

Religion, Politics, and Everyday Life:

An Ethnographic Study of the Religious and Social Practices of
Three Georgian Orthodox Churches and the Batumi “Orta Jame”
Mosque during 2024 Pre-Election Period



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of Three Georgian Orthodox Churches and the Batumi “Orta
Jame” Mosque during 2024 Pre-Election Period**

Tbilisi, 2025



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Introduction

In contemporary Georgian society, trust in religious organizations has been steadily increasing. According to the Caucasus Barometer survey of 2021, 63% of Georgia's population trusted religious institutions¹, while by 2024,² 73%³ of the population trusted the religious institution to which they belonged. Today, for a large segment of Georgia's population, religious organizations are considered as the most reliable and authoritative institutions, whereas trust in the executive,⁴ parliament,⁵ presidency,⁶ judicial system,⁷ and political parties,⁸ remains significantly lower.

The Georgian Orthodox Church was annually financed with 25 million GEL⁹ from the state budget. In March 2024, however, an additional 35 million GEL was allocated¹⁰ in the state budget for the Patriarchate's educational projects. Accordingly, in 2024 the total funding of the Georgian Patriarchate amounted to 60 million GEL. According to the Prime Minister of Georgia, the increase in funding "is not connected to the elections."¹¹ Nevertheless, granting financial privileges to the Georgian Orthodox Church raises risks of instrumentalizing religion for political legitimization and may pose a threat to the institutional autonomy of the Church. It is noteworthy that, according to the State Agency for Religious Issues, starting from 2024, the funding of four other religious organizations increased by 1 million GEL, amounting to 6.5 million GEL.¹²

In 2024, the Georgian Government continued the practice of handing over land plots to the Georgian Orthodox Church at a symbolic price of 1 GEL.¹³ At the same time, the construction of Batumi's new mosque has been delayed for years¹⁴, which underscores the problems and unequal conditions faced by religious minorities in the country.

¹ See: The answers "Trust more than distrust"(36%) and "Fully trust"(27%) were combined. (Last accessed: 14.04.2025). [link](#)

² See: [link](#) (Last assessed: 14.04.2025)

³ See: [link](#) The responses „I rather trust than distrust“ (34%) and „I fully trust“ (39%) were combined. (Last accessed: 14 April 2025)

⁴ See: [link](#) Trust: 31%. The responses „Rather trust than not trust“ (21%) and „Fully trust“ (10%) were combined. (Last accessed: 14.04.2025)

⁵ See: [link](#) Trust: 22%. The responses „Rather trust than not trust“ (15%) and 'Fully trust' (7%) were combined. (Last accessed: 14.04.2025)

⁶ See: [link](#) Trust: 26%. The responses „Rather trust than not trust“ (20%) and 'Fully trust' (6%) were combined. (Last accessed: 14.04.2025)

⁷ See: [link](#) Trust: 23%. The responses „Mostly trust“ (16%) and „Fully trust“ (7%) were combined. (Last accessed: 14.04.2025)

⁸ See: [link](#) Trust: 12%. The responses 'Mostly trust' (9%) and 'Fully trust' (3%) were combined. (Last accessed: 14.04.2025)

⁹ See: Civil Georgia. (2024, March 19). "The government increased funding for the Patriarchate." [link](#) (Last accessed: 19.04.2025)

¹⁰ Decree of the Government of Georgia, N375, March 15, 2024, "on Providing Financial Assistance to Certain Institutions Funded by the Georgian Patriarchate". [link](#) Last accessed: 19.04.2025)

¹¹ The Prime Minister stated: "This funding was included in this year's budget last year. Therefore, it has no connection to the elections. This is not a decision made recently, before the elections. For us, it is important that the Patriarchate is able to implement its own projects, especially in the field of education." Civil Georgia, „The Government increased the Patriarchate's funding“. [link](#) (last accessed: 19.04.2025).

¹² State Agency for Religious Issues of Georgia, „Funding of Religious Organizations Increased“. February 2, 2024. [link](#) (last accessed: 03.07.2024)

¹³ Decree of the Government of Georgia, N354, March 12, 2024, „on the Privatization of Immovable Property Owned by the State through Direct Sale to the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church“. [link](#)

¹⁴ See: Social Justice Center, „Batumi New Mosque Case“, June 28, 2023. [link](#) (Last accessed: 19.04.2025)

Taking this into account, the Georgian Orthodox Church is in a financially privileged position compared to other religious organizations in Georgia. In fact, since 2002, when the *Constitutional Agreement between the State of Georgia and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia* was signed¹⁵, the Georgian Orthodox Church, as the dominant religion, acquired additional privileges through the act of cooperation with the state (Wheatley 2005).

Against the background of the Patriarchate's privileged status and the high level of public trust it enjoys, it is crucial to assess the relationship between politics and religious institutions, especially during such critical periods for the country as elections. Specifically, it is necessary to determine the extent of influence of politics on the religious agenda, to establish how representatives of religious institutions participate in political discourse, and, in the case of ruling party members, to evaluate how they attempted to leverage the resources and authority of religious organizations for electoral purposes.

This report presents an ethnographic study of the environment within religious institutions in Georgia during the 2024 pre-election period. Drawing on the examples of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Batumi "Orta Jame" Mosque, the study examines prevailing attitudes and political narratives circulating within religious spaces. The primary focus is on Sunday sermons, which, alongside discussions of religious doctrines, often incorporate commentary on social and political issues. Sermons are analyzed as a medium through which the consciousness of congregants is shaped. Accordingly, this research explores how representatives of religious institutions reflect upon ongoing social and political developments in Georgia during their preaching. The study also examines the ways in which religious narratives are interwoven with political messages. It analyzes both the latent and explicit messages in sermons that resonate with the main electoral narratives of the ruling party. In addition, the report describes the reflections of believers on the sermons (their perceptions and interpretations)

Research Aim, Questions, and Methodology

The aim of this study was to examine the presence and influence of political discourses within religious spaces during the pre-election period of 2024, based on observation of Sunday sermons. In line with this research aim, the following objectives were set:

1. To determine the amount of time devoted to discussions of ongoing socio-political processes during Sunday sermons in churches across Tbilisi's central and peripheral districts.
2. To identify the messages, narratives, and ideas communicated by clergy representatives during interaction with congregants in churches located in both central and peripheral districts of Tbilisi.
3. To analyze the strategies employed by religious representatives in reflecting upon ongoing socio-political processes during Sunday sermons in churches located in both central and peripheral districts of Tbilisi.
4. To determine, in the context of religious minorities and in comparison with the Georgian Orthodox Church, the role of the Batumi Mosque in the processes of political discourse and public opinion formation, based on observation of weekly prayers.

¹⁵ See: [link](#) (Last accessed: 19.04.2025)

The study was conducted during the pre-election period, from June to October 2024. The primary focus was placed on the Georgian Orthodox Church as the dominant religion in the country. At the same time, the research considered the perspective of Batumi's Muslim community, a religious minority, particularly in the context of the ongoing problems surrounding the construction of the "New Mosque of Batumi."

The method of data collection consisted of ethnographic research (participant observation). For the documentation of ethnographic observation, a "participant observation form" (a semi-structured questionnaire) was employed, oriented toward the detailed description of the course of Sunday sermons. For in-depth analysis, audio recordings of sermons were made. In total, 68 recordings were analyzed (60 in Tbilisi, 8 in Batumi).

The research field encompassed Tbilisi and Batumi, comprising a total of four sites. For the observation of processes within the Orthodox Church, three churches were selected in Tbilisi: two located in the central districts of the city (Tbilisi Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition and the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi), and one located in a peripheral district (Lomisi St. George Church in Gldani). To capture differences in religious and political discourse, the churches in Tbilisi's central districts (Sioni Cathedral; Sameba Cathedral) were compared with the church in the peripheral district (Lomisi St. George Church in Gldani). In addition, to establish and represent the perspective of a non-dominant religious group, the Batumi Mosque ("Orta Jame") was selected. The findings were then compared with the observations recorded in the Georgian Orthodox Churches.

The selection of religious institutions was carried out through non-probability, purposive sampling, oriented toward the study of unique cases. Specifically, the Sioni and Sameba Cathedrals in Tbilisi represent central churches of the capital, distinguished both by their large congregations and by their leading position (influence) within the Georgian Patriarchate. In informal discussions with clergy, the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi is regarded as the Patriarch's principal church, while the Holy Trinity Cathedral (Sameba) is identified as the church where the Patriarchal locum tenens, Shio Mujiri, conducts Sunday services. The Gldani Church, located in the suburban district of Tbilisi, is the oldest church in the Gldani periphery and attracts a significant number of worshippers. The selection of these sites was intended to enable an assessment of the situation in central and peripheral places of worship and their comparative analysis. The "Orta Jame" Mosque in Batumi was selected in view of both its large congregation and its historical significance.

The sermons were analyzed using the technique of narrative analysis. For the in-depth examination of messages, sermons were coded and categorized. Narratives were compared with one another according to the site and date of observation.

Adherence to ethical principles was of central importance for the study. Verbal consent was obtained from all respondents. At the outset of the research, they were informed that participation was voluntary, confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time. A key ethical principle of the study was the protection of participants from any potential harm or discomfort. Since active worshippers constituted a relatively small group, the principle of anonymity was strictly upheld to minimize the risk of identification. All details that might allow for identification were modified.

Theoretical Perspective

In order to analyze the role and influence of religious institutions in contemporary Georgia, it was essential to develop an effective theoretical framework that would allow for an in-depth examination of social reality. It is

noteworthy that, in discussing religious organizations in Georgia, one cannot avoid engagement with theories of religious nationalism, secularism, and power, since these dimensions are closely intertwined. At the same time, anthropological theories are of particular importance, as they make it possible to study the environment within religious institutions from the perspective of everyday life, community, and the human experience.

It is essential to emphasize that in post-Soviet Georgia, from the 1990s to the present, two narratives have alternated: ethno-religious nationalism has been replaced by the concept of modern liberal nationalism (Nodia 2009), which adheres to the principles of the secular state and prioritizes citizenship and a sense of unity despite religious and ethnic differences (Smith 1991). Therefore, for the theoretical framework of this study, it was important to engage both with theories of the secular state in modern societies and with theories of religious nationalism.

The theoretical framework of this work draws on multiple academic sources. These include studies of secularism and post-secularism, which assist in determining the purposes and forms of religious institutions' involvement in secular political processes; the theory of religious nationalism, which provides effective tools for analyzing the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in national politics; and theories of power, knowledge, and discourse, which constitute the analytical structure of the study. In addition, the framework is supported by a range of anthropological research on religion, which has enabled a "from below" approach to the study of religion and a deeper analysis of believers' perspectives.

Theories of Secularism and the Post-Secular Society

Classical theories of secularism predicted that, as a result of modernization, religion would either disappear from the public sphere (Weber 1930) or be relegated to the private domain (Berger 1967). Yet over the decades, empirical research has described the opposite development.

In contemporary contexts, rather than a decline in the role of religion, theories of *post-secularism* (Habermas 2008) and of *multiple secularities* (Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt 2012) have emerged. José Casanova's work on *public religions* demonstrated the irrelevance of the theory of religious privatization by documenting the active participation of religious institutions in public life and debate. According to Casanova, religious actors may engage in public discourse without necessarily opposing secular spheres or the principles of religious freedom (Casanova 1994).

Charles Taylor's interpretation in *A Secular Age* provides a more detailed account of secularism. According to Taylor, secularism does not operate as the absence of religion but rather as its precondition. Secularism does not imply the disappearance of religion; instead, depending on the context, it signifies a transformation of positions in which belief becomes one option among many (Taylor 2007).

Critical theories of secularism, by contrast, challenge the assumption of a clear boundary between religion and politics. Talal Asad criticized the Western model in which religion is conceptualized as a private and depoliticized sphere. According to Asad, secular governance is not the result of a universal stage of development but emerges from specific historical configurations of power (Asad 2003). Secularism is a political doctrine, an historically and politically contingent project that arose through the reconfiguration of the public visibility and legitimacy of religious authority (Asad 2003). According to this perspective, secularism is not the absence of religion but rather a mode of governance that defines the meaning, place, and behavior of religion. This theoretical prism is particularly relevant in the case of post-Soviet Georgia, where the boundaries between the sacred and the secular are frequently contested. Despite the constitutional separation of church and state, the Georgian Orthodox Church continues to hold significant public influence. This theoretical perspective makes it possible to conceptualize the Georgian Orthodox Church not merely as a religious institution that occasionally intervenes in politics, but also to analyze the ways in which the religious institution is shaped and constituted by political negotiations and legislative frameworks. The Georgian Orthodox Church occupies a uniquely privileged position in Georgia, as it is the officially favored religion and is financially supported by the state. The fact that it publicly articulates positions on morality, national identity, and ongoing social and political processes points to its role as one of the central social agents in shaping the conditions of political legitimacy in the country.

It is noteworthy that in Peter Berger's later work, modernization is argued to generate pluralism rather than secularism (Berger 2014). The idea of religious pluralism is particularly important for analyzing the role of religious minorities within the state.

To describe the separation of religious institutions and the state, another valuable perspective is offered by the theory of *multiple secularities*. According to its authors, different societies, depending on their specific historical trajectories, establish diverse boundaries between the religious and the secular (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012). In the Georgian context, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a form of secularism emerged in which the Georgian Orthodox Church was granted a special role and privileges, despite the nominal separation of religion and state (Serrano 2010).

To explain the phenomenon of the population's "return to religion" in post-Soviet Georgia, Karpov's work offers a valuable perspective. According to the author, the form of secularism that existed during the Soviet period was coercively imposed upon the population. Following the rejection of atheist ideology, the return of religion to public life is described by the author as "the revenge of the sacred on the secular society" (Karpov 2010, 232). V. Karpov also employs the concept of "strategic secularism," according to which secular states maintain ties with religious institutions, while the separation of church and state is of a merely formal nature.

Strategic secularism refers to the instrumental use of secular structures by the state, aimed at cultivating religious support through unofficial channels. For the Church, an alliance with the state is significant for the preservation of its independence (Karpov 2010). Such alliances are characteristic of a number of Orthodox countries. For example, McGuckin refers to this form of cooperation between religious institutions and the state as the concept of "symphonia." According to this scholar of religion, the Byzantine model of harmonious cooperation between church and state continues to retain relevance in Orthodox political theology today. This concept implies that religious institutions, rather than pursuing confrontation, choose cooperation with state structures, which does not contradict their role as an independent moral voice. Despite the alliance, they retain institutional independence (McGuckin 2011).

In conclusion, it is important to describe the distinction between "assertive" and "passive" secularism. *Assertive secularism* opposes the presence of religion in public life, whereas *passive secularism* accepts religion's nominal influence within secular boundaries (Hurd 2008). Georgia represents a form of *passive secularism*, as the Georgian Orthodox Church functions de facto as a political actor while, at the same time, maintaining a visible institutional boundary with the state.

The theories of secularism discussed above provide the context for understanding why religious institutions may participate in Georgia's pre-election discourse, despite the secular separation of religion and state.

Religious Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Context

Religious nationalism provides an important theoretical perspective for examining the relationship between religious discourse and politics. The theory describes the merging of national and religious identities, in which religious affiliation is closely tied to national self-identification (Juergensmeyer 1993; Friedland 2001).

Robert Bellah developed the concept of *civil religion*, which refers to the perception of the "sacred" within the everyday life of the nation. Rather than focusing on a specific faith, civil religion is composed of shared symbols, rituals, and values that elevate the political community, the nation itself, to a quasi-sacred status. In this model, the boundary between the religious and the national is fragile: religion sacralizes the nation (Bellah 1967). This contribution by the sociologist of religion helps us to identify the mechanisms by which religion is employed for the sacralization of the nation-state and for legitimizing the political order. Bellah's concept offers a set of theoretical tools for identifying the process of sacralization by tracing the presence of symbols, myths, rituals, and moral codes. For example, the abundance of religious holidays in the secular calendar, public blessings of the population, and the invocation of saints or religious leaders in political rhetoric are all clear illustrations of civil religion in practice.

Another valuable theoretical perspective is Rogers Brubaker's concepts of the *nationalizing of religion* and the *religionizing of nationalism*. According to Brubaker, national movements strengthen their positions by adapting religious symbols and rhetoric, while religious institutions embody the role of guardians of national traditions

(Brubaker 2012). Through what he terms *coded religion*, religious language serves the production of national and political meaning (Brubaker 2012). *Coded religion* provides an effective analytical tool for accessing the meaning of sermons. For instance, a sermon that describes threats to “traditional values” functions as a coded political message, which followers interpret in accordance with specific political positions. Coding enables the transmission of politically charged messages without explicitly naming a political party, an important means for religious institutions to maintain an image of neutrality. It is noteworthy that, in certain cases, religious organizations deliberately refrain from taking a public stance, a practice that scholars refer to as *strategic* or *constructed ambiguity*. Strategic ambiguity allows religious institutions to simultaneously pursue multiple aims (Eisenberg 1984), while constructed ambiguity provides them with flexibility (Bull 2012).

At the same time, studies of *ethnicized religion* demonstrate that, in the post-Soviet space, during periods of political crisis, religious institutions may become repositories of national identity. They possess the trust and authority of the population, since during the Soviet period they managed to preserve a certain degree of autonomy (Karpov and Lisovskaya 2007). The work of Karpov and Lisovskaya resonates with the privileged status granted to the Georgian Orthodox Church after Georgia’s independence, particularly with the recognition of its special role and history in the Constitutional Agreement. It is noteworthy that in post-Soviet countries, the rise of religious nationalism began as a result of the collapse of the USSR’s atheist ideology, which had prohibited the expression of both religion and national identity (Connor 1994). During the post-communist transition, against the background of ethical disorientation, churches assumed the role of moral authority (Bourdeaux 1995; Ramel 1998). In the countries of the Caucasus, a process of national self-determination began, expressed in the growing interest in history, religion, and ethnicity (Connor 1994). Myths associated with the dominant community, religion, and other features of ethnic nationalism became defining elements of identity. As a result, in the Caucasus region, religion turned into a resource for ethno-national consolidation (Agadjanian 2015).

