sioni Cathedral.[287]

Bishop Malkhaz Songhulashvili of the Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia remembers how quickly things changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union: "I remember a sense of disappointment in our church. We thought that freedom had arrived, but it turned out that this freedom was only for the Orthodox, for ethnically Georgian Orthodox"[288]. The sense of disappointment was there because of the history of friendship that the GOC and the EBCG had before things changed so drastically. Bishop Malkhaz continued:

> I remember how surprised the head of our church, Guram Kumelashvili, was when one fine day, he heard on TV when the Patriarch … repeated the well-known calque that foreign "sects" are using the economic difficulties to recruit our population and they (journalists) asked who these are, the Patriarch mentioned different groups, including our (The Evangelical-Baptist) Church. The head of our church was sure, and we all thought this, that after the dialogue we had during the time of Bolghashvili, we and the

[287] See: Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*.
[288] Lost in Translation – Malkhaz Songhulashvili. (Soviet Past Research Laboratory) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-xaD372b_Q&t=47s

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> Orthodox Church were friends. But it was shocking when they accused us of being a foreign sect that had only just come to Georgia, taking advantage of the economic poverty. … We soon saw this was not a slip. It was an attitude, a policy planned out by the ethnonational spirit in Georgia.[289]

As early as 1991, Patriarch Ilia II, in his sermon, spoke about how "Orthodox Christianity has saved Georgia and will save it again" and that "the Georgian people have been Christians since 1st century, therefore should remain Christian".[290] By Christian, it was meant Orthodox Christian because the Patriarch clarified: "Our nation should not become influenced by the sects and foreign religions . . . every man who will help with the spread of sectarian teachings and will aid the spread of different religions will be declared the enemy of the Georgian nation".[291] In this speech he declared that a department was founded within the Patriarchate, that would "aid in these matters." This speech perfectly summarized the shift that was taking place in the GOC and its stance towards other churches.

In 1991 as well, Patriarch gave a sermon in February, saying that it was wrong to let the non-Orthodox participate in prayers with the Orthodox. "There have been occasions when non-Orthodox, for instance, Catholics, have come to us, and we have given them communion. This is wrong," – said Ilia II; furthermore, he assured the audience that even though the Orthodox priests have participated in prayers with the non-Orthodox, they have

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[289] Ibid.
[290] *Patriarch Ilia II – Epistles, Words, Sermons, Vol.2* Tbilisi, 1997. Sermon accessed at: https://www.orthodoxy.ge/patriarqi/qadagebebi/skhva/12motsiquli.htm
[291] Ibid.

never betrayed Orthodoxy, that they were praying with Orthodox prayers with "our rules, our traditions, Georgian traditions, pure Orthodox prayers."[292]

Similar opinions were expressed in his 1994 Christmas epistle:

> Taking advantage of the economic and political hardships in Georgia today, hidden behind the slogan of democracy, representatives of different foreign religions and protestant sects (Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Catholics, Krishna's followers, Pentecostals, so-called Salvation Army, and others) are trying to force religious expansion.[293]

The list of these "foreign religions and sects "mentioned by the Patriarch is controversial on many different levels. For instance, the Salvation Army came to Georgia at the time of war in Abkhazia in 1992-1993, helping provide food and shelter for the displaced people.[294] As for the Catholics and Baptists for instance – both churches had long history in Georgia. The Christmas Epistle of 1994 is one of the most cited texts regarding the history of ecumenical relations in Georgia. this epistle was the sign of how the language of the religious hierarchy changed with the influence of political and religious climate.[295] There is a letter in the WCC archive summarizing the worries of the Patrairch. He was writing to Catholicos of Cilicia in 1997. By this time, the Holy Synod had already decided to leave the WCC. The letter expresses the same concerns as mentioned above – the problem of the "foreign sects."

