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Cultural drivers and barriers to democratisation

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Executive summary

This paper examines the role of religious institutions as cultural drivers and barriers to democratisation in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, focusing on Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. It situates the analysis within broader political culture debates, which emphasise that democratisation is not determined solely by formal institutions or socio-economic development, but also by underlying societal values such as trust, participation, tolerance, and civic engagement. While these values are widely associated with democratic consolidation, the paper argues that their effects are mediated through concrete institutional actors – most notably religious organisations – which shape, translate, and sometimes distort their democratic potential.

The study engages with established political culture and modernisation theories, including Almond and Verba's "civic culture" framework and Inglehart and Welzel's "emancipative values" thesis, while also addressing critiques that cultural explanations are overly deterministic or imprecise. It proposes that rather than treating "culture" as an abstract societal attribute, a more productive approach is to examine religious institutions as key intermediaries between values and political behaviour. Churches and Islamic institutions are particularly influential in the eastern neighbourhood due to their historical embeddedness, high levels of public trust, and close association with national identity formation.

Empirically, the paper shows that the role of religious institutions varies significantly across cases. In Armenia, the Armenian Apostolic Church has primarily functioned as a conservative stabiliser and legitimising force for political elites, contributing to national cohesion but limiting liberal democratic reform, particularly in relation to minority rights. In Azerbaijan, Islam is tightly controlled by the state through a system of "official Islam," which depoliticises religious life and suppresses independent religious mobilisation, thereby reinforcing authoritarian stability by default rather than through active religious agency. In Belarus, the Belarusian Orthodox Church operates within a state-cooperative model that privileges traditional religion while maintaining strong political alignment with the Lukashenko regime. Although individual religious actors occasionally supported protest movements, the institutional Church has largely reinforced narratives of stability and order, contributing indirectly to authoritarian resilience. In Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Church has played a dual role: it has contributed significantly to social cohesion and national identity, but increasingly acts as a constraint on liberal reforms, particularly in areas such as LGBTQ+ rights and anti-discrimination policies, often influencing legislation through its privileged institutional position. In Moldova, religious influence is deeply entangled with geopolitical divisions between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations. Competing Orthodox jurisdictions have become politically relevant actors, with the dominant church exercising substantial influence over electoral behaviour and public discourse, often resisting reforms associated with European integration and liberal democratic norms. In Ukraine, by contrast, religious pluralism has created a more dynamic and competitive environment in which churches have acted both as facilitators of democratic mobilisation – most visibly during the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan – and as sources of division, particularly where church structures are linked to Russian geopolitical influence.

Across all cases, the paper finds that religious institutions are neither inherently democratic nor authoritarian. Instead, their impact depends on three key factors: their autonomy from the state, the degree of religious pluralism within society, and their embeddedness in broader geopolitical and identity conflicts. Where churches are pluralistic and relatively independent, they are more likely to support civic mobilisation and democratic norms. Where they are closely aligned with state power or embedded in authoritarian governance structures, they tend to reinforce political stability at the expense of liberal democratic development.

The paper concludes that understanding democratisation in the eastern neighbourhood requires moving beyond essentialist claims about religion and instead focusing on the institutional conditions under which religious actors operate. Religious institutions should be understood as powerful cultural intermediaries that can either enable or constrain democratic development depending on how they interact with political authority and societal values.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

AAC	Armenian Apostolic Church
AIP	Islamic Party of Azerbaijan
BOC	Belarusian Orthodox Church
BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
GOC	Georgian Orthodox Church
MOC	Moldovan Orthodox Church
OCU	Orthodox Church of Ukraine
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
RCC	Roman Catholic Church
SCRWA	State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations
TI	Traditional Islam
UAOC	Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church
UGCC	Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church
UOC-KP	Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Kyiv Patriarchate
UOC-MP	Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate
WVS	World Value Survey

1 Introduction

Cultural drivers of democratisation in the eastern neighbourhood are closely tied to how people understand and value democracy, rather than just formal institutions. It is typically assumed that where cultures of participation, trust, European orientation, and civic mobilisation are strong, they enhance societal agency and create fertile ground for democratic development. Conversely, where such cultural foundations are weak or contested, democratisation is more fragile and prone to reversal. This is common in contexts where societal and political trust are weak, participation in political processes is limited, and support for democratic norms is merely declaratory.

In examining how cultural factors shape political outcomes, political culture approaches to democratisation have found that political institutions and behaviour must be congruent with the beliefs and values prevailing in a given society, an argument most notably coined by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's congruence theory in their seminal 1963 study, *The Civic Culture*. In their analysis of five democratic societies, Almond and Verba (1963) find that political culture generates social norms which in turn prescribe behaviours that people identify as appropriate and generally follow, even when they personally do not share these values. Importantly, their findings point to an independent effect of political culture on political and social behaviour. At its basis, the political culture approach claims that structural factors, such as high levels of education or income, cannot by themselves bring about democratisation – this requires human action. Welzel and Inglehart claim that “mass beliefs are needed to translate structure into action. (...) People’s beliefs are thus the intervening variable between social structure and collective action. In particular, emancipative values which embody postmaterialist orientations are conducive to democratisation”.¹ More recently, other scholars have also found that “cultural values lead to, rather than follow, the emergence of democracy”.²

The concept of political culture has been criticised for its vagueness and catch-all nature, yet it remains widely used to capture the dominant values shaping political systems. Initially defined by Almond and Verba (1963) as a set of attitudes, perceptions, and behavioural orientations, the concept has evolved to emphasise “values,” particularly under the influence of Inglehart’s work. Core democratic values identified in the literature include tolerance, participation, and trust, while later scholars add moderation, civility, and political efficacy.³ More recent approaches highlight “emancipative values” like equality, autonomy, and popular voice as central to democratisation.⁴ Overall, cultural theories of democracy tend to focus either on openness to diversity and individual rights or on civic confidence, including trust in institutions and fellow citizens.

The relationship between citizens’ values and norms and the emergence and persistence of democratic regimes continues to be a divisive issue in comparative politics. While classic modernization theory posits

¹ Welzel, C and Inglehart, R. (2019). ‘Political Culture, Mass Beliefs, and Value Change’. In *Democratization*, edited by Christian W. Haerpfer, Patrick Bernhagen, Christian Welzel, and Ronald Inglehart, Second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 136.

² Ruck, D.J., Matthews, L. J., Kyritsis, T., Atkinson, Q. and R. A. Bentley. (2019). ‘The Cultural Foundations of Modern Democracies’. *Nature Human Behaviour* 4 (3): 265.

³ Diamond, L. (1999). *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 161.