Another important concept for the study of religious nationalism in the post-Soviet space is that of “traditional religion.” Using the example of Russia, this concept describes situations in which the growing role of religion in society serves political purposes. *Traditional religion* places emphasis on “traditional values,” while appeals to *traditional values* function as a mechanism of boundary-marking, distinguishing national identity from external threats (Agadjanian 2017). The concept helps us to understand how, during an election period, a Sunday sermon may serve political discourse, framing a specific political course as either acceptable to, or threatening for, *traditional national values*. Equally relevant here is the concept of *moral panic*, which examines how particular groups or changes (for example, “Western influence” or “LGBT propaganda”) are constructed as fundamental threats to social values. Such constructed threats are employed to justify the defensive reactions of traditional powerholders (whether religious institutions or political groups) (Cohen 2011). The production of *political fear* is integral to political discourse, serving both to mobilize supporters and to present the “people” as being defended from external dangers (Wodak 2015).

In the context of religious nationalism, religious institutions assume the role of saviors of national identity against external threats. A specific version of national identity is constructed by the religious institution, one in which defense against outside influence and danger is deemed vital (Juergensmeyer 2019). It is important to note that religious nationalism operates through three key mechanisms: 1. The production of historical narratives, which reinforce the image of religious institutions as the saviors of the nation during periods of occupation and tyranny. 2. The reinforcement of moral boundaries, which separate “true citizens” from “others.” 3. The ritualization of national belonging through religious ceremonies (Koenig and Knöbl 2015). In addition, Juergensmeyer discusses *performative violence*, which employs rhetorical violence in the name of defending against symbolic enemies (Juergensmeyer 2019). Such rhetorical performances are often directed against the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, “Western values,” and liberalism.

In the Georgian context, everyday religious practices are intertwined with efforts to express national identity. It is noteworthy that during the Soviet period, the idea of defending national identity helped the Georgian Orthodox Church in its struggle for self-preservation (Serrano 2010). In the 1980s, the Church came to embody a site of national resistance, since in an atheist society religious worship was prohibited. The collapse of the Soviet system created a new context that established a specific link between national identity and Orthodoxy (Serrano 2014). This connection continues to the present day. Since 2002, based on the Constitutional Agreement, the Georgian Orthodox Church has held the status of an officially privileged institution. In contemporary Georgia, the Church is regarded as an authoritative institution in the formation of public opinion (Pelkmans et al. 2005). For example, K. Gurchiani's study, based on the case of a public school, describes the intersection of religion and national identity. The observance of Orthodox rituals is not merely an act of worship, but also a practice of expressing Georgian national identity (Gurchiani 2017).

Research on religious nationalism helps us understand why religious discourse mobilizes narratives that describe existential threats to the nation and appeal to the motif of national survival. Within this religious narrative, the Sunday sermon becomes one of the most frequent and affective media through which national mythology is articulated and adapted to moments of political challenge, such as election periods.

Theories of Discourse, Knowledge Production, and Power

The theoretical framework of this study draws on the works of Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe. Discourse theory enables us to grasp the meanings produced through language, which may acquire contested significance (Foucault 1978). According to Foucault, modern discursive practices emerge as the outcome of complex historical processes (Foucault 1977). Discourse not only expresses pre-existing subjectivities but also constitutes subject positions (Foucault 1972). In discussing power, knowledge production, and the formation of the subject, Foucault argues that discourses generate regimes of truth (Foucault 1982). As he notes, "truth is not outside power" but rather "produced by multiple forms of constraint" (Foucault 1980, 131). Accordingly, religious discourse can be viewed not merely as an act of communication, but as a system that produces specific "regimes of truth" and subject positions (Foucault 1980). In this context, religious institutions operate as sites of truth production, endowed with moral authority and knowledge of the transcendent. At the same time, they contribute to the formation of political subjectivity. Representatives of religious institutions occupy specific positions within "regimes of truth," which grant their statements particular authority. A sermon, therefore, constitutes the declaration of an authoritative figure rather than the opinion of an ordinary citizen.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the French philosopher reflects on what he calls the *function of enunciation* (*fonction énonciative*), which presupposes the existence of certain conditions that make it possible for a statement (*énoncé*) to be expressed within a discursive formation. Two aspects are central to this function of enunciation: 1. A statement always presupposes the existence of a specific position; however, its author is not an isolated individual but rather the combined effect of institutional practices, norms, and positions. 2. The function of enunciation determines, within a discursive field, the relations that exist between statements. Thus, for Foucault, discourse has an autonomous status in reality. The one who articulates a statement, as well as the space in which it is articulated, is not the product of a concrete individual but of the interplay between knowledge and power (Foucault 1972). In the context of this study, discourse is the medium through which religious leaders create *positions of enunciation* that their followers may then adopt. Clergy do not merely state their personal opinions but rather *produce "truth"* within a moral and spiritual dimension of choice. Another important Foucauldian concept here is *parrhesia* (frank speech). This refers to the act of truth-telling within relations of power,

functioning as a moral practice. It is marked by courage and fearlessness (Foucault 2001). The concept is particularly useful for analyzing sermons, especially in those situations where clergy resort to “dangerous truths” as a way of demonstrating their own moral bravery.

Of particular importance is the concept of *hegemony*, which posits that power operates not only through coercive institutions (police, armed forces, etc.) but also through the consent of the governed (Gramsci 1971). According to Gramsci, ruling elites maintain power by deploying cultural and ideological norms so effectively that subordinate groups come to perceive the status quo as “common sense.” Rather than relying exclusively on state violence or economic control, hegemony functions through civil society, schools, churches, the media, and intellectuals, which disseminate the values and worldview of the dominant class, making power appear natural and unquestionable. As Gramsci put it, “the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways: as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’” (Gramsci 1971, 57).

Discussing populist discourse, Ernesto Laclau conceptualizes hegemony as the moment when particular discursive articulations temporarily dominate by positioning themselves as universal rather than particular (Laclau 2005). Hegemonic projects, however, always require antagonistic boundaries that divide the social field into opposing camps. In this context, Laclau and Chantal Mouffe distinguish between the *logic of equivalence* and the *logic of difference*. The logic of equivalence chains together diverse elements into an identity relation that unites them in opposition to a common adversary, while the logic of difference emphasizes distinctions among elements (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). For Laclau, discursive construction often proceeds by presenting values in dichotomous terms (for example: Christianity versus liberalism, tradition versus globalization, the nation versus minorities), which produces societal divisions and sparks public debate (Laclau 2005).

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the focus of analysis should be on the meanings generated through discursive articulation and contestation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Specifically, they introduce the concept of the *empty signifier*, a temporarily fixed element within hegemonic articulation. The empty signifier is an indeterminate political concept or symbol that unites diverse ideas under a single term, but without final meaning, shifting in content depending on context and historical moment (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

It is noteworthy that populist discourse about threats is often accompanied by a narrative of *peace*. Here it is essential to distinguish between *negative peace* (the absence of violence) and *positive peace* (the presence of justice and equality). In the case of negative peace, the emphasis is on stability and the absence of overt conflict. Rather than promoting principles of equality and justice, the priority is placed on preserving traditional order (Galtung 1969). Moreover, peace discourse can serve to legitimize existing power arrangements rather than to transform unjust structures. Thus, the rhetoric of negative peace works to maintain traditional hierarchies and national structures, while agents of change are cast as sources of threat (Lederach 1997).

In discussions of discourse and power, it is important to review the concept of symbolic power. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1991), symbolic power is a model of the world that is imposed and yet perceived as legitimate, natural, and containing common sense. This form of power operates not through coercion but through recognition: people must believe in the authority of the individual or institution disseminating the message. A defining feature of symbolic power is the use of euphemistic language in such a way that it conceals relations of power under neutral, familiar, and acceptable terms. Through euphemisms, language is employed to disguise symbolic violence; it functions as a subtle system of coding (Bourdieu 1991, 46–48). Bourdieu used the concept of euphemism to analyze relationships embedded within social structures.

In conclusion, for the theoretical framework of the study, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was of particular importance, as it represents not only a theoretical perspective but also an operative analytical tool for interpreting

the findings. According to CDA, language possesses the ability to reflect and reproduce power relations within society (van Dijk 1993). Discourse shapes mental models through which individuals understand politics and society (van Dijk 2008). Sermons can be regarded as a form of “elite discourse,” since in communication with the congregation, clergy hold a specific type of authority. Following Fairclough, the three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, provides the foundation for an in-depth analysis of narratives (Fairclough 2013). The analysis of sermons was conducted in accordance with this model. Specifically, at the textual level, the linguistic features of sermons were examined: word choice, metaphors, and narrative structures employed by clergy in the construction of particular narratives. At the level of discursive practice, the sermons were assessed in terms of their alignment with specific religious and political discourses, as well as in relation to their transformation within these contexts. Finally, at the level of social practice, sermons were evaluated in relation to the significance of these discourses for Georgian society.

The theories discussed above help us to conduct an in-depth analysis of the discourses of religious institutions, to determine the place of religious nationalism within contemporary religious narratives, and to assess both Soviet-era ideas and the ongoing processes in post-Soviet Georgia. Furthermore, research on discourse, knowledge production, and power describes the phenomenon whereby religious discourse shapes political subjectivity not through direct ideological influence, but rather through the complex processes of subject formation and discursive articulation.

The Georgian Orthodox Church in Post-Soviet Georgia

Alongside the theoretical perspective, it is important to review the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in post-Soviet Georgia, since the main focus of this study is placed on the discursive, symbolic, and institutional power of the Church. This religious institution possesses the capacity to influence the political preferences and positions of a segment of the Georgian population (its followers, the congregation).

The influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian society began to grow after the dissolution of the USSR (Nodia 2009). Following the collapse of communist ideology, the Church aimed to fill the resulting socio-cultural and ideological vacuum and to reinforce ethno-cultural nationalism (Sulchanishvili 2012). Against the backdrop of weakened state institutions, it succeeded in accumulating significant political capital (Nodia 2009; Serrano 2010). At the same time, it assumed the function of defending national identity, which was closely linked to the historical role of the Church in protecting Georgian culture from foreign domination (Rapp 2007). As a result, despite the formal separation of church and state, the Georgian Orthodox Church secured a privileged position in public discourse (Serrano 2010). Moreover, it transformed its high level of public trust into political power (Zedania 2009).

A decade later, the ethno-cultural nationalism that had taken shape during Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s rule was replaced by a comparatively more liberal and secular form of nationalism (Jones 2006; Nodia 2009; Zedania 2009). In 2002, with the support of Georgian society, a Constitutional Agreement was signed between the state and the Church, granting the Georgian Orthodox Church unprecedented privileges. Under this agreement, the Church was exempted from tax obligations, clergy were released from mandatory military service, and the Patriarch of Georgia was accorded a special legal status (Chikvaдзе 2005). During this period, the Georgian Orthodox Church was the only religious organization to receive state funding. The government justified this support as compensation for the economic and moral damages inflicted upon the Church during the Soviet era (Grdzeliძე 2009). According to the Constitutional Agreement, the symbolic power of the Church was transformed into political power, which later manifested in its capacity to mobilize public protest. The reality established on the basis of

the Constitutional Agreement resembles the precedent described by the scholar of Orthodox Christianity, Victor Roudometof, as the “establishment of religion in a secular state.” This constitutes a paradoxical position in which the Church enjoys official recognition and privileges, while formally operating within the framework of a secular political system (Roudometof 2015).

After the Rose Revolution, state policy toward the Georgian Orthodox Church was ambivalent (Jones 2006). While recognizing the principles of a secular state, the government nonetheless chose to ally with the Church during times of political crisis. This form of “soft theocracy” became particularly evident in debates over such social issues as ensuring equality for religious minorities, teaching religion in schools, and reproductive health. Secular political institutions often ceded their positions in order to avoid confrontation with clerical authority (Nodia 2009). Meanwhile, governmental attempts to implement secular reforms were interpreted by Georgian society as an effort of “grafting from abroad” (Jones 2013, 110). The Georgian Orthodox Church opposed ongoing reforms in the country, in particular the removal of religious education from public schools and actively fostered ethno-nationalism (Tevzadze 2009). The withdrawal of religious instruction from public schools was followed by large-scale protest rallies (Jones 2013). It is noteworthy that, for decades, the foundation of the Georgian Orthodox Church’s public influence has not been formal political power, but rather its cultural and moral authority (Ladaria 2012).

In order to quell public dissatisfaction, the government exempted the Georgian Orthodox Church from paying income tax. In addition, it abolished the requirement to tax non-commercial property and land owned by the Church (Grdzeldze 2009). In 2010, an amendment to the Georgian Tax Code stipulated that religious activities constituted non-economic activity, and therefore religious organizations were exempted from property tax (covering non-commercial property and land) (Metreveli 2016, 9). Beyond legal aspects, the Saakashvili administration also increased direct state funding of the Georgian Orthodox Church (Metreveli 2016, 10). At the same time, the government introduced another mechanism of financial support by establishing the practice of transferring real estate owned by local municipalities (including historical monuments, forests, agricultural lands, national parks, and protected territories) to the Church (Grdzeldze 2009). As a result, the practice of privileged treatment of the Georgian Orthodox Church was institutionalized (Metreveli 2016, 12), and it continues to this day. It was only in 2011 that the state amended the Civil Code to grant religious minorities the possibility of registering as legal entities of public law. This decision was met with protest both from society and the Church (Serrano 2014).

The second major wave of Church-led mobilization was directed against sexual minorities. On May 17, 2013, by demanding the cancellation of the peaceful march, the Georgian Orthodox Church reminded the state of its power to mobilize the population (Metreveli 2019). It is noteworthy that religious practice in Georgia is characterized less by strong theological knowledge and more by ritual orthodoxy and emotional religiosity. For the population, religious identity is perceived in symbolic and performative terms. Instead of doctrinal teaching, emphasis is placed on participation in public rituals or processions. Consequently, when the Church calls upon the population or criticizes a particular idea, it resonates widely across the country. In 2014, the Georgian Orthodox Church also opposed the anti-discrimination bill, which was a prerequisite set by the European Union for visa liberalization. Specifically, the Georgian Orthodox Church protested the clause in the bill that guaranteed protection on the grounds of sexual orientation, as well as the wording related to gender identity. Despite the Church’s objections, the state passed the legislation (Metreveli 2019). The above indicates that, despite its officially apolitical position, the Georgian Orthodox Church continues to intervene in Georgia’s moral and political life.

An analysis of these protest waves shows that within the national-religious discourse, the Church identifies certain issues as threats to Georgian national identity. These issues are linked to the basic freedoms of religious and sexual minorities (Metreveli 2019). Such categories are constructed through ethical discursive practices

disseminated by the Church in its appeals to society, whether through the Patriarch's public epistles or through sermons delivered by clergy in certain churches.

Religious Minorities in Post-Soviet Georgia

In conclusion, it is important to review the situation of religious minorities in post-Soviet Georgia, particularly under conditions of coexistence with the dominant religion.

In the post-Soviet space, the relationship between the state and religious institutions has undergone a process of reconfiguration. After decades of "Soviet secularism," the revival of religion is not simply a "return to tradition," but rather the outcome of a complex negotiation of memory, trauma, and aspirations (Pelkmans 2009; Wanner 2007). Religious discourse influences debates on sovereignty, gender roles, minority rights, and foreign policy. In the Georgian case, the Georgian Orthodox Church filled the moral and institutional vacuum that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR, becoming a key source of legitimacy and continuity within society (Pelkmans 2006).

At the same time, the ethno-religious nationalism of the 1990s had a profound impact on the alienation of religious minorities in Georgia. This was largely shaped by the politics of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, which marginalized and excluded ethnically non-Georgian groups. Under these conditions, ethnic and religious minorities were pushed out of the dominant discursive agenda (Jones 2006). The Georgian Orthodox Church, as both the guardian and definer of the national discourse, characterized other religions in the country as "foreign" (Balci and Motika 2007) and perceived them as threats to the national project (Zedania 2009).

In post-Soviet Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Church plays a sovereign role in the process of national self-determination and in moral debates, intervening in discussions concerning religious minorities and territorial integrity (Metreveli 2016). It is noteworthy that the Georgian Orthodox Church is oriented toward the well-being of the majority; under the motive of protecting society's welfare, it defends Georgian traditions and ethnicity, which in many cases places the political and personal security of minorities at risk (Metreveli 2019).

It is also significant that in 2018 the Constitutional Court of Georgia delivered an important decision regarding the protection of minority rights. Specifically, it ruled that the granting of certain tax privileges exclusively to the Orthodox Church constituted a discriminatory norm¹⁶. The Court's ruling stated: *"Recognition of the special role of the Church is connected with its historical contribution and does not serve to create a privileged legal status for the Orthodox Christian religion in the present. Historical contribution cannot be considered a legitimate source of privilege. Differentiation and the creation of a legally advantageous position for the Church is not and cannot be the goal of the Constitution. ... The granting of a certain right to the Church does not imply preventing other religious organizations from enjoying the same right."*

For more than a decade, religious organizations had been demanding the elimination of inequalities in Georgian legislation and the transformation of a discriminatory environment. The 2018 decision of the Constitutional Court represented a significant and precedent-setting step in the protection of equality for religious minorities (TDI 2018).

When discussing religious minorities, particular attention is drawn to the Georgian Muslim community of Achara, which, in the context of "Ottoman Georgia," for a long period represented a "historical other" (Zviadadze

¹⁶ See: [link](#) Last accessed: 20.04.2025.

2020). Moreover, in the national discourse, information about Islam, despite its centuries-long presence in Georgia, rarely appears. Furthermore, when Islam is mentioned, the national narrative tends to portray it as foreign, dangerous, and aggressive (Balci & Motika 2007, 335–353). In this situation, the Muslim community has had to develop various strategies for coexistence with ethno-religious nationalism (Zviadadze 2022).¹⁷ Even today, within the dominant national narrative, representatives of this religious minority are ascribed characteristics perceived as incompatible with Georgian national identity.

For decades in post-Soviet Georgia, religions were largely discussed through the prism of state policy and the dominant religion, Orthodox Christianity (Zedania 2009). In contemporary Georgia, however, only a small portion of research addresses the everyday lives or religious specificities of minorities.¹⁸ For part of the population, Georgian citizenship is associated with being both ethnically Georgian and Orthodox Christian, while other religious or ethnic groups in the country are perceived as “foreign” and “unacceptable” cultures. This position becomes particularly visible in public debates over religious buildings. For example, the construction of Batumi new mosque has been delayed since 2017. As a result, members of Achara’s Muslim community have been forced to pray outdoors, despite harsh climatic conditions, while in the very area allocated for the mosque, seven Orthodox churches have been built without permits¹⁹. Clearly, this points to discriminatory treatment on the basis of religion. Under such circumstances, it becomes especially important to study the perspectives of religious minorities as they navigate coexistence with state and dominant religious discourses.

