

From Atheism to Authoritarian Faith: State-Managed Religion in the Post-Soviet Caucasus

Thornike Gordadze, European University Institute, Florence, June 25–26, 2026

Why are post-Soviet churches so pro-Russian?

In Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine, churches have often opposed European integration and favored maintaining ties with Russia. They tend to be closer to communist or post-communist elites than to reformist and liberal governments. Paradoxically, many clergy rehabilitate Soviet leaders while condemning those seeking a break with the communist past.

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) maintain strong links with the Moscow Patriarchate. This is striking because the GOC is fully autocephalous and the AAC is not even part of the Orthodox Church. Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, where competing Orthodox jurisdictions create pluralism, Georgia and Armenia have centralized churches with near-monopolies over believers.

Russian influence is often stronger where the religious field is unified than where multiple authorities coexist. Moscow formally respects the independence of the GOC and AAC while providing ideological guidance. Even Russia's 2008 war against Georgia did not significantly weaken pro-Russian attitudes within parts of the Georgian clergy; some church figures interpreted the conflict as divine punishment for Georgia's Western orientation.

These ties were largely forged during the Soviet period. Despite official atheism, the KGB closely controlled religious institutions, influencing clergy appointments and careers.

The Church–State Relationship: Limited Secularism

After the collapse of the USSR, churches emerged as central sources of identity and meaning. Religion effectively replaced communist ideology, while former communist elites sought legitimacy through alliances with religious institutions. Former atheists rapidly reinvented themselves as devout believers.

Church institutions also experienced continuity rather than transformation. Many leaders retained Soviet-era networks and practices while gaining enormous wealth and influence. Careers within the Church became attractive, encouraging corruption, nepotism, and patronage.

Although post-Soviet constitutions generally proclaim church-state separation, churches receive extensive privileges. In Georgia and Armenia, they enjoy public funding, tax exemptions, property transfers, and legal advantages. Constitutional provisions often grant them a "special role" in national history.

These privileges are frequently exchanged for political loyalty. Governments and security services often possess compromising information on clergy and use it as leverage. Tensions periodically emerge, but they rarely threaten the broader alliance between church and state.

“Better the Sultan’s Turban than the Pope’s Mitre”: A Post-Communist Version

The Byzantine saying expressing preference for Ottoman rule over union with Rome has a modern parallel. Post-Soviet churches often cooperate more readily with corrupt, illiberal, Russia-friendly governments than with reformist and pro-Western leaders.

a) ***In Georgia***, the GOC maintained an ambiguous position toward the independence movement and opposed the first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, despite his deep religiosity. By contrast, it enjoyed harmonious relations with former communist leader Eduard Shevardnadze after his public conversion to Orthodoxy.

Relations with Mikheil Saakashvili were frequently tense. Although his government made substantial financial concessions to the Church, his reformist and pro-Western agenda conflicted with the Patriarchate’s conservative outlook. During the 2012 elections, some clerics openly campaigned against him.

After coming to power, Georgian Dream strengthened its alliance with the Church through financial support and protection of ecclesiastical interests. Radical groups linked to the Church were often tolerated when targeting LGBTQ events and liberal activists.

As Georgian Dream shifted toward conservative populism, its positions increasingly converged with those of the GOC. Measures such as “Family Purity Day,” constitutional restrictions on marriage, and legislation targeting LGBTQ issues reflected this convergence. The 2024 “Law on the Protection of Family Values and Minors” effectively aligned state policy with Church preferences while complicating European integration.

Despite their close relationship, the government and Church are not identical actors. The Church seeks to preserve autonomy in order to negotiate benefits and maintain independent channels of communication with Russia, particularly through the Russian Orthodox Church.

b) A similar pattern exists ***in Armenia***. President Levon Ter-Petrosyan maintained a secular and distant relationship with the AAC, resisting efforts to expand its role in state affairs. His successors, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, embraced the Church as a source of legitimacy, granting it legal privileges, property, funding, and symbolic influence.

The relationship changed significantly after Nikol Pashinyan’s 2018 Velvet Revolution. The AAC was widely perceived as aligned with the old oligarchic order. Since then, relations between Pashinyan and Catholicos Karekin II have often been tense, particularly after Armenia’s defeat in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. The Church increasingly criticized government policies and became a focal point of opposition. By 2026, tensions escalated further, with government accusations against senior clergy and demands for ecclesiastical accountability.

The Russian North Caucasus Model: Official Islam versus Salafism

The Soviet legacy of state-controlled religion also shaped Islam. Soviet authorities viewed Islam as particularly threatening because its centers of authority lay beyond Moscow's control. Mosques and religious schools were suppressed more harshly than Christian institutions, leaving only a small number of functioning religious centers.

As with Christianity, an "official Islam" survived under state supervision. Religious leaders remained loyal to the Communist Party and security services.

Following the Soviet collapse, borders opened and foreign religious influences entered the Caucasus and Central Asia. Students returned from Islamic institutions abroad, while preachers arrived from the Middle East, Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran. These newcomers often possessed greater religious knowledge than local clergy and quickly attracted followers, particularly among younger generations.

This revival challenged established religious authorities and soon became politically significant. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the principal conflict in the North Caucasus opposed "official" or "traditional" Islam to Salafism, which Russian authorities commonly labeled "Wahhabism."

Official Islamic institutions are organized through Muftiates (DUMs), formally independent but closely linked to regional governments and Moscow. They promote a state-approved version of Islam that is loyal, apolitical, and hostile to Salafism. In exchange, they receive funding, protection, and control over religious life.

Salafi groups denounced official clergy as corrupt and subordinate to an illegitimate state. For them, the issue was not only theological but also political and social. The conflict became particularly violent in Dagestan and during the Chechen wars. By the mid-2010s, insurgent movements had largely been crushed through extensive counterinsurgency campaigns. Today, state-sponsored Islam dominates public life, though underlying tensions persist.

Russia manages the Islamic question through local proxies: regional leaders and loyal religious authorities. The central concern is not theology but loyalty. Religious figures are valued insofar as they support state authority.

Chechnya under Ramzan Kadyrov illustrates this logic. Kadyrov has built a highly authoritarian system that employs conservative Islamic symbolism while remaining a pillar of Russian rule in the North Caucasus. He controls religious institutions, appoints loyal clerics, supervises Islamic education, and promotes conservative social norms.

Large mosques, state-sponsored religious activities, and public displays of piety reinforce his authority. Religious legitimacy serves political purposes: opposition is framed not merely as political dissent but as a challenge to religious order itself.

Conclusion

Three decades after the Soviet collapse, many religious institutions in the post-Soviet space have inherited rather than rejected the authoritarian practices of the system that once controlled them. Their institutional culture remains shaped by hierarchy, patronage, and dependence on state power.

Faith did not replace ideology; it became its successor. Mechanisms of control that once served the Communist Party now support national churches and official Islamic institutions. Their loyalty to Moscow or to local rulers reflects shared interests: privilege, protection, and impunity in exchange for political support.

This symbiosis helps explain why many religious hierarchies perceive democratization, liberal reform, and European integration as threats rather than opportunities. The paradox is that institutions that survived decades of militant atheism often emerged not as defenders of freedom, but as guardians of submission.