⁴ Welzel and Inglehart (2019): 136.

that broad public endorsement of democratic norms contributes to stable democracy⁵, others argue that structural conditions, elite behavior, and institutional design may matter more than mass attitudes.⁶ This makes it challenging to establish whether societal attitudes denoting support for democratic norms and tolerance, civic engagement and institutional legitimacy represent drivers or barriers to democratisation in the specific case of the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

Another strand of political culture literature, concerned with the role of cultural traditions in facilitating or, by contrast, constraining the emergence, survival and eventual consolidation of democracy has predominantly focused on religious traditions as paradigmatic manifestations of the cultural affinities of societies.⁷ Thus, arguments about religious traditions which are favourable or detrimental to democratic development abound in the literature⁸, with most accounts pointing to the strong association between Protestantism and democracy and the much weaker, if not negative, impact of religions such as Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Islam and Confucianism on the prospects on democracy.⁹

These studies point to¹⁰:

1. Protestantism's emphasis on individualism, fostering individual responsibility: as a result, Protestantism is a more sceptical religion of the state and less fundamentalist
2. The close link between religion and the state in the other religions:
 - a. In Islam, there is no distinction between religion and politics
 - b. Catholicism is more controlling of the lives of its subjects, more intolerant and dogmatic

The central argument according to which religious fundamentalism is incompatible with democracy revolves around the essentially open nature of democratic polities where "the good society" is basically a matter of opinion (whereby the majority's view must prevail)¹¹ and where tolerance and respect of other's opinions are crucial in supporting democracy. That Catholicism and, in particular, Islam with its universal claims which seek to apply religious law to civil life, might struggle to accommodate the demands of democratic rule, is a reasonable expectation. While recent studies have found no effects of different forms of Christianity on democratization, they identified a clear negative link between predominantly Muslim societies and democracy.¹² However, there remains much disagreement with regards to what it is about predominantly Muslim countries that makes them prone to undemocratic forms of political rule. By now, the argument that there is something inherently undemocratic about Islam as a religious doctrine has been largely discarded.

⁵ Lipset, S.M. (1959). 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy'. *American Political Science Review* 53 (1): 69–105; Inglehart, R., and Welzel, C. (2005). 'Exploring the Unknown: Predicting the Responses of Publics Not yet Surveyed'. *International Review of Sociology* 15 (1): 173–201.

⁶ Boix, C., and Stokes, S.C. (2003). 'Endogenous democratization'. *World Politics* 55.4: 517–549.

⁷ Markoff, J. and Burridge, D. (2019). 'The Global Wave of Democratization'. In Haerpfer, C. W., Bernhagen, P., Welzel, C., and Inglehart, R. eds. 2019. *Democratization*. Second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 87.

⁸ Huntington, S.P. (1984). 'Will more countries become democratic?' *Political Science Quarterly* 99(2): 193–218; Inglehart, R., and Welzel, C. 2005. 'Exploring the Unknown: Predicting the Responses of Publics Not yet Surveyed'. *International Review of Sociology* 15 (1): 173–201.

⁹ Lipset (1959); Huntington (1984).

¹⁰ Hadenius, A. (1992). *Democracy and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 119.

¹¹ Hadenius (1992): 119.

¹² Teorell, J. (2010). *Determinants of democratization: Explaining regime change in the world, 1972–2006*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Instead, scholars have suggested that female subordination may be at the root of Muslim countries' anti-democratic effect¹³ or that the "Muslim" democratic gap is rather an "Arab" gap.¹⁴

Against the background of the inconclusive nature of these debates, this paper zooms in on a more concrete manifestation of the culture prevalent in a given society, namely the role of religious institutions in society and politics. Focusing on the role of religious institutions provides a particularly insightful lens through which to analyse cultural drivers and barriers to democratisation in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, as religious institutions occupy a uniquely influential position at the intersection of identity, values, and political life. In many countries of the region, churches are among the most trusted societal actors and play a central role in shaping public norms, moral discourses, and conceptions of national identity. This gives them significant capacity to either legitimise democratic principles or to resist them, particularly when liberal norms are framed as incompatible with tradition. Moreover, churches often engage directly or indirectly with political elites, legislative processes, and public debates, amplifying their influence beyond the purely spiritual sphere. As such, examining the church allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural narratives are constructed, contested, and mobilised in ways that can both enable and constrain democratisation, making it a critical focal point for analysing the broader relationship between culture and democratic development in the region.

2 The role of religious institutions in democratisation and authoritarianisation

2.1 Armenia

The role of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) in Armenia's democratisation is, much like in Georgia, ambivalent, but overall it has tended to function more as a conservative stabiliser and source of cultural legitimisation for the pre-2018 autocratic successive regimes of Ter-Petrosyan, Kocharyan and Sargsyan. This symbiotic relationship between the AAC and the state came to a halt with the Velvet Revolution in 2018, which brought to power the secular and progressive government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and continued to deteriorate following the 44-day war in 2020.

In the early post-independence period, the Church contributed positively to nation-building, cultural restoration and social cohesion. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia faced war, economic crisis, and institutional fragility. In this context, the Church helped reinforce national identity, moral continuity, and solidarity. The AAC developed a reinforced and self-conscious outlook, presenting itself as the sole source of national identity and a defender against "alien cultural values and identities".¹⁵ Moreover, narratives such as Armenia being the first Christian nation and the AAC being the foundation of Armenian identity are pervasively propagated throughout society, including

¹³ Fish, M.S. (2002). 'Islam and authoritarianism'. *World Politics* 55(1): 4-37.

¹⁴ Stepan, A. C., and Robertson, G.B. (2003). 'An "Arab" more than a "Muslim" democracy gap'. *Journal of democracy* 14(3): 30-44; Teorell. (2010): 50.

¹⁵ Burchardt, M., and Hovhannisyan, H. (2016). 'Religious vs Secular Nationhood: 'Multiple Secularities' in Post-Soviet Armenia'. *Social Compass* 63 (4): 430.

through educational materials, further reinforcing Christianity and the AAC as clear markers of Armenian identity.¹⁶

The privileged relation between the AAC and the state is underpinned by a series of legal provisions that codify a politically ambiguous church-state structure. On one hand, Articles 17 and 41 of the Armenian Constitution guarantee freedom of religion, and thus recognise formal church-state separation. On the other hand, Article 18 of the Armenian Constitution recognises the “exclusive mission” of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the spiritual life of the Armenian people.¹⁷ Following independence, Armenia experienced an influx of new religious denominations, causing confusion and fear of foreign influence. This led to campaigns by “traditional” religious groups for legal recognition.¹⁸ The 2005 constitutional amendment, recognising the Armenian Apostolic Church as a national institution responsible for spiritual and cultural preservation was a response to these calls. Moreover, laws exempt all property owned by the AAC from real estate tax and exempt all religious institutions from value-added tax on services for organising religious rites and the sale or donation of religious objects to or from religious organisations, in addition to the construction of AAC churches being funded by the state budget.¹⁹