The Importance of Ethnographic Research in the Study of Religion

In contemporary scholarship, critiques of secularization theory have been accompanied by a growing recognition of the need for in-depth study of the phenomenon of religion. Within the latest paradigm, quantitative research methods long established in sociology are not sufficient for analyzing religion (McGuire 2008). Descriptions of believers’ affiliations, measurements of attendance at rituals, or other “statistical variables” do not provide a comprehensive picture of reality, since the boundaries between “traditional” and “non-traditional,” or “sacred” and “profane,” are fragile (Ammerman 2013). The focus of research must therefore expand to include the perspectives of social actors, how they understand, translate, and reinterpret religious experiences (Orsi 2010). An anthropological approach to the study of religion enables multi-dimensional research, helping us to see its social, cultural, and political significance. At the same time, ethnographic research allows the study of religion not from an atheistic, secular, or statist discourse position, but from the standpoint of local culture, socio-political dynamics, and religion itself (Geertz 1973).

Ethnographic research is particularly important for the analysis of religion in the post-Soviet context, as it provides access to and amplifies the voices of marginalized actors. One of the advantages of this anthropological

¹⁷ In Achara, the strategies employed by the Muslim community are described in the article by Sopho Zviadadze. See: Zviadadze, Sophie. *Many faces of Islam Post-Soviet Georgia*, (Muslims of Post-Communist Eurasia, 2022). [link](#) Last accessed: 18.04.2025.

¹⁸ For example, the studies of K. Gurchiani, S. Zviadadze, and M. Darchiashvili examine the specificities of religious minorities in Georgia. On the Muslim community in Achara, see: Zviadadze, Sophie. *Many Faces of Islam in Post-Soviet Georgia* (in *Muslims of Post-Communist Eurasia*, 2022). [link](#) and Darchiashvili, Mariam. *Informal Networks in the Black Sea Region: The Case of Georgian Muslim Boarding Houses*. (Journal of Religion in Europe, 2021). [link](#) Last accessed April 17, 2025.

The experience of coexistence between Christian and Muslim groups in a multi-ethnic environment is examined in Ketevan Gurchiani’s article: Gurchiani, Ketevan. *Baptizing into Kin: Religion and Peace in a Multi-ethnic Village in Georgia*, (Journal of Religion in Europe, 2021). [link](#) Last accessed: 17.04.2025.

¹⁹ See: [link](#) Last accessed: 20.04.2025

method is its ability to capture the experiences of those who remain outside hegemonic narratives (Abu-Lughod 1991; Ortner 1995). Gayatri Spivak has described these as “subaltern voices.” Such individuals often include religious minorities, critically minded believers, women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and others (Spivak 1988).

Rather than relying only on surveys and interviews, ethnography creates the basis for analyzing everyday practices, situational contexts, and power relations within local settings (Geertz 1973; Mahmood 2005). According to Michel Foucault, ethnography is part of the anthropologist’s “toolkit”, “not a theory but an instrument, a logic of the specificity of power relations and struggles” (Foucault 1980: 145). Ethnography makes it possible to reveal hidden power structures, as well as to identify how people perceive, internalize, and resist these forms of power (Dirks 2001), especially in contexts where the boundary between clerical authority and state power is blurred (Asad 2003). Through ethnographic inquiry, it also becomes possible to access the discursive and formative meaning of sermons. For example, sermons in which clergy criticize “European values,” or attribute an individual’s misfortune to “Western corruption,” should not be read simply as the opinion of a single clergyman, but as part of a broader discursive and ideological formation. Within this framework, religious discourse can function as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1991). Ethnographic research thus enables in-depth exploration of the emotional texture of religious life, rituals, and competing discourses (Csordas 1994).

At the same time, ethnography offers a “bottom-up” approach to accessing macro-political processes. By means of micro-level analysis, it creates the possibility of connecting to macro structures, as described in Ginsburg and colleagues’ study of media and cultural production (Ginsburg et al., 2002). Ethnography helps us to determine how geopolitical orientations, gender politics, and national sentiments are linked to everyday practices - specifically, how the “global” is refracted through the “local” (Appadurai 1996; Ortner 2006). In this way, ethnography enables the study of macro structures through micro-level research, as demonstrated in Ferguson and Gupta’s work on state power and spatial practices (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Ethnography provides access to a complex and nuanced field. In particular, it helps us identify how privileged positions are enacted in interaction with political discourse. For instance, during sermons clergy may not make direct political appeals, but they often repeat the narratives and coded messages of particular political parties, what James Scott has called “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990). This constitutes a form of coded communication in the public sphere, the analysis of which is made possible through anthropological research. Here, discourse is not treated as a passive reflection of ideology, but rather as a performative and contested space (Butler 1997). Observing the audiences of sermons enables us to understand how religious authority is perceived on the ground, what listeners remember and what they forget from the messages they hear. Studies of evangelical prayer practices demonstrate that participant observation allows researchers to grasp the significance of religion for individuals, by tracing how sermons are perceived and interpreted during ritual and by examining their effects on behavior and narrative practices (Luhmann 2012).

Ethnography makes it possible to contextualize ambivalences and contradictions. Its aim is not to produce uniform answers or homogeneous conclusions, but rather to investigate diversity. Quantitative studies may describe the growing dynamics of religious affiliation, but they cannot explain why believers often express ideas that appear to be mutually contradictory (Wuthnow 2012). The ethnographic method helps us analyze such ambivalent cases, for example, when a clergyman condemns “the West” while simultaneously praising Western systems of social welfare, or when a female believer considers herself loyal to the Church while also criticizing its hierarchy and environment. Similar ambivalent views are described in Robbins’s study of Christian pilgrims (Robbins 2004). According to Lambek, the presence of such contradictory elements in believers’ moral reasoning is characteristic of everyday religion (Lambek 2010). Moreover, ambivalences are analytically valuable, as they highlight the specific features of religious, social, and political life (Das 2007). Ethnographic research enables the study of these complex issues, delving into the understudied spaces where faith meets doubt, doctrine intersects with

pragmatism, and theology intertwines with politics, spaces that Schielke and Debevec have referred to as the “ordinary ethics” of religious life (Schielke and Debevec 2012).

Empirical Part of the Study

This chapter consists of three sections. It begins with an ethnographic analysis of the general religious environment in three Orthodox churches, followed by a detailed description of central and peripheral churches and their sermons. Finally, it examines the religious environment and sermons at the Batumi “*Orta Jame*” mosque.

Ethnography of Religious Spaces

As a result of ethnographic research, the general features of the religious environment in Georgian Orthodox churches during the pre-election period were analyzed. These included the ritual of the Sunday liturgy, prayer and preaching practices, and the main characteristics of both the clergy and the congregation.

Sunday Liturgy

In all three churches, Sunday prayer services take place in the morning hours. In the Sioni and Gldani churches, the service begins at 9:00 a.m., while in Sameba Cathedral it starts at 10:00 a.m. About ten minutes before the beginning of the service, chanting commences. The chanters call the congregation toward the temple and invite them to prayer. Then, priests standing at the ambo recite prayers, read excerpts from the Bible, and perform the liturgical ritual. At the start of the Sunday service, the number of people present in the church is relatively small. However, the number of worshippers gradually increases, reaching its peak about 20–30 minutes after the service begins.

The Sunday liturgy consists of three stages in total: I. Proskomedie – the blessing of the bread, wine, and sacred objects required for the performance of the Eucharist. II. Liturgy of the Catechumens – the stage during which the churches are most crowded; even unbaptized persons are permitted to attend. III. Liturgy of the Faithful – attended only by baptized persons. During this third stage, the Sunday service approaches its conclusion, and the Communion of the faithful begins. Frequently, before the commencement of Communion, a member of the clergy briefly addresses the congregation, touching upon the theme that will later be expanded during the sermon. The Sunday sermon begins after the completion of the blessing ritual. In most cases, during the service in all three churches, at least 90 people gather weekly. However, in the months of July and August the number of worshippers decreases, with an average of about 80 people attending Sunday prayer in these months.

It is noteworthy that Sunday prayer is always attended by more people than the sermon. Members of the congregation explain this by noting that, “*Not everyone has a spiritual father; some simply come to pray. ...If they have not given confession, they do not stay for Communion*” (female, 62 years old, parishioner of Sameba Cathedral).

Overall, the Sunday liturgy, including all three stages, lasts on average about 90 minutes. The duration of the service depends on several factors, such as the schedule of the clergy, religious holidays, or the number of worshippers present. The liturgy tends to last longer when the church is more crowded, as well as during religious holidays. On major holidays, the duration of the service sometimes exceeded two hours and thirty minutes. The Sunday sermon most often begins after the conclusion of the prayer and the rite of blessing. In some cases, however, clergy begin the sermon before Communion, briefly outlining the issues they intend to address, and then continue the sermon after the Communion has ended.

Prayer

Prayer is attended by believers of all ages and genders, although women are in the majority. During prayer, men and boys inside the church typically stand in a single row facing the ambo, to the right-hand side, while women gather on the opposite side. For members of the congregation, standing in a specific place according to gender often appears as an unconscious act. As one parishioner explained: *"I go where the women stand. If I see someone I know, I stand there"* (female, 65 years old, parishioner of Sioni Cathedral).

Nevertheless, the gendered organization of space within the church recalls the phenomenon Judith Butler has described as *performative gendering* (Butler 1990). The construction of the religious space takes place along pre-existing gender distinctions, despite the absence of any formal requirement or necessity for such division. During prayer, members of the congregation are expected to stand quietly, refrain from movement, and listen to the prayer *attentively*. For example, the rector of Sioni Patriarchal Cathedral, Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, frequently instructed congregants to listen attentively, remain silent, and stand still during prayer.

On several occasions, observations recorded instances in which a priest interrupted the prayer in order to reprimand the congregation. For instance, during the liturgy on June 9, the Protopresbyter halted the prayer, declaring: *"One of the chanters has been possessed by the devil and is speaking along with me. ... This is unacceptable. It is a great sin. Our Patriarch has used this word, and I will allow myself to repeat it... this is degradation."* On three further occasions, the Protopresbyter requested that small children be taken out of the church due to noise. The rector was also critical of tourists. For example, in August, during one Sunday prayer service, he reprimanded a tourist who approached an icon during the liturgy. From the ambo, he said "Stop," and then asked an English-speaking altar server to explain to the tourist that it was forbidden to walk around the church during the Sunday liturgy. As for the local congregation, he once expelled a worshipper from the church, remarking: *"Such a grown person cannot understand that one should not walk during the prayer."* The demand for stillness and silence during prayer resonates with Mary Douglas's concepts of *purity* and the *danger of pollution* (Douglas 1966). At the same time, the requirement of obedience recalls Michel Foucault's notion of the *disciplinary society*, oriented toward the production of docile bodies (Foucault 1977).

Noise is most frequently encountered in Sameba Cathedral. However, since it is a large ecclesiastical complex with numerous loudspeakers installed throughout its territory, the clergy rarely respond to the noise. At the same time, during the Sunday liturgy, part of the congregation moves about the church without restrictions: lighting candles, making the sign of the cross before icons, and quietly conversing with acquaintances. In contrast, at the Church of St. George of Lomisi in Gldani, the congregation is always required to remain silent. With regard to movement, however, they enjoy greater freedom than the congregation of Sioni. The priest only once reminded parishioners that *"walking during prayer is not appropriate."*

Sermon

The Sunday sermon begins after the conclusion of the prayer and lasts on average about 10 minutes. Since understanding the biblical passage read during the service requires a certain level of theological knowledge, and its meaning is not always clear to the congregation, during the sermon the parish priest explains the content of the passage and offers the worshippers his interpretation of the biblical text. At the same time, the priest also addresses

current social challenges and problems in the course of the sermon. In some cases, the sermon lasts longer, depending on both the religious holiday and the size of the congregation, as well as the disposition of the priest. For example, in May and October, several sermons lasted as long as 20 minutes. In contrast, in July, when fewer worshippers attended the service, the clergy limited themselves to shorter sermons of about 6–7 minutes, and the Sunday liturgy concluded more quickly. It is also noteworthy that the length of sermons depends on the subject under discussion. Sermons that addressed ongoing events or current developments in the country tended to last longer. Across all three churches, the average length of the sermon was approximately 10 minutes.

It is also noteworthy that the content of sermons is quickly forgotten by the congregation, even though the “*father*” represents a religious authority for them. Shortly after the conclusion of the sermon, worshippers often found it difficult to recall its content, which on several occasions became a source of reproach from the priests. Clergy frequently reminded parishioners to listen attentively. The priests’ insistence on “*attentive listening*” and silence represents not only an attempt to discipline the congregation, but also the internalization of moral control. This corresponds to Talal Asad’s conception of religion as a discursive tradition that trains bodies and desires (Asad 2003).

At the conclusion of the liturgy, part of the congregation gathers in the churchyard. There, some worshippers speak with clergy, ask for blessings, greet acquaintances, and often discuss matters of personal importance. In the churchyard, conversations most frequently revolve around everyday events, social and economic difficulties, and ongoing national developments. In all three churches, the most common topic of discussion concerned emigration and the prospect of leaving Georgia, since in the context of rising inflation and high unemployment, remaining in the country is associated with a life perceived as lacking prospects. The last to leave the churchyard are most often elderly women.

Description of the Congregation

The congregations of all three churches share similar demographic characteristics. The majority of parishioners are middle-aged and elderly individuals. Among women, the age of worshippers generally begins from around 50 years, with the most active participants being elderly women between the ages of 60 and 70. Among men, the age of worshippers usually begins from around 40 years. Compared to women of the same age group, men aged 60–70 attend church less frequently. In all three churches, the majority of parishioners are ethnically Georgian.

Across the three churches, women constitute approximately 60–65 percent of the congregation. Female worshippers often know one another well, since many are neighbors or relatives, and they frequently attend church together. Elderly women in particular are the most active members of the congregation. For many of them, participation in church life forms part of their everyday routine. It is also noteworthy that, in certain cases, women are employed by the church in roles such as candle-sellers or cleaners.

The choice of a particular church by parishioners is determined by factors such as proximity to one’s place of residence, the presence of a preferred priest, or having acquaintances in that church. In the case of central urban churches, additional factors include the church’s history (as with Sioni Cathedral) and its prestige (as with Sioni and Sameba), since churches located in central districts are perceived by some worshippers as more prestigious due to their historical significance and role.

The number of parishioners varies by church, yet in all three churches at least 90 individuals attend the Sunday liturgy on a weekly basis. During the observation period, attendance decreased in the summer months,

particularly in July and August, but increased again in September and October. Those worshippers who attend services weekly tend to know one another well. Within the congregation, there is a group of approximately 10–15 parishioners who are especially active in church life. Unlike ordinary members, they maintain frequent and direct contact with the clergy. They also disseminate information to other worshippers on religious matters (Christian teachings, saints, Christian Holy Days, rules of conduct within the sacred space of the church, and more). Priests often ask them to help spread information. For this purpose, they rely both on social media and on personal connections. As one parishioner explained: *“Some people don’t have Facebook, so I call them by phone. ... There have been cases when the father asked us to check in on someone who hadn’t appeared for a long time, and we contact them to see if something is wrong”* (female, 48 years old, parishioner of Sioni Cathedral). At the same time, these active parishioners collect funds for various needs, organize excursions, and undertake other activities. For instance, on September 29, the active members of Sioni Cathedral, with the blessing and encouragement of the priest, began preparations for an excursion on the occasion of the holiday of Svetitskhovloba. The location was selected by the clergy, but the excursion itself was financed through parishioners’ contributions. This practice is also widespread in the churches of Gldani and Sameba.

On certain occasions, mainly during religious holidays, parishioners attend church together with their family members. For example, on June 23, the holiday of Pentecost, people of all ages were present at the Sunday sermon. Often, older women in families ask their children and grandchildren to attend church services and take pride when their relatives are present at prayer. As one respondent explained: *“Because of work they are so tired, it is difficult for them to find the time, they cannot come every week. I come and pray on their behalf. But we are a religious family... today is Pentecost, and all of my family is here.”* (female, 66 years old, parishioner of Sioni Cathedral). When families attend church together, parents often bring their young children with them.

Teenagers and young people between the ages of 12 and 25 are the least frequently observed in church. In some cases, the younger generation is brought by their parents at significant moments in their lives (for example, when entering university, before military service, or prior to traveling abroad). On such occasions, parents often ask the *“father”* to bless their children. In rare cases, young people also serve as altar servers or chanters. Overall, interest in regular church attendance is less pronounced among youth. For this reason, priests often reproach family members who are present at prayer for not bringing their children. As one respondent recounted: *“Father David has asked me many times why I don’t bring my children. What can I do? They are teenagers, they have school, sports, they want to rest, they have other interests. They do believe in God, and I do talk to them about Christianity.”* (female, 43 years old, parishioner of Sioni Cathedral).

As for young chanters and altar servers, they usually explain their interest in religion through their religious family background, *“closeness to the father,”* and personal motivation. One respondent recounted: *“My family has long been part of Father Giorgi’s congregation. My mother used to take me to church from childhood. She wanted me to become an altar server, so she asked the father, and he gave us his blessing. Since then, I have been serving as an altar server.”* (male, 24 years old, altar server at Sioni Cathedral). Another explained: *“The father is such a kind and good person that I enjoy being close to him.”* (male, 22 years old, parishioner of Gldani Church).

The congregation also differs according to economic status. Three socioeconomic groups can be distinguished: (1) wealthy, (2) middle, and (3) economically vulnerable. The wealthy group consists of businesspeople and their family members, who make large donations to the church or present personal gifts to priests. They mostly attend church during major religious holidays. This group is more often found in the central churches of Tbilisi, Sameba and Sioni, since central churches are regarded as more prestigious, as one respondent noted. The middle group consists primarily of employed individuals who regularly attend Sunday services (at least once a week or every two weeks). The economically vulnerable group is made up mostly of elderly people, primarily retired women. They attend not only Sunday liturgies, but also Saturday services and prayers on other days.