> Today a lot of various sects are bursting into Orthodox countries. These antichristian units make use of the strained economic situation formed in the countries of the

[292] Ilia II, in Tinikashvili, 12
[293]Christmas Epistle, Tbilisi. 1993-1994. Patriarch Ilia II available at: https://www.orthodoxy.ge/patriarqi/epistoleebi/sashobao1994.htm
[294] ed. Zurab Kiknadze, Religiebi Sakartveloshi, Ombudsmen of Georgia Library, Tbilisi 2008, 252
[295] Kintsurashvili, 38

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> Caucasus. They disguise themselves under the cover of various charitable organizations, but as a reality, they preach studies that are alien to the traditions of our nation.[296]

Apart from the letter to Aram I, most of these instances predate the monks public and demonstrative demands for the GOC to withdraw from the WCC and protect the "pure Orthodox way." This is not to say that there were no new religious groups seeking to attract people in the post-Soviet countries. In the setting of the 1990s the new religious activity has caused concerns, how it worried the nationalized religious communities.[297] After the collapse of the Soviet Union religion found a different relevance. the Orthodox Church became increasingly identified and tied with Georgian national identity, therefore the Patriarch had no problem grouping together religious communities who were in Georgia for a long time and those who arrived after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and blaming them all for abusing the economic and social hardships to take Georgian people away from the *true* faith. Malkhaz Songulashvili, writing about history of Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia, explains that the GOC adopted the rhetoric of the Moscow patriarchate in its argumentation against the non-Orthodox evangelism – the patriarch complained that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Christians came not to help the ROC but to compete with it. The Patriarch of GOC thought the same[298], as we saw in his epistles and letters.

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2.2.6 The Consequences – case of the defrocked priest

This case highlights the consequences of the decision to leave the WCC and the general anti-ecumenical rhetoric mentioned above. One of the priests who demanded to

[296] WCC Archives, to His Holiness Catholicos of Cilicia. P1
[297] Mathijs Pelkmans, ed., *Conversion after Socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 1.
[298] Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia*, 257.

leave the WCC was later actively involved in violently assaulting other Christian churches in Georgia.

A 2001 report done by Human Rights Watch analyzes the growing violence against religious minorities during the 1990s in Georgia. "Non-Orthodox Christian worshippers throughout Georgia have been the targets of at least eighty violent attacks by civilian groups in the past two years," we read in the report.[299] At the time Georgian government made no effort to seriously investigate the violent attacks. The victims are primarily Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostalists, Baptists, and members of the Assembly of God, also known in Georgia as "non-traditional" worshippers." Evangelical Baptist Church was attacked twice – first, the Bibles were burned in the warehouse, and the second time, the Church was attacked when the ecumenical prayer was to be held. As a result of growing violence and lack of responsive activity from the Georgian government, 15 US congress members wrote to the president of Georgia in 2002, urging him to stop the violence against the religious minorities and ensure the violent groups to be lawfully punished.[300] In 2001 leaders of religious communities met with the president "In what one participant described as `a unique meeting'.[301] They presented to president three petitions: one calling for a law on freedom of conscience, one called a "peace paper" calling for religious peace and tolerance in Georgia and all of Caucasus region, and the third one – signed by Orthodox, Catholics,

[299] Memorandum to the US Government on Religious Violence in the Republic of Georgia. https://www.hrw.org/news/2001/08/28/memorandum-us-government-religious-violence-republic-georgia#_ftnref27

[300] Amerikeli Kongresmenebi Shevardnadzes religiuri Dzaladobis Agkvetisken Moutsodeben. (Americal Congressmen urge Shevardnadze to act)https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=1311

[301] Felix Corley, KESTON NEWS SERVICE: 11.00, 10 July 2001.
Reporting on violations of religious liberty and on religion in communist and post-communist lands
https://www.keston.org.uk/kns/misc/kns-georgia-religious-leaders-meet-president-will-meeting.html

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Lutherans, and Baptists – to allow them to be engaged in the humanitarian aid work.[302] President Shevardnadze promised to take action; however, the priest responsible for the violent attacks was not imprisoned until 2004.

The violence against religious minorities increased drastically in the late 1990s to 2002. According to Sabrina Ramet, the increased organized violence against the non-Orthodox Christian denominations can be connected to "Georgian Othodox Church's active lobbying during 1989-99 for a government ban on such groups altogether".[303] Between October 1999 to July 2003, about 100 violent attacks took place.[304] The attacks were conducted by the leadership of a certain priest named Basil Mkalavishvili, with other fundamentalist groups. About 45% of Orthodox Georgians living in major cities, supported actions of Mkalavishvili.[305]