The proximity between the AAC and the state has meant that the Church has maintained close and often pragmatic relations with political elites, contributing to the legitimisation of ruling authorities, rather than challenging undemocratic practices. Historically, the AAC has been involved in politics, often providing tactical support or endorsements to preferred candidates.²⁰ That the AAC and successive governments have historically enjoyed a quid pro quo relationship, exchanging symbolic legitimacy and loyalty due to their aligned interests, seems to be confirmed by the Church’s opaque financial affairs and accusations of money laundering, corruption and driving exorbitant luxurious cars leveled against Church leaders.²¹ The proliferation of churches and the emergence of “oligarchisation,” where individuals who build churches can exert influence and authority over local populations, using it to enhance their reputations, further attests to the pernicious effects of the church-state relationship on the democratisation process in Armenia.²²

In the sphere of rights and liberal norms, the Church has often taken conservative positions, particularly on issues such as gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. For instance, The Church accused Pashinyan of advancing what it framed as a “gay agenda” following the government’s plans to ratify the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. In doing so, it promoted misleading narratives, falsely asserting that the Convention would legalise same-sex marriage or introduce a “third sex,” claims that have no basis in the text of the agreement.²³ The AAC has thus played an active role

¹⁶ Mkrtchyan, S., Agadjanian, A., Jödicke, A. and van der Zweerde, E. (2015). ‘Constructing National Identities through General Education: Religion in Armenian Schools’. In *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus*, 1st ed., London: Routledge: 155.

¹⁷ Yegavian, T. (2026). “Church and State in Armenia: A Crisis Decades in the Making”. EVN Report, available at: <https://evnreport.com/opinion/church-and-state-in-armenia-a-crisis-decades-in-the-making/>

¹⁸ Sarkissian, A. (2008). ‘Religion in Postsoviet Armenia: Pluralism and Identity Formation in Transition’. *Religion, State & Society* 36 (2): 163–80: 168.

¹⁹ Sarkissian (2008).

²⁰ Sarkissian (2008).

²¹ Rotink, G. (2024). “From Allies to Adversaries: The Shifting Dynamics of Armenian Church-State Relations”. The Hague Research Institute for Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus & Central Asia, available at: <https://hagueresearch.org/from-allies-to-adversaries-the-shifting-dynamics-of-armenian-church-state-relations/>.

²² Antonyan, Y., Agadjanian, A., Jödicke, A. and van der Zweerde, E. (2015). ‘Political Power and Church Construction in Armenia.’ In *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus*, 1st ed.. London: Routledge: 84.

²³ Rotink (2024).

in shaping public debate around state-led legislative efforts to protect LGBTQ+ rights, by framing anti-discrimination and anti-violence measures in alarmist terms, portraying them as threats to national identity, family structures, and the Church itself. Clergy have mobilised public opposition through protests, public statements, and media appearances, consistently resisting initiatives aimed at advancing protections for LGBTQ+ individuals.²⁴

Following the escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and the subsequent loss of most territories, tensions arose between the Church and the government (Radio Free Europe 2024). The periodic ceasefire violations, numerous border clashes, and Azerbaijani offensives aimed at solidifying control in the region led to heavy criticism of the Pashinyan government from both the public and the AAC (Center for Preventive Action 2024). This shifting dynamics positioned the AAC as one of the regime's most vocal critics, with the traditionally strong ties between the two now largely frayed (Radio Free Europe 2024). Consistent with the hypothesis by Norris and Inglehart (2011), the AAC has recently become a tool for encouraging activism. However, this opposition is driven more by the regime's actions in the Karabakh war, its efforts to reinterpret history, and its attempts to curtail the church's power, rather than a genuine push for democratisation. The relationship between the regime and the church has evolved, with the church now more vocal in its support and mobilisation for opposition figures, such as the Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan. This marks a departure from its previous role, where it served as a tool for mobilisation, policy legitimisation, and hegemony.

Overall, the Armenian Apostolic Church has been supportive of statehood and social cohesion, which are important preconditions for democracy, but it has not played a role in advancing democratisation. Its tendency to align with autocratic power structures and uphold conservative social norms means it has functioned more as a constraint on liberal democratic development, rather than a driver of democratic change.

2.2 Azerbaijan

Islam is the overwhelmingly dominant religion in Azerbaijan, with 94% of Azerbaijanis identifying as Muslim²⁵, although there has been a slight decrease in its representation compared to 2014 when the figure stood at 97% .²⁶ Together with an increase in non-religious respondents from 1.1% to 5.4%, this may indicate a growing trend towards non-affiliation with organized religion. Additionally, the data suggests a decline in minority denominations such as Eastern Orthodox and other smaller groups. Christian religious institutions, such as the Russian Orthodox Church (through its local diocese) and the small Apostolic Prefecture of Azerbaijan, represent minority communities and their churches do not play a role in political or societal debates. Despite the dominance of Islam, Azerbaijan is a strictly secular state, rejecting the integration of religion into governance. Islam in Azerbaijan is not a state promoted religion but rather part of cultural or

²⁴ Pink Human Rights Defender NGO. (2024). Annual Report: The Human Rights Situation of LGBT People in Armenia During 2023, available at: <https://pinkarmenia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/lgbtreport2023en.pdf>.

²⁵ EVS/WVS. 2022. 'European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS)'. JD Systems Institute & WWSA. Dataset Version 4.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.21.

²⁶ Inglehart, R., Haerpfer, C., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., Lagos, M., Norris, P., Ponarin, E., Puranen, B. et al. eds. 2014. 'World Values Survey: Round Six - Country-Pooled Datafile Version': www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp. Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

ethnic identification, with a very different status from that held by religious institutions in Georgia and Armenia, where national churches are viewed as social institutions.²⁷

The Azerbaijani government maintains strict control over religious institutions, education, and literature to prevent radicalization and political Islam. The state fosters an "official Islam" that is loyal to the government. Religious life in Azerbaijan is tightly regulated by the state, particularly through bodies like the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCRWA), which was established by Heydar Aliyev in 2001 and whose authority has gradually expanded, gaining as of 2022 exclusive power to regulate all religious activities in the country.²⁸

This framework ensures that religious institutions, including churches, operate under strict oversight, discouraging political engagement or criticism of the government. In such an environment, religious actors tend to prioritise institutional survival over political activism, even though some have accused the regime of using a security-driven discourse as a pretext for repression and targeting opposition leadership.²⁹ A notable example is the case of Mövsüm Səmədov, leader of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (AIP), who was arrested after delivering a speech criticising the regime's ban on the adhaan, hijab, and the closure of mosques. Additionally, the AIP itself was banned from participating in parliamentary elections.