The attitude of the congregation toward the clergy is positive. For parishioners, the priest is an unquestioned authority to whom they turn for blessings and advice. For elderly women in particular, the priest is a figure close to God, someone who knows the Holy Scriptures better than they do. As one respondent noted: *"I do not come to church simply to sit, I come to hear the word of God. Father Giorgi proclaims this word."* (female, 69 years old, parishioner of Sioni Cathedral). For the congregation, the supreme authority is the Patriarch of Georgia. As one female worshipper explained: *"I am not interested in politics. There are already so many problems every day, why should I also think about politics... If my Patriarch calls on me to go to the elections and vote for Georgian Dream, I will do it, because I trust my Patriarch."* (female, 73 years old, parishioner of Sameba Cathedral). When speaking about the Patriarch, parishioners expressed reverence. Several added that *"many people try to use him."* For example: *"Our Patriarch has become so weak that some people try to take advantage of him... there were even rumors about his close circle, about Shorena... and of course journalists are quick to pick it up. But still, we do not fully understand what is happening. One thing I know is that I trust no one more than the Patriarch."* (female, 68 years old, parishioner of Sameba Cathedral).

In the churchyard, parishioners rarely discuss politics. When asked about politics, three main positions emerged among them: 1. *"I am not interested in politics."* 2. *"I prefer the ruling party over the others."* 3. *"No one is really for the people. Everyone works for themselves."* During conversations about elections, most parishioners expressed indifference. A common attitude was that elections would not change anything in their lives: *"I am not planning to go to the elections. It makes no difference. ... The main thing is that we all take care of our own work, live honestly, and by doing so help our country."* (female, 50 years old, parishioner of Gldani Church).

At the same time, during the Sunday service, the Church calls upon parishioners to focus not on *"worldly problems"* but on spiritual life, for which church attendance is essential:

"It is regrettable that people's minds are not turned toward God... In this world the devil has his temptations and seeks to bind human beings to the earth, to this world. ... Many people do not think about being pure before God, in spirit and in body. ... Even those burdened with grave sin often do not regard themselves as such. ... If we abandon the Church, we will lose everything. The Church is the pillar and foundation of truth. It raises us in this world, teaches us, protects us from the sin. It gives us the true teaching so that a person does not live and work with a confused mind... so that they are not on the side of the devil through their actions, their thinking, their way of life in this world. ... We must cling to God. We must renounce sin... it is we who feed sin. ... Attachment to this world prevents us from looking upward to heaven. A life of dignity is only possible in Christ, through keeping God's commandments and overcoming the body. ... A person experiences great joy when God's grace is within them and they are ready to dedicate their entire life to God, ready to forget everything in this world, just so that this divine joy is never taken away. ... By following the impure desires of the body and by laziness, people distance themselves from God and lose divine grace. ... It all begins with not attending prayer, not coming to the liturgy. That is the beginning of downfall and estrangement from God. In this way, one loses the path to God." (Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni Cathedral, sermon of June 9).

By urging a focus on *"heavenly"* matters instead of worldly concerns, the clergy transforms parishioners' distrust and disappointment toward politics and *"earthly affairs"* into spiritual indifference. At the same time, this reinforces their own religious authority. Within this narrative, the Church is framed as the highest moral and spiritual authority in contrast to temporary institutions such as the state and the events unfolding in the country. Priests exercise pastoral power (Foucault 1982) over believers, especially when they provide the guidance deemed necessary for spiritual salvation. This discourse aims to transmit *"truth"* to the congregation. The priest generates *"regimes of truth"* and subject positions (Foucault 1980), thereby assigning parishioners their proper place. In this way, apolitical orientation is presented in the narrative as a virtue, while spiritual life emerges as the only authentic form of social engagement. Since priests are perceived by much of the congregation as authoritative and

trustworthy figures, their appeals become internalized in parishioners' consciousness. As one parishioner explained: *"Governments come and go. So many have already changed. In the church, they teach us something more important. Spiritual life is what matters, not all these things that will pass."* (female, 56 years old, parishioner of Sioni Cathedral).

The narrative suggests that worldly events are temporary and earthly, whereas the Church offers eternal truth and clarity. The tactic of instilling fear of the devil is aimed at generating moral anxiety among believers and fostering their attachment to the Church. Within this fear-based narrative, critical thinking and civic engagement are equated with spiritual danger. When the priest preaches that failure to attend the liturgy results in *"losing the path toward God,"* spiritual identity is defined as obedience to the priest. This creates an unconditional hegemony over the individual, leaving no space for debate or deliberation. Such rhetoric is an example of hegemonic soft power (Gramsci 1971). It also resembles the suppression of agonistic politics, whereby a potential space of contestation is transformed into one of obedience and indifference (Mouffe 2005). Through the depoliticization of the congregation, the Church privileges a passive society, one less likely to demand social reforms or to resist injustice. According to Gramsci, such a strategy serves the interests of both religious and political elites, for whom the existence of a compliant and nihilistically oriented society is advantageous (Gramsci 1971).

In this context, the demand to concentrate solely on "spiritual life," in Gramsci's words, represents a form of ideological pacification (Gramsci 1971). Its purpose is to deprive people, especially the youth, of the right to political subjectivity, privileging moral obedience over civic engagement. It is noteworthy that church representatives most actively call on young people to "return to the bosom of the Church," since "the devil never sleeps" and "tries to lead them toward false values." The particular focus on youth can be explained, on the one hand, by the younger generation's distinct values (which pose a threat to conservative religious norms), and on the other hand, by the participation of some young people in the protest demonstrations of 2024.

At first glance, members of the clergy appear to treat parishioners equally. However, in certain cases, congregants speak of the privileged status of specific individuals and families. For example, on August 4 at Sioni Cathedral, the regular Sunday liturgy was not held because a memorial service was conducted for Tengiz Tsertsvadze,²⁰ a Georgian immunologist and professor. Parishioners who had come to pray were sent back, which provoked not only resentment but also a sense of disappointment: *"They did not tell us that there would be no service today; otherwise I would not have come. I arrived and found the cathedral closed. They said there was a memorial and no liturgy. The priest blessed us quickly and sent us away.... When ordinary people die, it is not like this for them... You can only ask the priest to mention them briefly after the sermon... I know that no one will conduct my memorial service at Sioni."* (Woman, 57, member of the Sioni congregation). This points to the existence of a field of symbolic capital within the church (Bourdieu 1990), in which access to ritual services and dignified treatment is unequally distributed. As anthropologist Katherine Verdery (1996) observes, characteristic of the post-Soviet context is that religious hegemonies, rather than serving as egalitarian spaces, often become sites for the accumulation of elites.

Discussions of social inequality also arise in the Sameba (Holy Trinity) Cathedral: *"It depends on who you are, who you know, and what gift you give to the priest... They expect more from the wealthy and treat them differently. People like me are only useful if they need a cleaner."* (Woman, 74, member of the Sameba congregation). This comment represents an example of a "hidden transcript" (Scott 1990), in which the speaker does not openly confront the Church but instead expresses dissatisfaction with inequality and systemic exclusion. However, such

²⁰ In 2020, Tengiz Tsertsvadze was awarded the title of Honorary Citizen for his contribution to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. He was also a recipient of the Presidential Order of Excellence. For additional information about Tengiz Tsertsvadze, see: [link](#) Last accessed: 22.04.2025

critical attitudes were recorded only in isolated cases, which may indicate the internalized perception of inequality among parishioners. It is also noteworthy that the core messages transmitted by clergy during sermons are, on the one hand, internalized in parishioners' consciousness. For instance, in the churchyard, worshippers frequently discussed the necessity of attending church services and living piously. On the other hand, some parishioners listen to sermons selectively, assigning importance only to those exhortations that they already share, while rejecting or criticizing others outside the church, in more private and protected spaces. This suggests that parishioners are not passive recipients of clerical rhetoric; rather, they listen, filter, and at times resist particular messages. At the same time, however, there appears to be a need for "protected spaces" in which critical opinions can be expressed without resorting to "hidden transcripts." For example, parishioners rarely articulate positions on ongoing national issues within the church. In several instances, they added that the churchyard is not the place for such discussions.

Description of Church Personnel

The number of church personnel depends on the physical size of the building. Thus, the Holy Trinity (Sameba) Cathedral employs the largest number of staff, followed by Sioni Patriarchal Cathedral, while Lomisi St. George Church in Gldani employs fewer people due to its smaller size. At the top of the personnel hierarchy are the clergy. In addition, church personnel include altar servers, chanters, candle women, and cleaners. They differ not only by age and gender, but also by social class and economic status. In this hierarchy, candle women and cleaners occupy the lowest positions, followed by chanters, then altar servers, with priests at the top. The number of priests varies depending on the church.

Numerically, the largest group among church personnel is the altar servers, whose number often exceeds twenty. *"Altar servers can be both children and adults. What matters is that they have faith."* (Woman, 53, member of Sioni Cathedral). Adult altar servers are often remunerated by the Patriarchate. The group includes people from diverse social backgrounds, ranging from children of distinguished families to those from more economically vulnerable households. To become an altar server, frequent church attendance and an interest in religion are required. *"You also need to know the priest. There is a candle woman here, she was in great need, and now both of her sons became altar servers."* (Woman, 78, member of Sameba Cathedral).

Altar servers often described priests in positive terms: *"The priest has a good sense of humor, is warm and kind, although he dislikes unpunctuality; when someone forgets to perform a task, he sometimes gets angry for 2–3 minutes... I know many do not like the Church's position, but he does not restrict my freedom. I don't know, that's my opinion. Our priest is not the type to say, 'Don't do this. Don't go to a demonstration.' Probably because of his attitude, I am an altar server."* (Man, 25, altar server of Gldani Church). Similarly: *"Father Giorgi is demanding and strict, but forgiving."* (Man, 38, altar server of Sioni Cathedral).

Candle women also play an important role in the daily life of churches. Each church employs at least two. Their number depends on the size of the church. One candle woman sells candles, icons, and other religious items in a booth located near the church. The second "candle woman" organizes the candles lit before icons, removing burnt-out candles from the candleholder and cleaning the icons. Worshippers also refer to her as a candle woman. At the same time, they provide parishioners with various information, mostly regarding religious holidays.

During prayer, the choir of chanters plays an important role. At Sameba Cathedral, the chanters are not visible, as they sing from a space located behind the ambo. At Sioni Cathedral, however, designated spaces for them are

located on both sides of the church, on one side stand young men, while on the other are older individuals, mostly women. As parishioners noted, *“chanting and being an altar server is no longer as prestigious as it was 10–15 years ago.”* (Woman, 44, parishioner of Sameba Cathedral). Due to its smaller size, the choir of chanters at Lomisi St. George’s Church in Gldani is also smaller.

Church personnel generally speak of the local clergy with reverence. Only one instance of a critical position was recorded: *“It seems we are supposed to be equal, but it’s not like that. Faith alone is not enough. If you are not on good terms with the priest, you will have a hard time here. They won’t keep you for long.”* (Woman, Sameba Cathedral).

The existence of social hierarchy among church personnel is also evident at Sioni Patriarchal Cathedral. On September 15, after the sermon, the church leader, Giorgi Zviadadze, invited the head of the altar servers and chairperson of the Tbilisi City Council, Giorgi Tkemaladze, to the ambo and presented him with an “icon painted by the Patriarch.” The protopresbyter referred to him as the *“head of altar servers.”* *“Today, I want to reward our head of altar servers, Mr. Giorgi Tkemaladze. True, he holds a high position in secular life and is not an ordinary person, but for me he is part of church life. I wish to express gratitude and respect. In this case, I am rewarding him solely as the head of altar servers.”* (Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni Cathedral, September 15). During the observation period, Giorgi Tkemaladze attended Sioni Cathedral only a few times. When asked, the church’s altar servers refrained from commenting on the matter. This precedent may indicate the presence of patronage between religious and political elites. Such practices are characteristic of states with religious nationalism, where politicians use religious spaces to reinforce their authority (Bellah 1967; Brubaker 2012). In such cases, in the pursuit of political legitimacy, the boundaries between the sacred and the secular in the state become increasingly blurred (Asad 2003).

Central and Peripheral Parish Churches

Since significant differences were observed in the sermons of churches located in central and peripheral districts of Tbilisi during the pre-election period, it is important to review them in detail.

Holy Trinity Cathedral (Sameba)

The Holy Trinity Cathedral has been functioning since 2004. The total area of the church complex is 5,000 square meters. The complex includes churches, a church shop, refectories, and a large courtyard. During the pre-election period, no political posters or campaign materials were observed on church grounds.

Upon entering the church, attention was drawn to several boxes placed near the stands selling candles and icons. These boxes were always filled with headscarves and cloths, which worshippers used to cover bare parts of their bodies. Priests, altar servers, and candle women strictly monitored the dress code inside the church. During the observation period, many people were directed to the boxes, and in several cases, altar servers handed cloths to visitors dressed in shorts, asking them to cover parts of their bodies, which often surprised tourists.

The head of the Holy Trinity Cathedral is the Patriarch's locum tenens, Metropolitan Shio (Mujiri), who delivers the Sunday sermon each week. On rare occasions, mainly during his travels, he is replaced by Archimandrite Ioane Mchedlishvili. Around 20 clergymen are present during the liturgy, although they preach on different days of the week. During Sunday liturgy, some of them (4–5 priests) administer communion to the worshippers. Each priest has his own parishioners.

On average, about 120 people attend Sunday liturgy. However, many of them are tourists, since the cathedral is considered one of Tbilisi's main landmarks. Georgian citizens are numerically predominant mainly during the "family name blessing" ceremonies. By the start of the sermon, around 70–80 people usually remain inside the cathedral.

The average length of the sermons is 7 minutes. Most of the sermons address religion, Christianity, and examples of "pious and righteous living." The contributions of Ilia II to strengthening the Orthodox Church in Georgia are often mentioned. During sermons, emphasis is placed on the importance of religion. A commonly expressed position is that *"faith has preserved Georgian traditions, our dignity, and our identity,"* which represents an example of religious nationalism, in which religious institutions assume the role of guardians of national traditions (Brubaker 2012). The Sunday sermons were devoid of political content. Compared to the other two Tbilisi churches under study, the sermons at the Holy Trinity Cathedral were politically more neutral and refined. No explicit political messages or calls to political action were observed during the sermons.

In certain cases, latent references were observed that alluded to the political processes taking place in the country at the time. For example, on September 15, after reflecting on the idea of declaring Orthodox Christianity the state religion, the sermon recalled the Gospel parable of Matthew about *"the rich young man who wished to follow Jesus, but could not fully embrace Christ's ideas, as he was unable to renounce his wealth and worldly desires."* (Shio Mujiri, Sameba Cathedral, September 15). This may point to either the failure to reach consensus between the ruling party and representatives of the clergy, or to the existence of behind-the-scenes negotiations.

It is noteworthy that on August 25, at a meeting with voters in Ambrolauri, Bidzina Ivanishvili stated that "in the case of obtaining a constitutional majority," in addition to the three promises already made, the ruling party *Georgian Dream* also had a fourth one: *"a matter of existential importance for our country and faith, on which*

active work is underway, and in the near future we will inform the public about a major decision."²¹ On August 27, clerics confirmed to journalists that representatives of the ruling party *Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia* had indeed been in consultation with clergy regarding a constitutional initiative to declare Orthodox Christianity the state religion. This was confirmed by Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze and Metropolitan Nikoloz Pachuashvili, both of whom opposed the initiative.²² Subsequently, on August 29, the Patriarchate discussed the government's pre-election proposal to declare Orthodox Christianity the state religion. Despite differences of opinion, representatives and bishops of the Patriarchate agreed on a unified position, according to which such a decision, involving constitutional amendments, could not be adopted in an expedited manner.²³ This position resembles the institutional survival strategy described by Karpov and Lisovskaya in their studies of religious institutions in post-atheist Russia (Karpov & Lisovskaya 2007). The goal of this strategy is to preserve moral authority in society by avoiding full alignment with political forces. Meanwhile, Ivanishvili's initiative can be seen as an attempt to use religion as electoral capital, strategically mobilizing religious themes to gain voter support (Koesel 2014).

The sermon of September 15 may be understood as a symbolic commentary by a church leader on the political opportunism of the ruling party, a coded message rather than an act of open confrontation, what Scott calls "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990). The timing of the sermon, which coincided with the period of negotiations over the government initiative, resembles a case of "strategic ambiguity" within a religious message (Karpov 2010). The use of coded religious discourse, specifically, the deployment of biblical narratives for political commentary, is a common practice in countries where religious institutions maintain complex relations with political authority (Casanova 1994; Warner 2000). Particularly noteworthy is the analysis of the parable. It may serve as a reminder of the church's spiritual and moral authority vis-à-vis the material and political world and thus represent an act of "symbolic resistance" on the part of the church (Brewer et al. 2010). Just like the rich young man who found it difficult to renounce material advantages for the sake of spiritual life, the government and the political elite may publicly support the church, seeking symbolic or electoral benefits, yet not fully share its moral and spiritual principles, nor be ready for the necessary compromise. Overall, the message appears to be a coded indication of failed cooperation.

In conclusion, it is important to characterize the congregation of the Trinity Cathedral (*Sameba*), which differs from the congregations of other churches. In *Sameba*, a large portion of the congregation does not know one another, and the composition of worshippers varies from week to week. Only about 40–50 people attend the services regularly. Some of them are close to the clergy or are family members; others live nearby; and some simply feel a "need to pray in the church." The most active participants are predominantly elderly women. In addition, part of the congregation holds a critical attitude toward the clergy: they come to the church only to light candles and have little interaction with priests. These "detached believers" seek a religious experience during church attendance that is separated from hierarchical authorities (Hervieu-Léger 2000). This may indicate a certain decline of trust in religious authority among some of the faithful.

For example, one respondent, after agreeing to remain anonymous, offered a rather critical assessment of the clergy of the Trinity Cathedral:

"Since I knew your grandmother, I will tell you, but don't tell anyone that I was the one who said this. ... What can I say, priests themselves do not truly follow church principles, so how can they demand it from the people? They preach one thing and do another. Look, there is this priest here, your grandmother knew him too, he used to work with us, then a man was killed, and he fled to the monastery... now he is a priest. He has a good car. He

²¹ See: [link](#) Last accessed: 20.04.2025

²² See: [link](#) Last accessed: 20.04.2025

²³ See: [link](#) Last accessed: 20.04.2025

has a business. He does not deprive his family of anything, he has a wife and children, and he also got me this job, otherwise I would have been unemployed. ... There is so much filth going on here that you would not believe me if I told you. You'd think all the crooks have gathered here. ... People see it, but they don't say anything. Some think it's a sin. Others don't want problems. They say if you speak up, you will curse your own destiny. Yes, they say, 'Do not judge.' ... We need Christ to cleanse this place."