The "Exiled Gldani Eparchy" or sometimes referred to as the Mkalavishvili group, was an antiecumenical group that was formed in 1994, was lead by Basil Mkalavishvili. Mkalavishvili was the part of the clergy actively calling for the GOC to leave the WCC. He was demoted to the level of clergy because of his actions in 1995, defrocked.[306] Mkalavishvili was only imprisoned after international society called for action by Georgian government. In 2003 Mkalavishvili and his supporters attacked the ecumenical prayer in the Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia, a prayer that was attended by diplomats from other countries, causing international outrage.[307]

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[302] Ibid.
[303] Sabrina Ramet in Byrnes and Katzenstein, *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, 162.
[304] Ramet in Byrnes and Katzenstein, 162.
[305] Reisner and Jawad, p.53
[306] Religiebi Sakartveloshi, 150
[307] Radical Orthodox Faction Raided Baptists, 24 January 2003, https://civil.ge/archives/102759

The departure from the WCC and CEC, along with the Patriarchate voicing concerns about foreign sects influenced overall deterioration of relationship between the GOC and other Christian communities. The connection is not just of general atmosphere, but the very man advocating for the departure was leading the violent attacks on Christian denominations. By the time he started organized attacks, Mkalavishvili was not a part of the GOC, but he was not voicing different sentiments from them. It was his means that differed.

Concluding Remarks

It is important to point out that one can not, and should not narrow down the reasons of leaving the WCC to one factor. It is evident, that Georgia leaving such an international organization at a time when as an independent country, it was trying to acquire as much international support and recognition as it could, does not seem logical. Post-Soviet ethnonational and religious nationalism contributed also to the church taking a course of isolation, in the context of globalization. Deterioration of the ecumenical relations, therefore, was not only a result of actions of group of monks with theological arguments; or only the desires of the GOC to establish clear hierarchy between religious communities inside the country, or international and national contexts and influences that solely determined the course of action. If the membership in the WCC had no benefits for the GOC, and joining it was solely based on the political decision by the Soviet State, then it would have left the organization right after the independence of Georgia. If leaving was based solely on the theological grounds, then the GOC should never have joined the WCC. This indicates towards the fact that a general Orthodox dissatisfaction towards the WCC

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and mistrust of the Western influences, coupled with the growing political role of the GOC, and its assigned role of defending the *purity of faith* as well as purity of nation, lead to deteriorating relations with non-Orthodox Christian churches.

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CONCLUSION

Viewing the history of the GOC through the lens of its participation in the international ecumenical movement allowed me to trace several complexities: the church-state relations in the 20th and 21st centuries, inter-confessional connections, transformation of the Georgian SSR into the Republic of Georgia, the post-Soviet context of the 1990s, growing ethnoreligious nationalism, and so on. This lens was chosen since it traces the shifts on the national and international level, focusing on the church as an institution and its place in Georgian Society.

Part 1 of the thesis showed that for the GOC, becoming a member of the WCC was a step coordinated and closely controlled by the Soviet authorities. The church supported the state interests on the international level, voiced the Soviet interests in peace, and participated in the propaganda that the religious communities were not being discriminated against in the Soviet Union. The membership in the WCC also provided the GOC with international connections and access to resources to aid the weakened institution and a chance to end the church's isolation. Soviet religious policies shifted according to the historical circumstances the authorities found themselves. Soviet church-state relations were directed by the state's acknowledgment that religion was not disappearing from the lives of the Soviet citizens, and a more pragmatic strategy would be to effectively turn the religious institutions into state-controlled bodies. This type of cooperation between the GOC and the Soviet authorities raised protests in the Georgian National Liberation Movement in the latter period of the Soviet Union.

Part 2 examined the relationship between the state leaders and the GOC. In the 1990s, the GOC became a primary legitimizing tool for political leaders in a context where personalities gained public support, not political ideas or programs. Due to this cooperation,

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the church acquired a special status via the constitutional agreement in 2002, which acknowledged a "historical role of the GOC" and endowed it with special privileges not extended to other religious communities in Georgia. The GOC never officially became a state church, nor Christianity – a state religion; therefore, it stayed protected from state involvement but ensured governmental benefits.

Part 2 also explained how the context of independent Georgia, in combination with local anti-ecumenical sentiments both from the hierarchs of the GOC and the anti-ecumenical groups, increasing ethnoreligious notions of nationalism, led to the decision to leave the WCC. General dissatisfaction of the Eastern Orthodox space with the WCC was defined by the post-Soviet context and fear of the West corrupting the *purity of faith*. The archival documents showed that even though the official narrative claimed that the patriarch Ilia II made the decision to withdraw from the WCC and the CEC to avoid the schism. However, in reality, the growing anti-ecumenical sentiments were not limited to the groups of monks demanding the withdrawal. They were also present in the Patriarch's rhetoric since 1991.