Other notable examples of vocal religious authorities and their communities facing persecution for their oppositional stances include Taleh Baghirzade, founder of the Muslim Unity Movement, who has been charged with terrorism and attempted forcible seizure of power, and İlgar İbrahimoglu, whose Juma Community has supported opposition parties and participated in political protests.³⁰ Similarly, Gubad İbadoglu, leader of the Azerbaijan Democracy and Prosperity Movement, was arrested on charges of involvement in a counterfeiting operation and accused of religious extremism due to alleged links to the movement of Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen.³¹ Any deviation from the state-promoted model of Traditional Islam (TI) by these communities or their leaders is typically met with a strong and punitive response from the regime.

The state-promoted form of TI is designed to align with the regime's interests, avoiding any questioning of state policies or authority.³² This undermines the potential role of religion in fostering activism or societal engagement. Instead, TI demands compliance, suppresses activism, and works to maintain the status quo. Islamic institutions or authorities that deviate from this model face severe consequences, as they are perceived as threats to national identity and, by extension, state security. Religious denominations have come to recognise these expectations, making it difficult for them to be seen as true representatives of

²⁷ Charles, R. (2010). 'Religiosity and Trust in Religious Institutions: Tales from the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia).' *Politics and Religion* 3(2): 228–61.

²⁸ Office of International Religious Freedom 2024. US Department of State. "2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Belarus". November 2. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/belarus/>

²⁹ Ismayilov, E. (2015). 'Islam in Azerbaijan: Revival and Political Involvement.' In *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus*, 1st ed., London: Routledge: 96–111; Ismayilov, M. (2019). 'Islamic Radicalism That Never Was: Islamic Discourse as an Extension of the Elite's Quest for Legitimation. Azerbaijan in Focus.' *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 10(2): 183–96.

³⁰ Bashirov, G. (2018). 'Islamic Discourses in Azerbaijan: The Securitization of 'Non-Traditional Religious Movements.' *Central Asian Survey* 37 (1): 31–49.

³¹ Freedom House. (2024). 'Freedom in the World 2024- Azerbaijan', available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2024>.

³² Bedford, S., Mahmudlu, C. and Abilov, S. (2021). 'Protecting Nation, State and Government: 'Traditional Islam' in Azerbaijan'. *Europe-Asia Studies* 73 (4): 691–712.

society. Any act that combines religious beliefs with perceived criticism of the regime risks being labelled as extremist, fundamentalist, or as acting on behalf of foreign agents. The regime has successfully managed to equate religious ideologies with radicalism and anti-development, a narrative that has been facilitated by the lack of a clear ideological stance among religious institutions, compounded by the regime's control of resources, consistent persecution, and the stripping of registrations.³³

Against this background, it is not surprising that religious institutions in Azerbaijan function largely as passive supporters of the authoritarian status quo, generally maintaining cooperative or neutral relations with the state and avoiding involvement in contentious political issues. Given their marginal position, limited autonomy, and lack of political engagement, their visibility in society is relatively low. While they are not active barriers to democratic openings, their accommodation to state control and absence from democratic advocacy means they effectively reinforce the existing authoritarian equilibrium by default.

2.3 Belarus

Belarus, like many post-Soviet countries, experienced significant restrictions on religious practices during the Soviet era, with the state promoting atheism and suppressing religious activities and organisations. This changed in 1992 when Belarus adopted the law "On the Freedom of Religions and Religious Organisations," establishing a legal framework for religious freedom and autonomy.³⁴ Since then, Belarus has been considered a multi-religious country, home to several religious denominations, marking a significant shift from the years of repression during Soviet rule.³⁵

The dominant Church is the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) under the Moscow Patriarchate, representing the largest religious community in Belarus, with 58% of Belarussians declaring themselves to be Orthodox.³⁶ This figure, however, represents a significant decline in the percentage of Orthodox Belarussians, down from 72% in 2014, highlighting the consistently growing segment of the population that is non-religious, indifferent to religion, and apathetic towards religious beliefs (up to 35%, compared to 13% in 2014).³⁷ While the Orthodox Church is the most trusted institution in Belarus, with about 40% of Belarussians trusting it, this represents a decline in trust of about 25% compared with data from 2015.³⁸ The second-largest religious community is the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), which consistently gathers approximately about 6% of the population.

Unlike its counterparts in eastern neighbourhood countries such as Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, the BOC has played a more subdued and indirect role in nation-building, reflecting Lukashenko's rejection of ethnonationalism and his embrace of the East Slavic community model and the national symbols and

³³ Shirinov, R. (2015). 'An Analysis of Counter-Hegemony: Challenges of Political Opposition in Azerbaijan.' In *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus*, 1st ed., London: Routledge: 169–84. Routledge.

³⁴ Mudrov, S. A. (2017). 'Church-State Relations in the Post-Communist World: The Cases of Belarus and Estonia.' *A Journal of Church and State* 59 (4): 649–71.

³⁵ Lo Mascolo, G. (2023). 'The Christian Right in Europe: Movements, Networks, and Denominations'. 1st ed. Vol. 129. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

³⁶ EVS/WVS. 2022.

³⁷ Inglehart et al 2014; EVS/WVS. 2022.

³⁸ Douglas, N., Elsner, R., Krawatzek, F., Langbein, J., and Gwendolyn, S. (2021). 'Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change'. ZOIS Report 3/2021. <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/belarus-at-a-crossroads-attitudes-on-social-and-political-change>.

institutional structures of the former Soviet Union.³⁹ Moreover, church - state relations in post-Soviet Belarus experienced dynamic shifts over the years, developing across several key phases.⁴⁰

In the early 1990s, religion played only a limited role in shaping national identity, due to widespread secularisation and the ambiguous association of major confessions with external powers. Even as Belarus gained independence, the Orthodox Church supported statehood cautiously, avoiding strong geopolitical positioning. From 1996 to 2003, under Alexander Lukashenko, the relationship shifted significantly: new legislation and the 2003 agreement institutionalised a cooperative model between the state and the Belarusian Orthodox Church, replacing earlier principles of separation and privileging “traditional” religions, particularly Orthodoxy. The Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations of 2002 acknowledged the role of the Orthodox Church in “the historical formation and development of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people”⁴¹ and paved the way for the signing of the agreement between the state and the Church. This agreement guarantees the BOC religious autonomy and in return the BOC continues being an “influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people”.⁴² At the same time, the amendments introduced to the law in 2023–2024 have significantly expanded state oversight across all areas of religious activity, with legal provisions being applied to sanction religious leaders who express political dissent or support positions that diverge from official government policy.⁴³

Both the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches have traditionally avoided openly criticising state repression. During key moments of political crisis - most notably after the 2020 Belarusian presidential election protests - the Church leadership largely avoided direct confrontation with the regime. Nonetheless, the period surrounding the election saw individual clergy and lay believers alike - including priests and bishops - voice support for the protest movement, express sympathy for protesters and call for peace, prompting a strong response from the authorities, who dismissed several senior church leaders. A number of Orthodox priests also faced suspension, as the regime moved to reassert control.⁴⁴ Despite the increased visibility of church representatives during the 2020 elections and subsequent protests, the institutional role of the churches was peripheral and institutional support for democratic demands remained minimal and inconsistent.