- Elderly woman, Sameba Cathedral

This comment represents a "hidden transcript." It reflects an attempt at criticism which, under the expectation of moral surveillance, is not voiced publicly. Under hegemonic control, such truths become dangerous and threatening knowledge, something people avoid speaking about openly (Scott 1990).

Other members of the congregation avoided speaking about the clergy, expressed respect toward them, and considered any negative stories circulating about priests to be "provocations by non-believers" or mere gossip. For example, for several weeks they discussed the July incident that had spread on social media, when a priest expelled a visitor from *Sameba* for wearing shorts. "They just wanted to tarnish the name of the priests. And the journalists, see how rabid they are, always eager to find something to slander the Church with..." - Woman, 59 years old, member of the *Sameba* congregation.

By way of summary, it may be said that during the pre-election period, apart from the parable of the "rich young man," no other messages with political content were identified in *Sameba* Cathedral. The sermons were brief and were devoted mainly to reflections on biblical passages and the necessity of living a religious life. In his communication with the congregation, Shio Mujiri maintained a certain distance, refrained from commenting on ongoing political events in the country, and limited himself to theological discussion and to emphasizing the importance of faith for the Georgian nation.

Tbilisi Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition of the Mother of God

The Tbilisi Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition of the Mother of God has functioned since the 5th century and has been the Patriarchal Cathedral since 1920.²⁴ Two bell towers and a crypt are located on the church grounds, in which the Cross of St. Nino is preserved.²⁵ During the research period, no campaign materials or political posters were observed on the church premises. In their sermons, priests frequently emphasized the role of St. Nino in the spread of Christianity in Georgia, as well as the merits of kings who fought for the Christian faith. At the same time, the congregation was regularly reminded that Sioni is the Patriarchal Cathedral and occupies a special place in Georgian history. On multiple occasions, reference was also made to the great contribution of Patriarch Ilia II in preserving the faith in contemporary Georgia, as well as to the role of Sioni Cathedral itself in strengthening Orthodoxy.

²⁴ "Patriarchal Cathedral" refers to a cathedral that is directly subordinated to the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church and where the Patriarch conducts the liturgy. It represents an important religious institution where both ecclesiastical and state-religious ceremonies are held. Before the construction of the Holy Trinity (Sameba) Cathedral, the Sioni Church served as the central cathedral of the Georgian Orthodox Church, where the Patriarch of Georgia celebrated the liturgy.

²⁵ The Cross of Saint Nino is one of the most important symbols of the Georgian Orthodox Church. For more information about the cross, see: [link](#)

At the entrance to the church, attention is drawn to a sign placed in the corner marked “Dress Code,” which provides information about clothing deemed inappropriate for attending church. For example, men are prohibited from entering in shorts, while women are not allowed to enter wearing trousers. Women are required to wear headscarves and skirts. Nevertheless, during observations, violations of this “dress code” were frequently noted, though church personnel did not react to such cases. Enforcement of the dress code was mostly undertaken by elderly women, who directed younger women to a black box located at the entrance of the church, where headscarves were available.

The rector of Sioni Cathedral is Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze. On rare occasions, when he is absent, sermons are delivered by other priests. There are about ten priests in the church, each with his own congregation. During Sunday liturgy, active participants often include Deacon Father Davit, Father Giorgi, Father Ioane, and others. The church has around 20 chanters. On one side stand young male chanters (18–25 years old) dressed in blue robes, while on the other side are older chanters, both male and female, who wear burgundy-colored robes. There are also around 20 altar servers, representing different ages and social backgrounds. The average number of congregants reaches around 100 people, of whom approximately 70 remain to listen to the sermon. The average length of the sermon is 10 minutes.

In his sermons, Protopresbyter Zviadadze often referred to peace, dignity, and the role of faith in preserving the nation, as well as to the “approach of times of trial.” He stressed the importance of church attendance for the people.

The rector of the church frequently demanded complete silence and restraint from movement. During the period of observation, Giorgi Zviadadze repeatedly interrupted the liturgy in order to issue reproaches. He approached the congregation from the strict pedagogical perspective, as he put it, who teaches “not only religious life but also general rules of conduct,” since worshippers often require reminders about maintaining silence and refraining from unnecessary movement.

For example, on June 9, while pausing his sermon, the rector declared: *“Here, sacred words are being spoken, how could you not listen to them? You must be a degraded person not to listen to the holy words, not to have modesty or respect. You should not be such an ungodly person that the service has not yet ended, and you show no reverence. You must stand with humility and with awe. You must think about catching every word, not letting anything pass by. But your attention is elsewhere. Who are you then? What kind of person, what kind of believer, or what kind of citizen?”*

For the protopresbyter, the maintenance of discipline is of particular importance, which is why his communication with the congregation is often quite harsh. At one moment, he may speak about forgiveness, while the next he may interrupt the service and refer to parishioners with offensive words for “not listening.” On several occasions, due to noise, the priest even demanded that the parents of small children leave the church. In such instances, the offended individuals would try to leave as quietly as possible. Only once did a parent of an infant respond to the order, saying to a deacon: *“It’s a child, of course he will cry, what’s the problem?”*, to which she received a reproachful look from the priest and the following reply from the deacon: *“This doesn’t need much talking. People can’t pray, take the child out.”* The attempt by the clergy to control the behavior of worshippers during sermons resonates with Michel Foucault’s reflections on the “regimes of truth” and the position of the subject within power relations (Foucault 1980). As an agent constructing discourse, the clergyman, drawing on his authority, presents to the congregation a model of proper conduct and of the believer to be emulated. This constitutes, within the sacred space, an act of “truth production” by an agent of power, which expects specific behavior from the congregation and establishes control over their bodies, an instance of hegemonic effort to

obtain full obedience. At the same time, the reference to “good citizenship” illustrates an attempt to extend authority from the religious sphere into the civic sphere.

The representatives of the Sioni Patriarchal Cathedral also repeatedly addressed the issue of declining church attendance:

“Just as we have good ones, so too have many detached from the Church... first they conceal their fasting, then they do not admit that they attend church. It is no longer fashionable. ... And yet it is necessary to strengthen faith through deeds, by going to church... the time of the Antichrist is approaching.”

- Father Giorgi (Svimonishvili), sermon at Sioni, June 30.

In the sermons of the clergy at Sioni Cathedral, no direct political appeals were identified. However, their preaching did engage with social and, to some extent, political issues. Alongside religious themes, the sermons included reflections on such topics as the youth’s disinterest in religion, the possession of “wrong values,” external threats, emigration, unemployment, and the hopelessness among parishioners caused by economic problems.

It is also noteworthy that during the sermons, calls were repeatedly voiced to shift attention away from earthly life toward the afterlife: *“The main concern is not what happens here, for all of this is transient, but rather salvation, the life to come. A great trial awaits us; we will be tested by fire... Returning to the bosom of the Church is the path to salvation.”* - (Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni Cathedral, June 23) This call to transfer attention from worldly problems to the afterlife may weaken the congregation’s political engagement and reinforce apolitical attitudes or political nihilism.

Furthermore, since the congregation of Sioni Cathedral is composed primarily of older citizens, sermons frequently included appeals to “guide the youth onto the right path.” Two sermons were specifically dedicated to this theme.

The clergy’s focus on youth is particularly noteworthy in the context of the 2024 protest demonstrations, in which young people played a central role, as well as in reference to the “story of Nebuchadnezzar.” In particular, on May 12, 2024, the Patriarch of Georgia, in his address to the faithful, recalled the biblical story of Nebuchadnezzar: when King Nebuchadnezzar cast three young men into a blazing furnace, yet they survived unharmed.

“At present, our country is going through one of the most difficult stages of its development. We all desire peace, but often it is hard to achieve, because we do not act rightly, we do not turn to, nor put our trust in, the One who is the origin and source of peace, the Most Holy Trinity. I want to remind you of the true God-glorifying prayer of the three young men, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, whom the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, cast into such a fiery furnace that even those standing nearby were consumed by the flames, yet the three remained completely unharmed, for the Angel of the Lord was with them, and the heat of the fire could do them no harm. Let us beseech Almighty and All-Powerful God that, just as He saved Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael from their great trial, so too may He deliver Georgia, bless us with peace and unity.”

- Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia II, May 12, 2024.²⁶

²⁶ See: Patriarchate of Georgia. (2024, May 12). “Address of the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia to the faithful” [link](#) Last accessed: 01.08.2025

An opinion was circulated that the Patriarch issued an encrypted address, in which Bidzina Ivanishvili was compared to a robber-king, while the young people participating in the protest were standing on the side of truth and faith.²⁷ However, shortly afterwards, on the Patriarchate's website a "short note" was published: *"The address of the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia of May 12 of this year to the congregation was a call to prayer, to the preservation of peace and unity. Any attempt at its interpretation with political signs is wrong, regrettable, and a distortion of the essence of prayer. We ask the Lord to bless Georgia with peace."*²⁸

During the ethnographic research, the Patriarch's address of May 12 was mentioned neither by parishioners nor by clergy. However, reproach towards the youth was repeatedly recorded from the pulpit, which to some extent echoed the criticism of young people voiced by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze during the protest rallies.²⁹ For example, in the month of June, Father Giorgi Svimonishvili spoke about "being lost of the youth," about their "straying from the right path," and called on the congregation to bring their children to church more often: *"Very many have turned away from the Church. I think at least 50%... do not go to the temple. They are occupied with other matters. They think about other things. For them the main thing is not God, but their future life, tomorrow, and the existence they will establish for themselves after they do everything they are taught. This is a sad fact, therefore we are obliged to take care of this. We are obliged that, from the very beginning, already in school, in kindergarten, we instill in our young people that they must glorify the Lord. That they are descendants of such ancestors who sacrificed themselves for the love of God, honesty, dignity, Georgianness, faith... We must teach; we are obliged before our ancestors."* (Father Giorgi Svimonishvili, Sioni, June 30).

It is noteworthy that in "straying from the right path," along with the clothing style of the young generation, values are also implied. Namely, under "wrong values" are considered: recognition of democratic principles, freedom of religious confession, a pro-European/pro-Western course, the rule of law, tolerant attitudes towards the LGBT community, and liberal dispositions. For example: *"These values can be seen in a person's clothing, in their behavior, in their everyday life, in their relations with different persons"* (Father Giorgi Svimonishvili, Sioni, August 11).

As for the possibility of a young person choosing their religious affiliation, Father Giorgi evaluates it as follows:

"There are confessions where, proceeding from democratic principles, they try to give a child the possibility to choose religion. This is a humane approach - in quotation marks. You know what, for us this does not work. Our ancestors defined this very beautifully, and it is written very neatly in our canon law, that a child of forty days must be baptized. On the eighth day one must go to the church, the prayer of naming and birth must be read, and on the fortieth day the child must be baptized. Here our ancestors left us nothing to choose, to ponder, or to define."

- Father Giorgi (Svimonishvili), Sioni, June 30.

Also, according to an opinion expressed in the sermon, the supremacy of canon (religious) law takes precedence over the supremacy of state law:

"I will repeat once again, that whatever century it may be, canon law does not change. Any law, adopted by the government, no matter how good the government may be, or if it is a bad government, any law that contradicts

²⁷ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). (2024, May 13). "How should we understand the story of Nebuchadnezzar and the youths? – Address of Ilia II." RFE/RL. [link](#) Last accessed: 01.08.2025

²⁸ See: [link](#) Last accessed: 01.08.2025

²⁹ See: [link](#) Last accessed: 05.08.2025

canon law is considered invalid, because the nation will be corrupted by those laws which contradict canon law. The nation will forget the Lord... the nation will not walk the right path."

- Father Giorgi (Svimonishvili), Sioni, June 30.

Along with this, in his sermon of August 11, Father Giorgi compared the "generation of fathers" with the "generation of sons." The idea was voiced that the older generation carries the "right values" and has a "more proper view of events."

"We are passing on, a new generation is coming. But we must think about whether our generation, what it wanted... how our generation thinks... whether our youth, the future of our country... think and judge in the way we thought? And our ancestors? Or in their own way?... Our children do not think like us... If we want our future generation to think correctly, to repeat the path of our ancestors, to continue our path, they must think as our ancestors did, and not, a little bit in a European way, embellished. Embellished it will not work. If you do not sacrifice yourself for your country, for your faith, for your virtue, for your church, for your family, nothing will come of it."

- Father Giorgi (Svimonishvili), Sioni, August 11.

It is noteworthy that in the sermon the priest sets in opposition "thinking like our ancestors" and "thinking in a European way." Moreover, he separates Georgia's past and desired course from Europe. According to the sermon, the values of the Georgian ancestors were opposed to European values. This is an application of the "logic of difference" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Father Giorgi's above-cited sermon emphasizes Georgia's history, Georgian traditions, the deeds of the ancestors, and their distance from Europe. In this narrative, "thinking a little bit in a European way" is regarded as a shortcoming, which points to a negative attitude towards European thinking and towards Europe itself. Furthermore, in the sermons the necessity of defending "traditional values" was mentioned repeatedly.

It has to be noted that the clergyman started the sermon with a talk on "the necessity of making a choice." *"In life a person must make a choice. Of course, I am not referring to the upcoming elections. The talk is about a life choice - whether one should live a God-fearing life or a non-God-fearing one."* - Father Giorgi (Svimonishvili), Sioni, August 11. At the same time, this was the only instance during the pre-election period when the upcoming parliamentary elections were mentioned from the pulpit of Sioni Church, even if in jest. Here it is important that the priest uses the term "elections" with a double meaning. It is as if he alludes to them latently but immediately adds that the discussion is not about politics, but about making a "life-important choice" for a person.

In addition, in speaking about youth, there occurred an "accusation of the older generation." In particular, of those parents who are abroad in emigration.

"...If someone leaves, let's say, from our country, they may have some problems, economic or because of some situation... We should beg them... to return. ...But as soon as there is hardship in the family, some problem arises, they think to abandon everything and run away elsewhere. Parents abandon everything. And yet, they themselves should raise their children. Otherwise... parents and elders have gone away to earn money, and... the children are left without guardianship... they have left the little ones abandoned here. ... We think that we want something better for our children, but they cannot learn right thinking... children should be by our side. We must teach them right values. ...We must not forget our ancestors who preserved the country and the Church. They preserved our dignity - do you think there was not a worse situation then? There was a worse

situation. ... We must strive to build such a country that we remain here. Let our children be by our side, let us have a little less, but let us be together in love for one another”.

- Father Giorgi (Svimonishvili), Sioni, August 11.

Expressions such as “thinking like our Georgian ancestors,” “right values,” and “true thinking” are used in the sermon in the function of an “empty signifier” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). These concepts were employed as if they carried a meaning understandable and shared by all. Through the articulation of such “empty signifiers,” the Georgian Orthodox Church becomes involved in the process of forming a narrative about national identity, filling it with specific ideological content.

A large part of the congregation generally agrees with the sermons; however, the blaming of emigrants was met with an ambiguous reaction. This is because some members of the congregation themselves are thinking of leaving the country due to economic problems and often turn to the priest “for a blessing” before departure. This was the first instance during the observations when a part of the congregation did not agree with the priest, and the discussion on this issue continued in the churchyard. *“If it were not for Europe, many people would have died of hunger. My sister has been in Italy for eight years now. ... She left her children with us, and they lack nothing. It’s not like that [as the priest says].”*

- Woman, 39 years old, member of Sioni Church congregation.

During the pre-election period, in relation to the initiative to declare Orthodoxy as the state religion, noteworthy is the sermon of September 1, which was dedicated to an analysis of Paul the Apostle’s letter to the Corinthians.

“Today Father Giorgi read the Apostolic... It says something like this: I think that God entrusted us, the Apostles, with preaching His faith, and that before God, before this world, before angels and men, we must appear... as bread-bearers, as apostles of Christ. We must stand as apostles for Christ. ... For example, what does it mean ‘as bread for Christ’? Imagine that before a person, two people come, and there is a choice... a choice of two things to be made. On one side lies great wealth, and on the other side lies one single loaf of bread. ... And the two people must choose. Both have the right to choose and to say: I do not want this wealth; I will take this one loaf of bread. For someone, such a person may appear a fool. That is, here you must understand that the action of a God-fearing person, for another person who is not God-fearing and for whom material well-being is the most important thing, may appear as foolishness... Christian people in this world choose godliness, the fulfillment of God’s commandments, obedience to God. God-fearing people, if it is appointed to them, choose suffering... When pagan people said to the faithful that they would kill them if they did not renounce Christ and Christianity - they would be killed for this - they replied: we will never betray Christianity, we will never betray our holy Church, our holy God. For others this was foolishness, and it is precisely for this reason that Paul the Apostle writes such a thing to the Corinthians, such words: that we have become sheep for Christ, while you are wise; we are weak, while you are strong; you are honored, while we... until the last hour we experience hunger and thirst. We are naked and we are beaten. We suffer... and we labor with our own hands for those who betray us, for those who do evil to us. ... We give of ourselves and we endure... ... This is the bargain. Between believers and unbelievers. What must most trouble a believer is holiness, goodness, and godliness.”

- Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni, September 1.

The sermon appears to deal entirely with religious themes. However, considering the ongoing negotiations at that time between the ruling party and the Georgian clergy, it may carry a latent, metaphorical meaning. What

draws attention is the contrast established between the spiritual and the material; between “great wealth” and “a single loaf of bread”; between Christ’s apostles and the “non-pious” people; as well as the emphasis on the apostles’ weakness in contrast to those who possess material and political power. At the same time, the explicit mention of a “deal between believers and non-believers” may allude to the negotiations then taking place between the ruling party and the clergy. Wealth, in this context, may imply the possibility of receiving additional financial privileges, while the “single loaf of bread” could symbolize the Church’s current stance. The sermon may therefore, latently, be drawing a boundary between Church and state, possibly serving as an internal message to members of the clergy, reminding them that beyond the idea of material gain, the independence of the Church and the primacy of faith must remain their priority.

At first glance, the clergy of Sioni Cathedral appear indifferent to wider political processes. However, isolated instances of cooperation between representatives of the ruling party and the cathedral’s clergy have nonetheless been observed. Specifically, the chairman of the City Council, Giorgi Tkemaladze, serves as the head of the altar servers. Although he rarely attends services at Sioni Church, he has been honored with gifts “for his contribution to spiritual life.” In this case, the politician and public figure enjoys a certain privilege over ordinary parishioners, since at no other sermon had the clergy ever presented a gift to another member of the congregation:

“Today, I would like to present a gift to the head of our altar servers, Mr. Giorgi Tkemaladze. True, in secular life he occupies a high position - he is not an ordinary person - yet for me, he is part of spiritual life. ... In this case, I am honoring him solely as the head of the altar servers.”

- Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni, September 15

The explicit reference to his secular role as the head of the altar servers highlights the fact that the award ceremony represents an exchange of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991), in which the Church provides legitimacy to a political actor.

It is noteworthy that on September 27, the Day of the Exaltation of the Cross, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze visited Sioni Cathedral, where both the Patriarch and his locum tenens were present. Yet during the Sunday sermon on September 29, the Patriarch’s appearance overshadowed the Prime Minister’s visit, leaving it largely unnoticed. The rector of the church spoke about the significance of the Patriarch’s presence, particularly given his fragile health:

“Since the Patriarch had not visited Sioni for a long time. As you know, he is very weak. This was a great blessing for us.”

- Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni, September 29

Much of the congregation, however, was disappointed by the fact that “nowhere was it announced that the Patriarch and the government might come.” Their frustration stemmed mainly from being unable to see the Patriarch. For parishioners, Kobakhidze’s visit was of secondary importance. As one worshipper recalled:

“I didn’t know anything was planned. It was the Day of the Exaltation of the Cross, so I stopped by. I found a heavy security presence; you couldn’t get near the Patriarch. The church was filled with government people, all dressed formally. I had to stand far away, again surrounded by security. Only later did I learn that Kobakhidze was also there.”

- Woman, 56, Sioni parishioner

During his sermon, Giorgi Zviadadze also emphasized his own influence on parishioners' lives, particularly through the connections he mobilized to help unemployed individuals find jobs:

"They were members of my congregation, a married couple who were struggling greatly. They asked me more than once to use my acquaintances to help them. I did help them, both found employment. But today neither attends the service. This is ungratefulness."

- Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni, September 15

Since part of the congregation belongs to economically vulnerable groups, in other conversations parishioners also mentioned turning to priests with requests to help find employment:

"They do help us sometimes. The son of my friend was unemployed for a long time, and then the priest arranged a job for him. The important thing is that we do not forget this blessing."

- Woman, 62, Sioni parishioner

Many members of the congregation strive to maintain good relations with the clergy, which is reflected in their willingness to carry out the priests' tasks or requests:

"If they ask us to do something, what greater happiness could there be than this?"

- Woman, 70, Sioni parishioner

It is also noteworthy that, in certain cases, along with Georgian religious holidays, the commemorations of Russian saints were also mentioned and observed. For example, the Russian saint St. Matrona was recalled, as "she is a saint recognized within Orthodoxy." The congregation expressed no negative reaction to this fact. Such a precedent was not observed in Sameba (Holy Trinity Cathedral). However, Russian saints were also mentioned at Lomisi St. George's Church in Gldani, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

The Sunday sermon of October 20 is also important, because despite being held during the pre-election week, it was devoted entirely to religious themes:

"I want everyone to know that if you are not close to God, if you do not labor within the bosom of the Church, the devil will easily seize you and easily enslave you. There is nothing more terrible than the slavery of sin. God has liberated us, our Savior Jesus Christ has freed us from the slavery of sin and elevated us, opening the way to the eternal Heaven. ... This depends on us. If we live according to God's commandments and the instructions of the Holy Church, then we will have an elevated and bright life. If we humble ourselves, but do not pray, do not confess, do not attend church... then a bestial life awaits us. ... The choice lies between the individual and society. Georgia is an ancient Christian country, with ancient Orthodox traditions, and the most important thing we must carry within us is loyalty to God, loyalty to the Holy Church, and loyalty to our homeland. Love of God and love of neighbor, honesty and purity, piety and humility, laboring according to God's commandments."

- Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni, October 20

It is noteworthy that during this sermon, the theme of loyalty to the homeland was voiced for the first time. This may be connected to the fact that October 20 is also the commemoration day of Catholicos-Patriarch Ambrosi

(Khelaia), who fought for the homeland. At the end of the sermon, Ambrosi Khelaia was remembered in Sioni Cathedral as well:

“Today is the commemoration day of Saint Ambrosi the Confessor. He was the Patriarch who, during the years of Soviet rule, demonstrated the steadfastness of his will so that faith would be preserved in Georgia, and so that the entire society and the people would know that the greatest dignity a human being possesses is service to God, piety, and loyalty to God. Saint Ambrosi was arrested when the atheist regime was established. He sent a memorandum to the Genoa Conference, a letter in which he wrote about all the abominations that had taken root in Georgia as a result of atheist rule, and he called for the world’s attention to Georgia, this ancient land of Orthodox culture, at a time when churches were being demolished and clergy imprisoned. It was against all this that Saint Ambrosi, the Catholicos, raised his voice. He was arrested and tortured, and during his torture he declared: ‘My soul belongs to God, my heart to my homeland, and you may treat my body as you wish.’ Saint Ambrosi the Confessor has been canonized as a saint of the Georgian Orthodox Church by His Holiness Patriarch Ilia II and the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church.”

- Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni, October 20

In his discussion of Ambrosi Khelaia, Giorgi Zviadadze criticized the atheist regime, drew attention to the clergy’s struggle to preserve the Church, and highlighted Ambrosi Khelaia’s resistance and dedication. In Zviadadze’s discourse, the national idea and religion are intertwined, continuing the narrative of religious nationalism present in the country, according to which the Church is the defender of the Georgian idea. Within this narrative, the boundaries between national identity, history, Georgian traditions, and the Church become blurred, while religious symbolism is employed in the construction of national narratives (Smith 2003; Agadjanian 2015). The remembrance of Ambrosi Khelaia thus serves the process of consolidating Georgian identity. Catholicos Khelaia was also commemorated in the Gldani church, though in a different manner, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

By way of summary, it can be said that in the Patriarchal Cathedral of Sioni, overt political messages are almost absent. The sermons are devoted mainly to religious topics such as love of one’s neighbor, the importance of forgiveness, the purification of body and soul, life within the bosom of the Church, and adherence to God’s commandments. Reflections by clergy on ongoing events were recorded only in isolated cases. In particular, some clergy expressed negative attitudes toward Europe and voiced dissatisfaction with the youth for their allegedly “somewhat European way of thinking.”

Lomisi St. George Church in Gldani

The Church of St. George of Lomisi in Gldani is located between the III and IV micro-districts of Gldani. Compared to the central churches discussed above, it is relatively small. On its premises there is a refectory, a church shop, and a bell tower. The church also has a yard, which the congregation uses as a resting place. At the entrance, a box is placed with headscarves for female worshippers who may have forgotten to bring one. However, in the Gldani church, the dress code is not strictly enforced.

The church is served by several priests, though the sermon is always delivered by the parish priest, Father Davit (Nozadze). Services are also frequently attended by Deacon Iosebi, Deacon Akaki, and Priest Nikoloz. On average,

about 100 people attend Sunday liturgy, with roughly 70 remaining for the sermon. The average length of a sermon is 10 minutes. The church employs two female “candle-women” and has around 10 altar servers.

Compared to the central district churches, the congregation of the Gldani St. George of Lomisi Church belongs primarily to the middle and lower social classes. After the Sunday liturgy, parishioners mainly discuss social and economic issues. During the observation period, parishioners repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with recent price increases, low salaries, inadequate pensions, and the pension accumulation system, remarking that “under this government, either we will receive it or we will not.” The congregation also frequently voiced distrust toward politicians and the government, as well as a sense of hopelessness about the future. A widespread opinion was that “there is no one for ordinary people; everyone serves their own ambitions, that is why they go into politics” (woman, 62, Gldani parishioner). Similarly: “They only remember us during elections. They promise us a lot, then the elections are over, they come into government, and it is as if they forget us until the next elections” (man, 55, Gldani parishioner). This sense of hopelessness was especially evident in discussions about elections. Most parishioners did not feel that participating in elections would bring any improvement to their lives.

For the congregation, the clergy are authoritative figures. Parishioners listen obediently to the “father” during sermons, and no instances of disagreement were recorded. The parish priest, Father Davit, was described in positive terms: “a kind person,” “strict but fair,” “also has a sense of humor,” and so forth. The most active portion of the congregation is composed of women aged 40 and older.

During services, parishioners stand silently. Regarding movement within the church, Father Davit only once instructed the congregation that walking around the church was not permitted. Specifically, on October 20, he began his sermon by admonishing the congregation, explaining that before communion “excessive movement” is not allowed, as it disrupts the sacrament and distracts other worshippers.

No explicit political messages were observed in the sermons. However, on certain issues, the parish priest of this peripheral church adopted more radical positions. In particular, the sermons revealed an intolerant stance toward the LGBT community; the portrayal of western societies as corrupt; the association of liberalism with the Antichrist; descriptions of Islam as a threat; references to Russian saints; the romanticization of Russia; and so forth. These cases require detailed analysis.

During the sermon of June 16, the theme of “Sodom and Gomorrah” was invoked, with the claim that such a thing would not be permitted in Georgia. A negative stance toward “liberalism” was also expressed:

“Heresy has never existed in Georgia, which is a Christian source of pride. Let us take the examples of foreign churches, Byzantium, Rome, where heresy would arise at least once every century... They had to struggle against all of this. ... Constantinople fell, but Georgia withstood everything, and this is a sign, a hope, that in Georgia the Antichrist will never take root, no matter what liberal or other means the Antichrist may have. ... What is happening today may be painful for some... yet others approve of what is happening in schools. God forbid, but in the West, they enter schools and teach children that ‘you can be different, and it is wrong to be who you are now,’ thereby inflicting psychological trauma on children. ... The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was caused by debauchery; a corrupt society had no fear of God. In Sodom, men sought to have sexual relations with men, and this depravity caused its annihilation. Christians wish no harm to anyone. However, if someone, like the Sodomites, seeks to mislead us, we will not allow them to defile the country. I have heard in many places that a man infected with AIDS deliberately transmits AIDS to his wife without telling her, because if he is infected, he wants others to be infected as well. That is to say, if he is like this, then I too must be like this... Wars and explosions will not destroy humanity, but above all it will be the fall of morality that will lead to the extinction of humankind, when Christian love will cease to exist and love will be merely carnal. At that moment Christ the

Savior will come again... persecution will arise because of this. For example, if we participate in some international conference, they will ask the participants: 'Well, do you support minorities?' If you are afraid and say 'Yes,' then they will say: 'Come in.' If you say, 'No, I have my traditions and I am religious,' they will reply: 'Goodbye, go back where you came from.' It will begin like this. Then it will continue, step by step... But we know that in Georgia there has never been heresy, and ... there never will be. There will, of course, be attempts... but ultimately there is prophecy, not only of Georgian saints, but also of foreign saints: Russians, Greeks... that in Georgia the Antichrist will not take root."

- Father Davit, Gldani Church, June 16

It is noteworthy here that liberal values are framed as the "means" of the Antichrist, which ascribes an explicitly negative connotation to them. Furthermore, the acceptance of different sexual orientations and gender identities in Western countries is depicted as proactive and traumatizing LGBT propaganda for children. On the one hand, such acceptance of difference is thus represented as LGBT proselytism, while on the other hand the contemporary West is symbolically portrayed as a new "Sodom and Gomorrah." In the sermon, a boundary is drawn between "us" (the Georgian Orthodox Church and its parishioners) and the dangerous "others" (the LGBT community and Western liberals), which constitutes a rhetoric of exclusion (Wodak 2015).

In addition, the priest does not identify a specific actor allegedly seeking to "corrupt Georgian society." As a result, a certain type of conspiracy theory emerges, according to which there exists a force aligned with the Antichrist that, through Western/European liberal politics, seeks to "corrupt" the population. In this framework, the Church's mission becomes the "protection of the country and morality" from heretics, that is, from people of different sexual orientation and from the spread of such ideas. These notions most likely echo the Georgian Dream's draft legislation³⁰, which was publicly discussed during the pre-election period and aimed at restricting the rights of LGBT individuals³¹. On September 17, 2024, the Parliament approved the legislative package on the "Protection of Family Values and Minors." It is important to note that the sermon carries the features of "moral panic": by presenting LGBT people and liberal values as an existential threat to society and tradition, it constructs a narrative in which "foreign-influenced forces" are waging war against national/Christian identity. The description of apocalyptic outcomes (Sodom and Gomorrah) is characteristic of the discourse of moral panic (Cohen 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 2009).

In the June 9 sermon, a negative attitude was expressed toward Islam and Muslims. Father Davit depicted them as "unbelievers" and as "destined for hell." He even referred to them as equivalent to Satanists:

"The one who lives in a non-Christian way, his fate is 'horrible.' If a person becomes Muslim, if he becomes Satanist, he still cannot erase the seal of baptism."

- Father Davit, Gldani Church, June 9

The devil was also mentioned in the sermon of June 23.

³⁰ See: Parliament of Georgia. (2024, May 11). Shalva Papuashvili: "It is important to include a provision on family values and the protection of minors, because the Constitution stands above all and this is the supreme will of the Georgian people." [link](#) Last accessed: 21.04.2025

³¹ See: Legislative Herald of Georgia. (2024, September 17). *Law of Georgia on Family Values and the Protection of Minors* [link](#) Last accessed: 21.04.2025

“The devil has great energy, but this energy is used for the destruction of humankind. For example, the atom: there are nuclear power plants that generate energy and illuminate cities and villages... but there is also the atomic bomb, which... a single bomb can destroy many people... Without going further, let us recall Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That is to say, there exists the energy of God, which produces goodness, and there exists destructive energy, which annihilates. Therefore, we do not need the kind of energy that performs miracles and magic; we need the salvific energy. Let us not be fascinated by anything or anyone, but be faithful Christians, obedient to God.”

- Father Davit, Gldani Church, June 23

The sermon can be understood as a refined critique of science, technological progress, and secular ideology. “Hiroshima and Nagasaki” functions as an emotionally charged metonym, evoked not only to condemn war but also to illustrate how both energy and ideology can be “corrupted by humans.” Furthermore, the priest’s admonition that the congregation should not be fascinated by “anything” or “anyone” may be interpreted as a continuation of the discourse on “liberal values” and “Western influence.” While in this case the cleric did not specify a direct addressee, it is plausible that he was continuing the previously described conspiratorial narrative, in which the Antichrist fights the world through “liberal means.” By avoiding the naming of a specific threat, the priest reinforces the mythical, universal enemy image, which is a typical rhetorical feature of conspiracy theories (Barkun 2003).

It is also noteworthy that, following the discussion of the “vices of the West,” in subsequent sermons the parish priest of the Lomisi St. George Church of Gldani expressed positive attitudes toward Russian culture and saints. For example, in the July 7 sermon, references were made to Russian holidays and the veneration of Russian martyrs.

“Today is the commemoration of martyrs and holy fools for Christ in Russia. For some reason, some people reject everything Russian, senselessly and foolishly, this is a sin. To insult and curse a nation is great foolishness. True, we say, ‘Heavenly Georgia,’ ‘the Paradise of Georgia,’ and so on, but in the Kingdom of Heaven there is no national division; in the Kingdom of Heaven there is no division by sex, nor by age... There is no such division as: I must end up in the Georgian group, I in the Russian group. Yet they know their nationality. A Georgian saint prays for Georgia, a Russian saint for Russia, and a Ukrainian saint for Ukraine. ... God forbid anyone should think that Russian and Ukrainian saints quarrel there. Whoever desires peace should pray to his own saint, that people may speak to one another in a language of understanding, that peace may prevail. No one should pray to a saint that he destroy the enemy. ... In Russia, there are many Georgian saints. Let us recall the history of Kote Marjanishvili’s elder sister, who was canonized by the Russian Church. During the Bolshevik era she spent several decades in exile, yet even then she never abandoned monastic life. ... The hatred of a nation and of a culture is a terrible thing.”

- Father Davit, Gldani Church, July 7

At first glance, the sermon appears to be devoted to a discussion of ethnic tolerance and the importance of Christian humility, serving as a critique of “irrational hatred” toward the Russian people. Yet beneath this, a coded political message is discernible, resonating with *Georgian Dream’s* peace rhetoric in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. In Father Davit’s theological vision of the heavenly realm, political borders are erased: Russian, Ukrainian, and Georgian saints “do not quarrel with one another.” Instead of conflict, “prayer for peace” is emphasized. Alongside this, the messages that “to reject everything Russian is a sin” and that “to insult and curse the Russian nation is foolishness” reinforce this framing. These narratives recall *Georgian Dream’s* pre-election messaging, which placed particular emphasis on peace and reminded voters of the brutality of the Russia-Ukraine

war in contrast to the peace prevailing in Georgia. A striking illustration of this narrative was the party's pre-election banners, which juxtaposed images of bombed Ukrainian churches destroyed by Russian occupying forces with the untouched Holy Trinity Cathedral (Sameba) in Tbilisi, accompanied by the slogan: *"No to war! Choose peace! Vote 41."*³²

Whereas Father Davit refers to the West and Europe only in critical terms, in the case of Russia he calls for tolerance. In his sermons, the priest repeatedly expressed a negative stance toward specific aspects of Western culture (such as so-called "LGBT propaganda"). Against the backdrop of the increasing activity of pro-Russian groups in Georgia in recent years³³, the sermon may be viewed as an example of pro-Russian rhetoric. Moreover, by labeling anti-Russian sentiments as "sin" and "foolishness," Father Davit pathologizes political protest against 'everything Russian' and preaches a depoliticized pacifism. This resembles what K. Stoeckl, in her study of the Russian Orthodox Church, describes as "orthodox moral conservatism", a system of representations that advocates peace and morality and claims to protect human rights, yet only within a traditional, hierarchical, and ethno-religious order (Stoeckl 2014).

A positive attitude toward Russia was also evident in the sermon of August 25. In that sermon, Father Davit offered the congregation a particular interpretation of historical events, in which the Russian Empire appeared as Georgia's savior, while the North Caucasian peoples were represented as a threat and as Georgia's age-old enemies:

"Today is the commemoration day of the fathers martyred for their faith, the commemoration of the monk Isaac. ... Enemies plundered the church, took away the donated gold and silver, and carried off captives. Among those taken captive was Isaac, who, through the 'intervention,' effort, and money of the Russian Emperor Nicholas, was ransomed, not by the army. And Isaac later wrote a letter to the historian Ioseliani, the content of which was... that as a result of the Lezgin raid there was slaughter, people tried to flee, but where could they run? The monks were tortured... The peoples of the North Caucasus, Lezgins, Chechens, caused us great suffering during that time. I will tell you what the matter was. It was the Russian Empire, the middle of the 19th century. On her way to Bodbe, the sister of Kote Marjanishvili was attacked by North Caucasians and almost became a victim of this raid... She survived and was taken to Russia. This is how the Lezgins ravaged us..."