Providing the Georgian case of how Soviet-directed ecumenical involvement disintegrated in the first decade of Georgian independence while the GOC was becoming the key religious power and one of the most important political actors in the country can serve as an example of a broader trend. Certain aspects of the Georgian story can be generalized to countries with similar historical contexts and experiences.

For future research and advancement of the topic, it would be essential to use oral history and assess how the narrations of these events differ or overlap with the sources in the Archives and the periodicals. A combination of the two should provide a more precise picture of the past.

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APPENDIX 1

Catholicos-Patriarch of

All Georgia

1962 May 4

N209

Tbilisi

Telephone N3-49-80

To the General Secretary of the World Council

Of Churches, Dr. V.A. Wissert-Hooft[308]

Geneva

Dear Sir,

In the name of the Holy Synod of the most ancient Georgian Orthodox Church I as the head of the Church, address to you this declaration upon the entry of our Church as a member into the World Council of Churches.

We Agree with its principle as it is set forth in article I of the Constitution of the World Council of Churches.

We declare that the Georgian Orthodox Church existing since the 4th century A.D. is autocephalous and in connection with other churches, as it is required for the membership of the World Council of Churches.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has always attached great importance to the problems of close relationship among all the Christians for the consolidation of universal brotherhood, love and peace among the nations.

[308] WCC Archives, 42.2.026, F4, Letter from Ephrem II to the General Secretary of the WCC, with appendix.

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The Georgian Orthodox Church professes the United Saint Oecumenical and Apostolic Church, a part of which she is herself and is praying for the prosperity of the Holy Lord's Churches and their Union, being ready to contribute to the great work dedicated for the Christian unity.
We express our hope, that the World Council of Churches will provide a proper place among other proper members, for the Georgian Orthodox Church

Christ is Risen!

With Love,

Ephrem II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia

Georgian SSR

Tbilisi, Sioni str. 4

Patrarchate

Appendix

Some Data on the Georgian Orthodox Church

1. The Georgian Orthodox Church is headed by the Most Saint and Beatific Catholicos-Patriarch of all Georgia, who governs the Patriarchate, with the Holy Synod. Catholicos-Patriarch is responsible only before the Church Assembly.
2. At present, the Georgian Orthodox Church consists of 15 eparchies.
3. The eparchies are governed by bishops who are responsible before the Catholicos-Patriarch.
4. At present there are 7 bishops, one of them is a Metropolitan.

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5. The patriarchate includes 80 parishes, consisting of 100 churches and 105 clergymen.
6. There are two friaries and two nunneries with a scanty number of inhabitants.
7. The Church has a publishing house.
8. There is also a Mutual Benefit Fun for elderly, retired priests.

Business-manager of the Holy Synod

Protopresbyter Alexandre Gabunia

1962, May the 4th

Tbilisi

The Holy Synod

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APPENDIX 2

May 23, 1997, 09:26AM P01

Catholicos Patriarch of All Georgia[309]

380005 Tbilisi

Erekle II Sq. 1. Tbilisi

Tel: 99 03 78

To: His Excellency, Rev. Dr. Konrad Raiser

Secretary General WCC

150 Route de Ferney

P.O. Box 2100, 1211 Geneva 2

Switzerland

Fax: 022 791 03 61

May 22, 1996

Tbilisi

Your Excellency,

We would like to draw your attention to a serious problem that occurred in our life; during the past years a negative attitude toward the ecumenical movement has grown in our Church.

The above mentioned has developed into such a serious problem, that an actual danger of separation and contradiction between the clergy and the people has appeared.

Because of the present situation on May 20, 1997, a meeting of the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church was held and the issue of the Georgian Church being a member of WCC has been discussed.

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[309] WCC Archives, File 1979-2006, Letter N147, p1.

The meeting of the Holy Synod made the decision: since the interests of Orthodox are not often taken into consideration at the WCC, and since during the past years there are certain attempts to confer the WCC with an ecclesiological character, the Georgian Orthodox Church should leave the WCC.

With respect,

+ Ilia II

Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia

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