The institutional and ideological alignment of the BOC to both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Belarusian state under Alexander Lukashenko has meant that, rather than challenging authoritarian governance, the Church has typically reinforced regime legitimacy. It has promoted narratives centred on stability, social order, and traditional values, which resonate with and support the government’s political model. Its influence has been less overtly political than in some neighbouring countries, but its alignment

³⁹ Zhou, You. (2025). “Eastern Orthodox Churches and Nation-State Building in Eurasia: A Case Study Based on Fieldwork in Ukraine and Belarus.” *Risks, Resilience and Interdependency: Developing Countries in the Age of Uncertainties*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 160. 151-178.

⁴⁰ Mudrov, S. and Zakharov, N. (2022). *The Internal Discussions in the Belarusian Orthodox Church on Identity and Policy Issues: A Contemporary Perspective Journal of Religion in Europe*, 15(1-4): 81-104.

⁴¹ Mudrov (2017): 657.

⁴² US Department of State. no date. “Belarus”. November 2. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/171684.pdf>

⁴³ UNHR, (2024). “Belarus: UN experts concerned about new law on freedom of conscience and religious organisations”, 22 February 2024, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/belarus/belarus-un-experts-concerned-about-new-law-freedom-conscience-and-religious-organisations-enru>.

⁴⁴ Douglas et al. (2021).

with state power and reluctance to support democratic change have contributed to maintaining the status quo.

2.4 Georgia

The role of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in Georgia's democratisation is best understood as ambivalent: it has functioned at times as a source of social cohesion and legitimacy, but more often as a constraint on liberal democratic deepening, particularly in recent years.

In the immediate post-Soviet period, the Church played a largely stabilizing and identity-building role.⁴⁵ Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia faced weak institutions, internal fragmentation, and low public trust. In this context, the Church emerged as one of the most trusted institutions in society⁴⁶, helping to consolidate a sense of national identity and continuity. This contributed indirectly to state-building, by fostering social cohesion in a fragile political environment. The GOC's highly respected Patriarch Ilia II, in particular, demonstrated considerable political tact in navigating Georgia's highly polarized domestic landscape. During the political crisis of November 2008, when the government's forceful dispersal of opposition protests intensified tensions, the Patriarch acted as an intermediary, holding consultations with both opposition figures and government representatives, urging restraint and de-escalation. His intervention contributed to a temporary easing of tensions and helped stabilise the situation, which ultimately culminated in the re-election of Mikheil Saakashvili in a snap presidential vote.⁴⁷

However, as Georgia's political system stabilised and began pursuing democratic reforms, especially after the Rose Revolution, the Church increasingly acted as a normative and political constraint. Its influence has been particularly visible in areas related to civil liberties, minority rights, and pluralism, where it has often promoted conservative positions that clash with liberal democratic norms. For example, the Church has opposed legislation and public initiatives related to LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and secular governance, at times contributing to polarisation and limiting the expansion of inclusive citizenship. Ever since 2013, parts of the GOC have increasingly used inflammatory rhetoric, most prominently targeting LGBTQI+ communities, but also extending to broader social and political issues. Over time, this discursive radicalisation has spilled beyond rhetoric, coinciding with a surge in mobilised street-level violence by far-right and Orthodox groups, at times involving or encouraged by radical members of the clergy. A stark illustration of the growing influence of fundamentalist and nationalist forces within the GOC emerged in May 2013, when an International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia rally was violently disrupted by thousands of counter-protesters - including clergy - who targeted a small group of activists.⁴⁸ A year later, in 2014, the GOC openly resisted the adoption of the Anti-Discrimination Law, with members of the clergy directly participating in parliamentary plenary sessions to argue that provisions on equal rights for sexual minorities and gender equality conflicted

⁴⁵ Gegeshidze, A. and M. Mirziashvili (2021). "The Orthodox Church in Georgia's Changing Society", available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/07/the-orthodox-church-in-georgias-changing-society>.

⁴⁶ For many years, Georgians displayed the highest levels of trust in the church amongst their eastern neighbourhood peers, peaking at 86% in 2010, before gradually starting to decline after 2015. The latest Caucasus Barometer for 2024, conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC), showed that 73% of Georgians trusted the Georgian Orthodox Church, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/codebook/>.

⁴⁷ Metreveli, Tornike (2016). An Undisclosed Story of Roses: Church, State, and Nation in Contemporary Georgia. *Nationalities Papers* 44, pp. 694–712.

⁴⁸ Kakachia, K. (2014). "Is Georgia's Orthodox Church an Obstacle to European Values?" *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 322.

with fundamental moral principles.⁴⁹ In July 2021, tensions escalated dramatically during the crisis in Tbilisi, when far-right groups - among them members of the clergy - violently targeted journalists reporting on Pride-related events. The response of the GOC reflected its internal contradictions: while senior figures formally condemned the violence, they simultaneously rejected the organisation of Pride events, framing LGBTQ rights as incompatible with Georgian moral and cultural traditions.⁵⁰

Moreover, the status of the GOC relative to all other religious communities in Georgia has blurred the boundary between religion and state. The influence of the GOC within Georgian society was significantly reinforced by the 2002 concordat, an agreement that formalised the Church's privileged position within the state, granting it a range of legal and institutional advantages. These included tax exemptions, a consultative role in key policy areas such as education, legal immunity for the Patriarch, and exemptions from military service for clergy. In addition, the Church secured direct financial support from the state budget, underscoring its entrenched position within Georgia's political and institutional framework.⁵¹ In turn, across successive governments, Georgian ruling elites have consistently leveraged close ties with the GOC for political advantage. From Eduard Shevardnadze securing the Concordat and its privileges, to Mikheil Saakashvili significantly increasing state funding for the Church despite a pro-Western reformist agenda, and the Georgian Dream government further expanding both financial support and benefits, engagement with the Church has remained a central feature of political strategy.⁵² Governments have at times been reluctant to challenge the Church's positions, which can constrain reform agendas - particularly those linked to European integration and human rights standards. Taking the example of the Anti-Discrimination Law again, while the reform was ultimately approved by parliament, the bill was substantially weakened during the legislative process. Key provisions were removed, including the proposed inspectorate, and protections against discrimination were made subject to exceptions related to public morality and the constitutional agreement with the GOC.⁵³ These revisions prompted strong criticism from civil society, which viewed them as evidence that parliament had prioritised accommodation of the Church over democratic reform.