- Father Davit, Gldani Church, Sermon of August 25

Furthermore, according to the sermon, maintaining positive relations with the Russian state today carries existential significance for Georgia: *"After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the situation once again became unstable in the North Caucasus and here in Pankisi. This is a calamity. ... We could oppose it with nothing but force. This is not politics; this is reality. Some say that Russia should disintegrate and the North Caucasus should separate from Russia. For Georgia, this would certainly not be good. Because turmoil and the disintegration of Russia would be disastrous for us. The weapons that are currently present in Chechnya, North Ossetia, and Dagestan, Russia will not be able to withdraw them or take them back. As long as these regions remain part of Russia, such harm cannot be inflicted on anyone. They are disputing territories with each other, and if they are left alone face to face, there will be war, a war that will affect us as well, and it will affect us very badly. In the 1990s, we barely survived this calamity. The Russo-Chechen war was a disaster both for Russia and for Chechnya, but it was also a disaster for us, because a large quantity of weaponry was accumulating in the Pankisi Gorge and being transferred to Chechnya. Russia almost bombed the Pankisi Gorge; had that happened, it would have been a*

³² See: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). (2024, September 26). "Ukraine condemns the use of war footage on Georgian Dream's pre-election banners." RFE/RL [link](#) Last accessed: 21.04.2025

³³ See: Institute for the Study of Democracy (DRI). (2023, May 12). "The rhetoric of pro-Russian groups and Georgian Dream Coincides." DRI [link](#) Last accessed: 20.04.2025

catastrophe. Speaking thoughtlessly about the North Caucasus is wrong. For them, Georgia would become prey, and they would once again roam here, which would be even worse than during our civil war in Abkhazia.”

- Father Davit, Gldani Church, Sermon of August 25

Instead of Russia - whose aggression and hegemonic ambitions Georgia has repeatedly experienced firsthand, Father Davit presents the North Caucasian peoples as the primary threat. He constructs an “enemy image” of Chechens and the Kists of Pankisi, portraying them as the main danger. This reflects an attempt at *securitization* (Buzan et al., 1998), whereby the independence of the North Caucasian peoples is framed as a threat to Georgia. At the same time, he conveys to the congregation that Russia’s weakening and defeat would bring “terrible consequences” for Georgia, since “Georgia would become prey.” Thus, a security narrative emerges, “it would be disastrous for us”, in which the solution to the threat facing Georgia is implicitly framed as supporting Russia’s control over the North Caucasian countries and perceiving Russia as a guarantor of security. Father Davit shifts Georgian-Russian relations from the domain of ordinary politics into that of emergency politics, in which normal democratic constraints and positions are suspended in the name of “security needs” (Wæver, 1995). This narrative, on the one hand, represents an attempt to foster loyalty toward Russia, and on the other hand, seeks to instill fear of war among the congregation, corresponding to the pre-election rhetoric of Georgian Dream.

Moreover, the sermon reflects an attempt at spreading misinformation and rewriting history, since the Pankisi Gorge was in fact bombed several times by Russian forces.³⁴ However, the Russian state continues to deny the very fact of the bombings.³⁵ Such a retelling of history resembles the strategic construction of narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013), whereby political actors produce narratives in order to shape public perceptions and legitimize political positions: instead of being cast as the aggressor, Russia is presented as “providing stability” in the region. In addition, when recalling the Abkhazian war, Father Davit does not mention Russia’s role in waging the war or in fueling the ethno-conflict with Abkhazia, which represents a clear example of the use of selective historical memory. Furthermore, the sermon serves as an illustrative case for understanding the religious institution as a form of “soft power” (Haynes, 2016). Father Davit employs his religious authority to legitimize political viewpoints, while at the same time framing geopolitical issues through a religious lens and disseminating fear-based narratives that correspond to a specific political agenda.

It is noteworthy to examine the congregation’s reaction to the sermon. No one openly contradicted Father Davit; however, after the sermon ended, the conversation continued in the churchyard. Mostly older men discussed among themselves: *“What harm can the usisxlo[bloodless]³⁶ ones do to us? Russia has them under control.”* - (Male congregant, 56 years old, Gldani Church). *“Do not speak like that, because for Georgia, a war alone against anyone would be difficult.”* - (Male congregant, 55 years old, Gldani Church). In these post-sermon conversations, none of the worshippers pointed out the fact that Russia is Georgia’s main enemy and occupying power. This may suggest the effectiveness of Father Davit’s sermons. According to this interpretation of history, Russia is perceived as a strong state, an empire that for centuries defended Georgia from “predatory” northern tribes. Now, Russia is presented as the guarantor of stability and peace in the Caucasus region.

The sermon delivered on September 8 is also of interest, in which Father Davit spoke about the necessity of forgiveness:

³⁴ Kekelidze, Tamar. *Pankisi on the Pages of the Press*. Tbilisi: International Scientific Research Institute of the Caucasian Peoples, 2007, p. 48.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 48.

³⁶ As one of the respondents explained, in the Mingrelian language *usiskhlo* means ‘someone who does nothing’ or ‘a person of no use.’

“In order for you to be forgiven, it is important that you also have the ability to forgive. The Lord does not forgive those who do not forgive others. There is not only material debt, but also spiritual debt, which means the forgiveness of sins. ...It may even be that you will be held accountable for the sins of the one who seeks forgiveness from you but whom you refuse to forgive. ...Forgiving or not forgiving is not only a matter of our own will; it is a concept given by God. We must force ourselves to do it. Whoever does not forgive others violates the commandment of God.”

- Father Davit, Gldani Church, September 8

On September 8, the necessity of forgiveness was also addressed in sermons at Sioni Cathedral and the Holy Trinity (Sameba) Cathedral. However, in those churches, priests merely referred briefly to a biblical passage, very dryly, without commentary, stating the need for forgiveness. Interestingly, a week later, on September 14, during the pre-election campaign marathon, Bidzina Ivanishvili in the city of Gori declared: *“We will definitely find the strength within ourselves to apologize for the fact that, following instructions, the traitorous ‘United National Movement’ in 2008 engulfed our Ossetian brothers and sisters in flames.”*³⁷ This may be coincidental. Yet in the very same sermon, the parish priest of St. George’s Church in Gldani also discussed attitudes toward other nations: *“I have heard from others: ‘I don’t like Armenians, I don’t like Ukrainians, I don’t like Russians.’ How can one dislike an entire nation? Hatred of a nation is impossible; no nation as a whole is bad or ever can be. Hatred and contempt for an entire nation is wrong, and we must avoid such harsh judgments. We must not hate anyone. If I hate someone, I harm myself, not the one I hate.”*

- Father Davit, Gldani Church, September 8

Active reflection on the necessity of forgiveness was expressed by members of the congregation. Some supported the priest’s position:

“I have always believed in the power of forgiving others and that forgiveness is a great virtue.”

- Female congregant, 55 years old, Gldani Church

Others, however, disagreed with the priest’s stance. Yet it should be noted that in their discussions, the issue of forgiveness or apology was not considered in the context of conflicts and war.

Also noteworthy are the anti-Western attitudes voiced during dialogue among worshippers:

“A person must be generous and should not hate others, as the priest emphasized in the sermon. However, when there are liberal, European groups in the country trying to impose their views on us, this is not right. Maybe you do not have to hate them, but neither should you befriend them, because this will bring negative consequences for our country.”

- Male congregant, 58 years old, Gldani Church

³⁷ See: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). (2024, September 17). “Ivanishvili’s apology - what does it mean, to whom is it directed, and what does it change?” RFE/RL. [link](#) Last accessed: 21.04.2025

“Yes, it is our fault if something non-Christian happens in this country, because we allow everyone to do so, we bow our heads to everyone, and it should not be like that. However, this is not the time to discuss this.”

- Female congregant, 54 years old, Gldani Church

In this dialogue, the reference to “liberal, European groups” and their negative perception as bringing “harmful consequences for the country” partly echoes the messages disseminated by the ruling party during the pre-election period. Specifically, in the narrative of *Georgian Dream* and its affiliated media outlets, pro-Western groups were labeled as “radical, anti-national, and anti-church factions.” At the same time, disinformation and negative discourse about Europe and the West was being circulated, portraying the West as imposing its own agenda on Georgia and attempting to undermine the country’s sovereignty.³⁸

It is also noteworthy that in his sermon of September 29, Father Davit addressed the issue of relations between the Russian and Ukrainian churches. During the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, in which millions of people have suffered and numerous churches have been bombed, the parish priest focused on the problems faced by followers of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine:

“For example, in Ukraine, those who belong to the Russian Church cannot pray in church, so they are forced to pray at home. This is not the right thing to do. ...They avoid Ukrainians, even though both belong to Orthodox churches. ...A person should not have to conceal their own faith.”

- Father Davit, Gldani Church, September 29

The factual accuracy of this statement requires further research. However, it is significant that the parish priest presents the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in a negative light. The latter officially separated from the Moscow-led Russian Orthodox Church in October 2018. Implicitly, the priest criticizes Ukraine’s autocephalous movement and supports the narrative of the Russian Orthodox Church, a narrative strategically deployed in Russia by both the Church and political elites (Stoeckl 2014).

Equally noteworthy is Father Davit’s stance toward other religions. For example, his sermon on October 13 was dedicated to the Armenian Apostolic Church, discussing the differences between Monophysitism and Dyophysitism, as well as the history of the churches’ division. At the end, he added: *“May God bless the Armenian people; perhaps one day they will accept Orthodoxy.”*

Despite repeated messages during the sermon about the “necessity of accepting those who are different,” this final remark reveals an intolerant attitude, according to which only Orthodoxy constitutes the true form of Christianity. Father Davit’s comment reflects the practice of theological exclusivism prevalent in Eastern Orthodox churches, whereby non-Chalcedonian Christian traditions, such as the Armenian Apostolic Church, are doctrinally regarded as deficient. Contemporary Orthodox discourses, instead of highlighting commonalities, tend to emphasize differences. According to Demacopoulos, this gives rise to a “logic of purity”, which reinforces the idea of the superiority of one faith over another, substituting inter-Christian dialogue with hierarchical differentiation (Demacopoulos 2019).

³⁸ See: EUvsDisinfo. (2024, October 23). “Unexpected shifts in politics: Georgian Dream’s rhetoric on the European Union.” EUvsDisinfo.eu. [link](#) Last accessed: 20.04.2025

It is noteworthy to also examine the sermon of October 20, which was dedicated to the commemoration of Ambrosi Khelaia. Of particular significance is the way in which Father Davit recounted the story of Catholicos-Patriarch Ambrosi:

“Today is the day of remembrance of Ambrosi Khelaia, who was the third Catholicos-Patriarch after the abolition of Georgia’s autocephaly in 1810. This act was unlawfully carried out by the Russian Synod, in violation of canon law, with grave breaches. It had its reasons, and exarchs were appointed in Georgia. After the February Revolution, the Georgian clergy took the opportunity and declared the restoration of autocephaly in March. The first Catholicos-Patriarch was Kirion Sadzaglishvili. He died within a year, he was killed. In 1921, Ambrosi Khelaia became patriarch. He remained Catholicos of Georgia until 1927. This was the most difficult period. When the Bolsheviks entered Georgia, the Catholicos was compelled to send a letter in Genoa, Italy ... a denunciation of the Bolsheviks. Because of this, and because the Church was unacceptable to the Bolshevik government, they demanded that the Church hand over its valuables, since famine had spread across Russia. The Church gave up candleholders but refused to surrender icons. Much was hidden, and much was taken by the Menshevik government, which, through St. Ekvtime Takaishvili, was later returned to Georgia. Because the Church refused and hid valuables, many clergymen, including Ambrosi Khelaia, were arrested. In the end, he was sentenced to prison but did not remain long because of illness and was released by amnesty. The Bolshevik government attempted to win over wavering clergymen. Within the Church he found a chaotic situation, his powers were curtailed, and in fact the Catholicos-Patriarch was a nominal figure. Such was the unfortunate reality, and he died of illness in 1927. ... At his trial he spoke the historically famous words: ‘My soul belongs to God, my heart to my homeland, and my flesh is given to you.’” (Father Davit, Gldani Church, October 20)

It is important to note, however, that the parish priest omitted several significant historical facts. Specifically, in 1811 it was Emperor Alexander I of Russia who abolished the status of autocephaly, in blatant violation of Orthodox canon law, in order to subordinate the Georgian Church to the Russian Church. Furthermore, the restoration of autocephaly in 1917 represented an important precedent of independence for the Georgian Orthodox Church vis-à-vis Russia. In recounting Ambrosi Khelaia’s story, the significance of Georgian Church independence and the struggle for the national idea was not addressed at all. Father Davit merely repeated Ambrosi’s well-known phrase but did not attempt to interpret it for the congregation. Likewise, nothing was said about Ambrosi Khelaia’s struggle against Russian occupation, which may be assessed as an attempt to rewrite history in communicating with the faithful. The priest seemed to efface Georgia’s history of colonization and the struggle of the Georgian clergy for independence. In his sermon, Father Davit chose to criticize the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks instead of imperial Russia and the USSR, which represents an example of selective historical memory in post-Soviet religious discourse. This attempt at historical revision resembles the re-construction of the past in the present to serve current ideological needs (Rosenstone 1995). The priest reshapes historical memory to align with contemporary dynamics. The strategic omission of specific facts may further reflect Zerubavel’s concept of “conspicuous absence” (2006), in which historical facts that contradict a desired narrative are deliberately left unmentioned. This constitutes a form of mnemonic control, whereby collective memory is shaped through selective emphasis.

The congregation also reflected on the figure of Ambrosi Khelaia: *“If we had people like Ambrosi Khelaia, perhaps we would not have lost Abkhazia”* - (Female congregant, 21 years old, Gldani Church). This view was contested: *“One or two individuals could not have saved Abkhazia, because it had already been decided that they did not want to remain part of Georgia”* - (Female congregant, 20 years old, Gldani Church). It is noteworthy that in this dialogue, worshippers did not mention Russia’s role in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, despite the decisive part it played in fueling and sustaining the confrontation.

In summary, it can be said that, compared to the clergy of Sioni Cathedral and Sameba Cathedral, the parish priest of Lomisi St. George's Church in Gldani adopts more radical positions. On the one hand, his sermons reveal a sharply negative attitude toward Europe and the West. On the other hand, multiple similarities can be identified with the pre-election messages of *Georgian Dream* - whether emphasizing the importance of peace, the necessity of cooperation with Russia, or the articulation of anti-LGBT sentiments.

Analysis of Central and Peripheral Churches

During the pre-election period, in three Orthodox churches of Tbilisi, little to no time was devoted in Sunday sermons to discussions of ongoing socio-political processes in the country. The parish priests refrained from articulating clear positions on such issues. This "policy of non-involvement" represents a form of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg 1984), through which the Church avoids openly expressing party sympathies in order to preserve its symbolic authority. Clerical representatives spoke mostly in allusions and indirect references to current events. Given that deciphering these "riddles" required immediate reflection and active listening on the part of the congregation, much of the congregation remained unaware of these messages. Moreover, interpreting the latent messages conveyed by the clergy often required a certain level of theological knowledge. As a result, the majority of worshippers understood and remembered only the surface-level messages. When questioned, parishioners found it difficult to recall sermons from the previous week. However, they consistently remembered the core themes that "the Church teaches": for example, living a pious life, the necessity of peace in the country, and the negative influence of Western values.

The purpose of Sunday sermons was to instruct the congregation and to place them on the "right, God-fearing path," while the worshippers, in turn, were expected to "listen with their hearts and reflect on the admonitions." Priests explained to believers that "the way to salvation is faith," for which it is necessary to "recognize the true God, to understand and share the significance of communion... to separate from pagan religions and accept the true one" - (Giorgi Zviadadze, Sioni Church, June 16) This corresponds to Foucault's concept of "pastoral power" (Foucault 1982), whereby the clergyman, like a shepherd, seeks to guide the flock along the proper path, since he is perceived as holding moral authority and privileged knowledge of the transcendent. At the same time, this power dynamic produces specific "truth-effects" and subject positions, wherein the authoritative role of "truth-teller" is ascribed to the religious leader, while the believer is positioned as a passive recipient of the message.

In all three Tbilisi churches, the most frequent narrative was that of "peace." Sunday liturgy most often began and ended with an invocation for "universal peace." On one level, this can be explained by the religious meaning of the term: *peace* is a fundamental concept in Christian teaching and appears repeatedly in sacred texts (e.g., John 14:27: "*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you*"). Yet references to "universal peace" within the context of ongoing geopolitical processes (the Russia-Ukraine war) and national security (the threat of Russian aggression) may also suggest the presence of a political subtext. Equally important is how worshippers themselves interpreted the notion of peace, since such invocations influenced the congregation. After the liturgy, in conversations held in church courtyards, parishioners repeatedly stressed that the country's foremost priority at this moment was the preservation of peace and the avoidance of war: "*We work, we live honestly. The main thing is that there is no war. What else could we want? I don't care about money, small things matter, being well, raising children, walking on the right path, and peace is the most important thing.*" (Female congregant, 42 years old, Sioni Church). This reveals the public anxiety regarding national security. The frequent references to peace suspiciously overlapped with the pre-election slogan of *Georgian Dream*: "*Only through peace, dignity, and*

prosperity, towards Europe.” This constitutes an example of the overlay of political messaging onto religious discourse. The phenomenon of overlay can be explained by the populist rhetoric of the ruling party in the pre-election period.