The Church's role also intersects with geopolitical narratives. Elements within the institution have, at times, echoed rhetoric that is skeptical of Western liberalism and supportive of "traditional values," narratives that can align with broader regional discourses promoted by actors such as Russia. For instance, the Union of Orthodox Parents (Martmadidebel Mshobelta Kavshiri), a group closely linked to the Georgian Orthodox Church, has been a vocal critic of Western influence, frequently portraying it as a force seeking to undermine "traditional values".⁵⁴ This further complicates Georgia's democratic trajectory by reinforcing tensions between Europeanisation and domestic identity politics.

Overall, the Georgian Orthodox Church has contributed to state consolidation and social stability, particularly in the early years of independence, but in the contemporary period it has more often functioned as a brake on liberal democratic development, especially regarding rights-based reforms and the deepening of pluralism. Its impact on democratisation is therefore not uniform but shifts depending on the dimension of

⁴⁹ Minesashvili, S. (2015). "Can the Georgian Orthodox Church contribute to the democratization process?". Policy Brief. *Georgian Institute of Politics*.

⁵⁰ Gegeshidze and Mirziashvili (2021).

⁵¹ Kakachia (2014).

⁵² Lebanidze, B.; Kakabadze, S. Spoiler or Facilitator? Radicalization of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Its Impact on Societal Resilience in Georgia. *Religions* 2023, 14, 272. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020272>.

⁵³ Minesashvili (2015).

⁵⁴ Lebanidze and Kakabadze (2023), 5.

democracy considered: supportive in terms of identity and cohesion, but constraining in terms of liberal norms and inclusive governance.

2.5 Moldova

As the most trusted institution in Moldova,⁵⁵ the Orthodox Church shapes Moldovans' attitudes and values not only in the religious domain, but also in the political and social spheres. This outsized political and social role has been fostered by the fact that Orthodoxy represents one of the common fundaments of an otherwise divided national identity: despite divisions between advocates for "Moldovenism", which emphasizes the distinctiveness of Moldovans from Romanians and promotes a special role for the Russian language, and supporters of a (pan-)Romanian conception of national identity, supporting an ethnonational model of statehood centered on the titular nation, with Romanian language and culture occupying a dominant position, Orthodoxy is at the centre of both (pan-)Romanian and Moldovenist national narratives.⁵⁶

However, despite the potential for Orthodoxy to shape a coherent national identity narrative and strengthen national cohesion, the institutional split between two Orthodox jurisdictions – the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC), subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC), subordinate to the Romanian Patriarchate – has complicated the role of religion in the process of democratization. Given that the division between the two Churches mirrors Moldova's broader geopolitical split, their role as social and political actors has been shaped by a complex nexus of geopolitics and identity politics. Both Churches maintain close ties to political elites, support traditionalist social policies and conservative moral legislation, and oppose LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality laws, often acting as barriers rather than drivers for democratisation.

The MOC, in particular, has historically exerted considerable political influence by indicating support for pro-Russian political forces, engaging in electoral mobilisation and criticizing pro-European reforms. As the dominant Church in the country, the MOC covers approximately 80% of Moldova's Orthodox believers. With 93% of Moldovans declaring themselves to be Orthodox and 63% considering that a Moldovan citizen "must" be Orthodox (Pew Research Center 2017), it is clear that MOC's extensive outreach within Moldovan society (particularly in rural areas where more than 60% of Moldova's population live)⁵⁷ has endowed it with the power to shape public attitudes and political preferences. A prominent example of the MOC encouraging religiously motivated voting and signaling moral legitimacy to voters was the 2016 public endorsement of Igor Dodon's presidential candidacy, highlighting his commitment to Christian values. At the same time, individual MOC clergy criticized his main opponent, Maia Sandu, accusing her of anti-Orthodox positions.⁵⁸ More recently, the MOC has been accused of having become "a hybrid warfare weapon in Moldova's elections" by spreading Russian propaganda and contributing to disinformation campaigns in the country ahead of the crucial parliamentary elections in the fall of 2025.⁵⁹ According to a Reuters Special Report,

⁵⁵ In 2021, 68.9% of respondents declared very high or some trust in this institution (BTI 2024); in 2025, 65.6% of respondents declared very high or some trust in this institution (IPP 2025 [Institutul de Politici Publice | Prezentarea rezultatelor sondajului Barometrul Opiniei Publice, septembrie 2025](#))

⁵⁶ Gohlke, L. (2024). The Role of Religion in Moldovan Populist Mobilization Strategies: A Competition between Traditional and Religious Values? *Problems of Post-Communism*, 71(1): 71.

⁵⁷ Bertelsmann Stiftung. 2024. 'BTI 2024 – Moldova Country Report'. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

⁵⁸ Bertelsmann Stiftung. 2020. 'BTI 2020 – Moldova Country Report'. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

⁵⁹ <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/09/05/how-the-orthodox-church-became-a-hybrid-warfare-weapon-in-moldovas-elections>

Russian-linked operatives provided MOC clergy with financial incentives and organized pilgrimages to Russia in exchange for individual priests and their networks' promoting pro-Russian narratives ahead the key September 2025 election, framing Moldova's EU integration as a threat to Orthodox values and traditional society, and mobilising parishioners politically, especially in rural areas where the Church has strong influence.⁶⁰

Both the MOS and BOC have opposed reforms seen as running against traditional Christian values. For instance, both Churches advocated for excluding sexual orientation as grounds for protection against discrimination under Law 121 of May 24, 2012, on Ensuring Equality.⁶¹ Opposition to initiatives and actions supporting the rights of LGBTQ+ communities has been widespread within the MOC, which has vocally argued against demonstrations in support of LGBTQ+ rights and supported the organisation of alternative "Family Marches". Moreover, the MOC's website has been notably populated with official communication that frames alleged anti-Orthodox values such as gender equality and protection of minority rights as originating in the EU's political liberalism and Western education.⁶²

Despite its potential to foster national cohesion and support the strengthening of social capital, particularly among marginalized communities, the institution of the Church in Moldova has instead acted as a powerful societal institution seeking to shape public attitudes, often resisting liberal democratic reforms associated with European integration. Its influence is deeply intertwined with Moldova's broader geopolitical and identity struggles.

2.6 Ukraine

Unlike many Orthodox-majority countries, Ukraine has a plurality of competing churches, displaying what has been called "the most pluralistic and competitive denominational religious market in all of Eastern Europe" (Casanova, 96 in *Post-Soviet Political Order: Conflict and State Building* edited by Barnett R. Rubin, Jack L. Snyder). These include the formerly separate Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), which have since 2019 merged into the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU); the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP); as well as the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC). This religious pluralism has had two major effects: on one hand, it prevented the emergence of a single dominant church aligned with the state, creating fertile conditions for the democratic development of a culturally pluralistic and religiously tolerant society; on the other hand, it created a competitive religious field leading to social divisions, increasing politicisation and the "securitization of religion", particularly since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and full-fledged war in the Donbas.⁶³

Religious actors have played an important role as agents of civic mobilisation during key democratic turning points in Ukraine, most notably the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests.

⁶⁰ Lowe, C., Nikolskaya, P. and Zverev, A. (2025). 'Holy war: How Russia recruited Orthodox priests to sway Moldova's voters', available at: <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/holy-war-how-russia-recruited-orthodox-priests-sway-moldovas-voters-2025-09-26/>.

⁶¹ Gohlke (2024): 73.

⁶² Pociumban, A. (2020). 'In Church we trust. The case of the Moldovan Orthodox Church'. *New Eastern Europe* (Issue 5), available at: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/09/07/in-church-we-trust-the-case-of-the-moldovan-orthodox-church/>.

⁶³ Shestopalets, Denys. "Church as an Existential Threat: The Securitization of Religion in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine." *Journal of Church and State* 62.4 (2020): 713-739.

Following the blatantly rigged second round of elections in November 2004, a wide range of confessions, other than the UOC-MP, became involved in organizing mass mobilization by delivering sermons and leading pro-democracy prayers in public spaces, organising travel of priests and parishioners to Kyiv and making use of their own intellectual and material resources to support the protests.⁶⁴ The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and parts of the Kyiv-oriented Orthodox clergy were especially involved in supporting peaceful protests, calling for electoral integrity and providing moral legitimacy to opposition movements, but other congregations were also active. The evangelical Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations church (the Embassy of God), for instance, has been noted for its ability to mobilise its 25.000 members in nonviolent protest, providing at the same time material and spiritual assistance to fellow protesters.⁶⁵

During Euromaidan, churches played an even more visible and often direct role, with clergy being physically present at protest sites in large numbers, churches providing sanctuary, medical aid, and mediation and religious leaders publicly condemning violence. A large number of religious denominations and organizations publicly supported the protesters' pro-democracy discourse and the unequivocal defence of human rights.⁶⁶ This has led some to conclude that Ukrainian churches have provided the "backbone of civil society in the post-Maidan period", through their prioritization of the common good and their example of reconciliation.⁶⁷ The UGCC in particular, and later the OCU, strongly supported protestors and framed the movement in terms of dignity (hence, the Revolution of Dignity), justice and European values, contributing to the construction of a moral framing for the act of democratic resistance.

However, not all Ukrainian churches have acted as pro-democratic entrepreneurs, linking national identity with democratic values. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which has been closely tied to Russia and has in the past promoted narratives aligned with Russian geopolitical interests, has generally displayed a critical stance toward Western liberal democracy and opposed Ukraine's European integration.⁶⁸ This made it difficult for the UOC-MP to position itself during the Revolution of Dignity initiated by the Maidan protests, adopting a neutral stance in the beginning, followed by calls for peace, rather than the kind of over support for the protesters granted by the other churches.

The creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2019 (recognized by Constantinople) had major political implications, representing both a significant religious development in so far as the newly established OCU achieved canonical independence and aspired to unite most Orthodox believers living in Ukraine, and a nation-building milestone, crowning the centuries-long struggle of the Ukrainian people to establish their own national church. However, divisions within Ukrainian Orthodox churches, clergy and parishioners remain and continue to be politicised and instrumentalised by political actors.

Particularly after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the UOC-MP has lost much of its influence to the OCU, with declining membership, widespread public disapproval and accusations of collaboration with Russia severely diminishing its following and public standing. But even though Russia's

⁶⁴ Mitrokhin, N. (2010). 'Orthodoxy in Ukrainian Political Life 2004–2009'. *Religion, State and Society*, 38(3): 229–251.

⁶⁵ Filiatreau, S. (2009) 'Christian Faith, Nonviolence, and Ukraine's Orange Revolution: A Case Study of the Embassy of God Church'. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: 29(3), Article 2.

⁶⁶ Salajan, D. D. (2025). 'Identity and Faith: The Church and the Euromaidan in Ukraine' *Astra Salvensis* (1): 53-54.

⁶⁷ Cherenkov, M. (2018). 'The Church's social activism in post-Maidan Ukraine', *New Eastern Europe*, available at: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/04/17/church-without-walls-churchs-social-activism-post-maidan-ukraine/>.

⁶⁸ Olszański, T. A. (2014). 'The Ukrainian Orthodox Church's stance on the revolution and war'. OSW Commentary. *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)*: Warsaw, available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-10-30/ukrainian-orthodox-churchs-stance-revolution-and-war>.

ability to exert soft power through the arm of the UOC-MP has been severely degraded, the church – despite its claim of independence from the Moscow Patriarchate as of May 2022 – has been found by Ukraine’s Security Service to harbour treasonous priests who collaborate with Russian-appointed authorities in occupied regions and spread Russian propaganda. In an effort to curb these activities, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted in August 2024 a law meant to ban organizations managed from an aggressor country. While many in Ukraine regard this as justified and a necessary step in Ukraine’s overall defence against Russia, the move has also generated accusations of religious persecution. Notably, the issue has been raised as a potential bargaining chip when negotiating the provision of military aid by the current Trump administration.⁶⁹

The role of Ukraine’s multiple churches in the country’s democratisation has thus been complex, reflecting the country’s religious diversity and geopolitical cleavages. Rather than a single unified actor, different Orthodox jurisdictions and other churches have played distinct, and sometimes opposing, roles in shaping democratic norms, mobilisation, and legitimacy, acting as both drivers and barriers to democratization efforts.

3 Conclusions and policy recommendations

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that the role of religious institutions as cultural drivers or barriers to democratisation in the EU’s eastern neighbourhood is complex, context-dependent, and often internally contradictory. While political culture theories highlight the importance of values such as trust, participation, and tolerance, the empirical analysis shows that these values are not abstract forces; they are shaped, mediated, and mobilised by influential societal actors, among which churches occupy a particularly significant position. Across the region, religious institutions have not acted as uniform agents of democratisation or authoritarianism, but rather as adaptive actors whose impact varies according to their relationship with the state, their internal structure, and the broader geopolitical and societal context.

The case of Armenia illustrates how a dominant national church can function primarily as a conservative stabiliser. The Armenian Apostolic Church has played a constructive role in fostering national identity and social cohesion, particularly in the early post-independence period. However, its close alignment with political elites and its resistance to liberal reforms - especially in areas such as gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights—have limited its contribution to democratic deepening. Even when it has shifted into opposition following political crises, this has reflected institutional and geopolitical tensions rather than a principled commitment to democratic norms.