In certain instances, sermons also referenced dignity and the nation’s honorable past, where “living with dignity” was closely tied to religion, as Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze explained in Sioni Church on June 9 that “there is only one way to live with dignity, and that is in Christ.” Here, a secular term was imbued with sacred meaning, thereby amplifying its significance. Similarly, during another sermon at Sioni on June 16, Zviadadze underlined that “Georgia has immense dignity... history, culture, architecture. People need to know this, to understand it, in order to realize what kind of values the country they live in embodies.” This resembles what Assmann (2011) calls the “politics of memory,” namely the strategic use of historical narratives in the formation of contemporary national identity. By emphasizing the achievements of Georgian history, culture, and architecture, a particular version of Georgian identity is constructed in which cultural self-sufficiency and historical continuity acquire central importance. At the same time, sermons highlighted the special role of the Georgian Orthodox Church, presented both as the product and the guardian of this unique national heritage, which constitutes a clear example of religious nationalism (Brubaker 2012). The idea of Georgia’s and the Georgian people’s exceptionalism was also disseminated, as Father Davit declared in Gldani Church on 16 June that “there is a prophecy that before the Second Coming, from Mount Athos, God will come to Georgia and the icon of the Mother of God of Iberia will be brought here, to Georgia. So, we must not be afraid.” In this discourse, the honorable past is explicitly separated from external interference and international influence, since Georgian history and traditions are portrayed as self-sufficient, which Davit reinforced in the same sermon by stating that “if you say: no, I have my traditions and I am religious, then they will tell you: good, go back where you came from. ... We know that in Georgia there has never been heresy, and ... there never will be.” This narrative of cultural self-sufficiency corresponds to the ruling party’s pre-election rhetoric concerning challenges to political sovereignty, where the idea of defending dignity is linked to protecting the nation from external actors who allegedly seek to impose foreign and unacceptable values on Georgian society. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) note, such framing resonates with broader populist strategies whereby political parties portray themselves as defenders of traditional values and national identity against perceived foreign threats.

According to the messages emphasized in the sermons, the importance of knowing Georgia’s history, respecting ancestors, reinforcing “our” traditional values, honoring the family, and maintaining closeness to the Church were central themes, which represent a rhetoric characteristic of Orthodox “traditional religion” (Agadjanian 2017). It is noteworthy that this religious rhetoric overlaps with the pre-election messages of *Georgian Dream*, which stressed traditional values and the need to defend the sanctity of the family. This alignment can be understood as part of the ruling party’s political strategy, since political actors often employ religious symbols and traditional values in order to secure electoral support, particularly in countries where religious institutions hold significant social influence (Brubaker 2017). In the Georgian case, the Orthodox Church not only legitimizes political leaders but also sustains discourses about nationalism, history, territorial integrity, and universal morality. Equally significant is the fact that during the sermons, no ideas diverging from the populist rhetoric of the ruling party were articulated.

At the same time, sermons did not contain messages addressing human rights and freedoms, social welfare, democracy, citizenship, or the importance of equality. This indicates that in these respects, religious communication distances itself from civic and political engagement. From a sociological perspective, such a stance can be explained by a broader institutional tendency to preserve authority through appeals to traditional values rather than through the dissemination of progressive civic ideals (Hervieu-Léger 2000).

In all three churches, sermons also emphasized the need to defend the Church from both “visible and invisible enemies,” a discourse that resonates with Foucault’s notion of *parrhesia* - the practice of “truth-telling” as a moral

act within relations of power, whereby the pastoral figure demonstrates courage and fearlessness by speaking of “dangerous truths” (Foucault 2001). Although the “enemy” was never explicitly named, clerical representatives implicitly referred to journalists and NGOs who were said to be engaged in “discrediting the Church,” as Father Giorgi (Svimonishvili) declared in Sioni on June 30 that “they do not come into the church; they think that everywhere there are corrupt priests, and how can one even deal with them... do you know what the issue is? Those who curse and insult the clergy are precisely those who have nothing to do with the faith.” Such discourse constitutes a form of “threat construction,” a rhetorical strategy used to mobilize supporters (Schmitt 2007), creating a binary vision in which believers are positioned as defenders of the sacred while secular actors such as journalists and NGOs are framed as attackers, an attempt to generate a “counter-institutional discourse” (Hallin & Mancini 2019).

Sermons always concluded with blessings, which the congregation awaited with particular anticipation, ending with blessing both spiritual and secular authorities, the country, and the Patriarch. Despite the Patriarch’s supreme authority among both clergy and congregation, neither group mentioned the May 12 speech in which the Patriarch referred to the biblical parable of King Nebuchadnezzar and the confrontation with the youths.

Likewise, the question of proclaiming Orthodox Christianity as the state religion did not generate discussion within any of the three churches, though interviews later revealed three distinct positions: some parishioners already assumed Orthodoxy to be the state religion, others welcomed the initiative as “a very good and important step that should have been confirmed earlier” (female, 46, Sioni), while a third group felt it would make no difference - “the clergy should decide; for me my faith is already the state religion and the supreme power” (female congregant, 54, Sameba).

In sum, the priests of the central churches cultivated a comparatively neutral and refined discourse that, on the surface, appeared politically detached, whereas sermons in Gldani’s Lomisi St. George Church contained more radical messages. This difference may be linked to dynamics of power and visibility (Bourdieu 1991): clergy in central churches are more closely connected to political elites and media and thus exercise greater caution, whereas in peripheral parishes priests speak more openly about current events (with their discourse less filtered and more marked by improvisation).

“Orta Jame” Mosque in Batumi

Batumi’s “Orta Jame” Mosque is located on Kutaisi Street in Achara’s capital, Batumi. It is one of the oldest standing buildings in the city, constructed in 1866 during Ottoman rule. Within the mosque complex are spaces for ritual washing, separate prayer areas for men and women, and a shop for religious items. During the research period, no political posters or campaign materials were observed on the premises.

Friday prayers at “Orta Jame” are led by the mufti, Adam Shantadze, and are occasionally conducted by another representative of the muftiate in the mufti’s absence. The prayers are held in two languages: other than in Georgian, excerpts from the Qur’an are recited in Arabic, followed by the mufti’s explanation of their meaning. The Friday service typically lasts around two hours, with sermons averaging nine minutes in length. Despite large crowds, the atmosphere at “Orta Jame” was observed to be welcoming and orderly. Although the mosque is often overcrowded, no disturbances or noise were noted.

Observations at “Orta Jame” highlight the inequalities and injustices faced by the Muslim community in Georgia. Up to 5,000 people gather at the mosque for Friday prayer, including Georgian Muslims as well as Muslims of other ethnic backgrounds residing in Batumi, Arabs, Turks, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and others. Occasionally, tourists also attend prayers to observe the mosque, and they are welcomed warmly by the local clergy. Due to the lack of sufficient space, many worshippers are forced to pray in the courtyard or even in the street: *“the mosque, as usual, was filled with the faithful; due to the lack of adequate space, part of the congregation had to pray outside, in the street.” (from notes of September 19)*

The most active participants are local Muslim men, both young and older, who attend services regularly. In general, the congregation refrains from discussing politics or current national affairs, preferring instead to converse after prayers about everyday social and economic problems. These often echo the issues raised by the mufti during sermons, such as gambling addiction, alcoholism, and related social concerns. Clergy members are held in high regard and are considered spiritual authorities by worshippers.

The sermons largely focus on themes such as the essential duties of a good Muslim, the importance of religious education, women’s rights, tolerance toward people with different values or positions, raising children to be good citizens, respect for those with differing views, and lessons from the life of Muhammad. The theme of “peace” is also frequently repeated, but here it carries its fundamental Islamic religious meaning rather than political overtones. The mufti’s sermons are notably devoid of political messaging, something that congregants themselves explain through two key factors: 1. respect for the sanctity of religious space, *“this is not a place to discuss politics”* (male, 34, “Orta Jame” congregant); and 2. caution.

Outside the mosque walls, pilgrims occasionally spoke about politics. Several interlocutors expressed a sense of being monitored by the State Security Service, precisely because they belong to a religious minority. As one 48-year-old congregant explained, *“When our mufti was chosen, many protested, saying he was a man of the SSS. Any government tries to exercise control. That is why, with people we don’t know, we try to speak as little as possible.”* This heightened surveillance of their community reflects an attempt at the securitization of religious minorities, a process in which such groups are framed as potential threats to national security and thereby subjected to monitoring and control (Buzan et al. 1998). This practice alters the terms of minority participation in the political sphere, generates an atmosphere of suspicion, and restricts the freedom of religious expression. One congregant, aged 52, added that *“In Batumi and in Achara more generally, it has always been like this, and it always will be. I doubt any government will change it. They want to turn us into supporters of the ruling party.”*

It was the same under the National Movement, and it is the same under the Georgian Dream. The main thing is that we obey, and they send in their people.” Such reflections point to the existence of long-standing institutional practices of control that extend beyond the logic of party politics and constitute a structural feature of Georgia’s broader security strategy.

The interconnection between state and religious authorities is illustrated by the fact that the former mufti of Western Georgia, Jemal Paksadze, currently serves as an adviser to the Chairman of the Government of Achara. The boundary between clerical and secular positions thus appears fragile. On October 4, during the absence of the current mufti, Paksadze delivered the sermon, which focused on the duty of caring for parents and the importance of respecting them.

The sermons delivered by the deputy mufti during the absence of the mufti at “Orta Jame” are also of particular interest. For example, the September 13 sermon shows that, in contrast to the clergy of Sioni Church, the muftiate expresses a more compassionate and caring attitude toward youth. The deputy mufti emphasized that “no parent has left anything better to a child than good upbringing... children are our hope and our future, therefore raising them in a family environment, expressing love and care toward them, is one of our foremost duties... it is our shared responsibility to raise our children and young generation for the benefit of our nation and humanity... let us live in such a way that the earth is filled with peace and prosperity” (“Orta Jame”, September 13). Unlike the rhetoric observed in Sioni sermons, where young people were sometimes depicted as lost or misguided, here their upbringing is framed as a collective responsibility.

Equally noteworthy is the sermon of September 20, which addressed human rights and may carry implicit messages:

“respect for human rights is one of the fundamental duties established for the sake of peace of both the individual and society. Our religion, which safeguards personal life, prohibits any attitude or behavior that harms a person and deliberately insults human dignity, such as slander, gossip, ridicule, the public exposure of faults, hatred, entering homes without permission, and spying. For the same purpose, human life, property, possessions, honor, and family are inviolable, regardless of race, gender, or faith. Violations of these rights are subject to punishment in both this world and the hereafter... human life is priceless... today, unfortunately, we live in a world far removed from this divine order... we desire a world where the life of one innocent person is regarded as equal to the whole of humanity, and where respect for human rights is at the center. Let us all abandon any attitudes and practices that violate human honor and dignity, as the heirs of a cherished tradition that has enshrined mercy, justice, love, respect, and the morality of coexistence as dominant. Let us respect rights and laws in every environment in which we find ourselves. Let us be unifiers, not sowers of division. And let us pray to the Creator that respect, tolerance, peace, and calm may prevail in our world”

- Deputy Mufti, “Orta Jame”, September 20.

The deputy mufti did not specify who deliberately insults human dignity. However, references to “entering homes without permission and spying” and attempts at “dishonoring people” appear to resonate with the *State Security Service surveillance files* case, which contained information about the private lives of several clerics. The public leak of these files reinforced suspicions that security services monitor and collect compromising material on many individuals, including members of the clergy. This may help explain why political discussions are generally avoided within “Orta Jame”.

Summary of Main Findings

During the pre-election period, for the majority of congregants across all three churches, clerics represented indisputable religious authorities. Within Sunday services, clergy exercised pastoral power, aiming to “guide believers on the right spiritual path.” Yet, from the perspective of parishioners, Sunday liturgy was more ritualized in character: rather than attentive listening to sermons, the primary significance lay in being physically present at the service. A noticeable tendency was also observed of declining attendance, especially among younger generations, who seldom attend church.

Moreover, in the everyday practice of the Church, the boundary between the sacred and the profane remains conditional. This sometimes involves subtle forms of disagreement with clerical authority, typically expressed through walking or conversing during services. The clergy’s attempts to discipline parishioners and to issue reproaches serve to reaffirm religious authority and to reassert the boundary of the sacred space, a process aimed at establishing hegemony and internalizing moral control. At the same time, the presence of social hierarchies within sacred space serves as a reminder to worshippers of broader social inequalities. The avoidance of direct discussion of these issues, and their normalization as part of church life, indicates an internalized perception of hierarchy and inequality among the congregation.

The main messages conveyed by clergy during sermons, living a pious life, dignity, and the need for peace in the country, are, on the one hand, actively internalized by worshippers and serve as subjects of reflection. After services, congregants frequently discussed these themes. On the other hand, part of the congregation perceives Sunday liturgy in a performative way. During the sermons, a kind of “bricolage” emerges, whereby believers selectively adapt those parts of the sermon that resonate with their own opinions or personal narratives. This form of “individualized engagement” indicates that parishioners are not merely passive recipients of clerical rhetoric but rather listen, filter, and sometimes resist specific messages. At the same time, the need for “protected spaces” was evident, in which critical opinions could be expressed without resorting to “hidden transcripts,” pointing to the existence of an authoritarian environment, the presence of moral surveillance, and an awareness of submission to such a system. Only in one case, when the sermon addressed emigration, did some parishioners openly disagree with the priest. This suggests that economic and existential issues, such as migration, constitute a moral threshold: when personally experienced hardships outweigh the need to demonstrate reverence toward clerical authority, they trigger critical reflection among the faithful.

For the most part, conversations in churchyards revolved around social and economic problems such as emigration, unemployment, and inflation. Among the parishioners, a degree of nihilism toward elections and distrust toward politicians was also observed. The Church, however, channels this distrust and disappointment into a form of clerical indifference, in which disengagement from politics is reframed as a virtue and spiritual life is promoted as the only true form of social participation. By fostering depoliticization, the Church privileges a passive society, one less likely to demand social reforms or to oppose injustice.

It is noteworthy that in none of the three churches did the issue of proclaiming Orthodoxy as the state religion generate open discussion among parishioners, although three distinct positions were observed: first, some believers already assumed Orthodox Christianity to be the state religion; second, others welcomed the initiative; and third, a portion of the congregation considered that such a change would make no difference. This diversity of opinion points to a degree of pluralism and the absence of either theological or civic consensus on the matter, which partly challenges the assumption that believers constitute monolithic elements of religious nationalism or that they are merely passive recipients of information.

At the same time, despite the Patriarch's position as the supreme religious authority for the parishioners, in none of the three churches did congregants refer in their conversations to the Patriarch's address of May 12, his interpretation of the "parable of Nebuchadnezzar," which was intended to respond to current national events. This may indicate that members of the congregation devote limited time to reflecting on sermons, epistles, or Patriarch's statements. Despite the ritualized nature of Sunday worship, many believers appear less engaged with the broader public debates surrounding religious issues.

During the pre-election period, representatives of the three Orthodox churches employed a strategy of strategic ambiguity, expressed through restraint from making explicit endorsements. In order to preserve symbolic authority, they relied on coded messages and silence (the deliberate withholding of position). This can be explained by several factors: on the one hand, politicization of sermons risks desacralizing religious authority, since maintaining neutrality serves as a means of safeguarding religious power. On the other hand, there is the danger of polarization, which could generate conflict both among clergy and within the congregation. Thus, by avoiding open support for specific political parties, the Church seeks to preserve its moral authority in society. This is reinforced by the fact that in the three Orthodox churches where this research was conducted, political themes appeared only in isolated sermons, while the majority of preaching focused on religious ideas and the reinforcement of Christian faith and national values.

Moreover, during the sermons, no precedent of public discussion concerning the ruling party's initiative to proclaim Orthodoxy as the state religion was recorded in any of the three churches. Likewise, throughout the ethnographic fieldwork, none of the congregations referred to the Patriarch's sermon of May 12, 2024, on King Nebuchadnezzar's punishment of the youths, which had been a subject of public debate. Instead, what appeared in the sermons was an effort to criticize the values and orientation of young people, a discourse that closely mirrored the critique of youth voiced by the Chairman of *Georgian Dream*, Irakli Kobakhidze, during the protest rallies.

Despite the ruling party's active display of religious populism and its initiative to declare Orthodoxy the state religion in the pre-election period, representatives of the three Orthodox churches studied did not openly disseminate pro-*Georgian Dream* messages. However, in certain cases, the content of sermons partly overlapped with the ruling party's electoral rhetoric, which was built around such notions as "peace," "dignity," "Christian values," "traditions," "respect for the family," and negative attitudes toward the West and the LGBT community. At the same time, no messages were identified that addressed human rights, democracy, social welfare, or the importance of civic engagement. Instead, sermons consistently called for a focus on the afterlife rather than on worldly concerns, which may contribute to political nihilism and thereby diminish the perceived importance of participation in future elections. What emerges clearly is that religious discourse distanced itself from civic and political engagement, from reflection on ongoing national events, and from criticism of the ruling party. Rather, sermons converged with the hegemonic political discourse that fosters a passive society, negative peace, anti-European narratives, and homophobia.

In addition, the practice of constructing an "enemy image" was observed. Although sermons did not explicitly identify an "enemy," clerical representatives alluded to "ambushing forces," journalists, and NGOs who criticize religious figures and the Church. As a result, clergy avoided addressing internal conflicts or widely publicized scandals in their conversations with parishioners, choosing instead to speak about alleged multifaceted attacks on the Church. This discourse thus produces a binary vision in which believers are positioned as defenders of the sacred, while secular actors, journalists and NGOs, are framed as aggressors against the Church. Such framing constitutes an attempt to generate a "counter-institutional discourse," while simultaneously representing the Church and clergy as a unified spiritual body possessing supreme moral authority.

It is particularly noteworthy that the environment observed in the Lomisi St. George Church in Gldani reflects a distinctive constellation of attitudes that have long circulated in peripheral parishes. During the pre-election period, the following views were recorded: the LGBT community as the country's primary threat; a lenient stance toward Russia; the perceived necessity of close relations with the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church; and the portrayal of the West/Europe in a negative light, as the source and disseminator of "non-traditional" values in Georgia.

The differences between sermons in central churches and those in Gldani's St. George Church may be linked to dynamics of power and visibility. Clergy in central churches are more closely connected with political elites and the media, whereas such ties are less characteristic of peripheral parishes. As a result, priests in peripheral churches are subject to weaker institutional oversight, in contrast to their counterparts in central parishes, where clerics tend to cite the Church's official positions rather than express their own views. Consequently, the discourse produced in peripheral churches is less filtered and more spontaneous.

In conclusion, no political messages were recorded in Batumi's "Orta Jame", which is partly explained by the fact that neither worshippers nor clergy perceive the mosque as a confidential space for expressing opinions. This dynamic reflects the state's attempt at the securitization of religious minorities, whereby such communities are constructed as potential threats to national security. The resulting practices of control and surveillance reshape the possibilities for minority participation in the political sphere, generating an atmosphere of suspicion and restricting both freedom of religious expression and the exercise of civil rights, as well as the ability to be fully recognized as equal citizens of the state. Accordingly, the silence observed in Batumi's "Orta Jame" is not accidental but rather the outcome of a broader discursive regime of power, which, through the securitization of religious minorities, serves to neutralize their political potential and civic rights.

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