In Azerbaijan, the relationship between religion and democratisation is shaped by an entirely different dynamic: the subordination of religious life to a highly centralised and authoritarian state. Islam, while dominant as a cultural identity marker, is tightly controlled through a state-managed framework of “official Islam” that discourages political engagement and suppresses dissent. Religious actors who attempt to challenge state authority face repression, leaving religious institutions largely passive and politically marginal.

⁶⁹ Luchenko, K. (2025). ‘How the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Became a Weapon for Moscow and Washington’. *Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center*, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/03/ukraine-church-dilemma>.

In this context, religion does not actively drive authoritarianism, but its co-optation and depoliticisation effectively reinforce the existing regime by eliminating a potential source of societal mobilisation.

Belarus presents a similar, though not identical, pattern of alignment between church and state. The Belarusian Orthodox Church has evolved within a cooperationist model that grants it a privileged cultural role while ensuring its political loyalty. Although individual clergy and believers showed moments of support for democratic protests in 2020, the institutional church has remained largely cautious and aligned with the regime. Its emphasis on stability, order, and traditional values has contributed to the ideological maintenance of authoritarian governance, even if its direct political influence remains relatively limited.

In Georgia, the Orthodox Church has played a more visibly ambivalent role. It has been a crucial source of social cohesion and national identity, particularly in periods of instability, and has at times acted as a mediator in political crises. However, as democratic reforms have advanced, the Church has increasingly positioned itself as a defender of traditional values against liberalisation, opposing reforms related to minority rights and pluralism. Its privileged institutional status and close ties with political elites have further enabled it to shape policy outcomes, often constraining the deepening of liberal democracy despite its broader contributions to state consolidation.

Moldova highlights how religious institutions can become deeply entangled in geopolitical and identity conflicts. The division between competing Orthodox jurisdictions reflects and reinforces broader societal cleavages, while both churches have engaged in political mobilisation and supported conservative agendas. The Moldovan Orthodox Church, in particular, has exercised significant influence over public opinion and electoral behaviour, often aligning with pro-Russian narratives and resisting reforms associated with European integration. In this context, the church has acted less as a unifying cultural force and more as a politically embedded actor shaping and amplifying existing divisions.

Finally, Ukraine demonstrates the most dynamic and pluralistic interaction between religion and democratisation. The country's competitive religious landscape has prevented the monopolisation of religious authority and created space for multiple churches to engage in public life. Several religious actors have played a prominent role in supporting democratic movements, most notably during the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan protests, providing moral legitimacy, organisational resources, and physical support to protesters. At the same time, divisions within Orthodoxy – particularly the presence of the Moscow-affiliated church – have introduced countervailing influences, sometimes aligned with external geopolitical interests. This plurality has made religion both a driver of democratic mobilisation and a site of political contestation.

Taken together, these cases underscore that religious institutions are neither inherently conducive nor inherently hostile to democratisation. Rather, they act as powerful cultural intermediaries whose influence depends on their degree of autonomy, their relationship with political authority, and their capacity to shape or respond to societal values. Where churches are pluralistic, relatively independent, and embedded in vibrant civil societies, they can support democratic mobilisation and norm diffusion. Where they are closely aligned with the state or instrumentalised by political elites, they are more likely to reinforce authoritarian stability or resist liberal reform. Understanding the role of religion in democratisation therefore requires moving beyond essentialist assumptions about cultural traditions and instead examining the concrete institutional and political configurations through which cultural values are produced and contested.

Based on these insights, this paper offers the following policy recommendations:

General recommendations

1. Strengthening institutional separation between religious organisations and the state is crucial. Where churches are formally or informally integrated into state structures, they tend to prioritise regime stability over civic pluralism. Legal frameworks should therefore ensure clear boundaries between religious authority and political power, including transparent funding arrangements and limits on direct political privileges.
2. Supporting religious pluralism and equal treatment of denominations can reduce the dominance of single institutional actors that are able to shape national identity in exclusionary ways. Competitive religious environments, as the Ukrainian case shows, are more likely to generate civic engagement and reduce monopolisation of moral authority.
3. Third, engagement with religious institutions should prioritise democratic norms rather than institutional privileges. International actors, including the EU, should focus on encouraging churches to uphold principles such as non-discrimination, civic peace, and respect for political rights, rather than reinforcing their political status through state-centric partnerships.
4. There is a need to support civil society-religion interfaces, particularly initiatives that connect faith-based actors with human rights, social justice, and democratic participation agendas. This can help shift religious discourse away from exclusivist identity politics toward more inclusive interpretations of tradition.

Country-specific recommendations

Armenia:

The Armenian Apostolic Church remains deeply embedded in national identity and enjoys a privileged constitutional and symbolic role. Reforms should therefore be gradual and focus on increasing institutional transparency and accountability, particularly in relation to church property, financing, and political engagement. At the same time, civil society initiatives should be supported that promote dialogue between religious authorities and rights-based organisations, especially on gender equality and minority rights, to reduce the framing of democratic reforms as existential cultural threats.

Azerbaijan:

Given the strong state control over Islam, the key challenge is not church-state entanglement but over-centralisation and repression of religious autonomy. Recommendations include cautiously expanding space for independent religious expression under clear human rights safeguards, and ensuring that counter-extremism policies are not used to suppress legitimate civic or religious participation. International actors should encourage the distinction between security concerns and peaceful religious activity to avoid further politicisation of Islam.

Belarus:

In Belarus, the priority is to reduce the political instrumentalisation of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. This would require revisiting legal frameworks that privilege the Orthodox Church and expanding protections for religious leaders who face sanctions for political expression. Support should be given to religious actors who

promote civic peace and dialogue, especially those who emerged during the 2020 protests, while avoiding strengthening institutional ties that reinforce regime legitimacy.

Georgia:

The Georgian Orthodox Church requires reforms aimed at reducing its informal political veto power. This includes revisiting aspects of the 2002 Concordat to ensure that legal privileges do not translate into policy influence in areas such as education and anti-discrimination law. At the same time, targeted support should be given to moderate voices within the Church and to interfaith initiatives that promote pluralism and reduce polarisation around identity politics.

Moldova:

Given the geopolitical split within Orthodoxy, policies should focus on depoliticising religious affiliation and reducing external influence over church structures. Transparency in foreign funding and political campaigning by religious actors should be strengthened. In addition, civic education programmes should aim to reinforce the separation between religious identity and political choice, particularly in rural areas where church influence on voting behaviour is strongest.

Ukraine:

In Ukraine, the main priority is to safeguard the pluralistic religious environment that has supported democratic mobilisation, while preventing its further securitisation. While legitimate concerns about foreign influence through religious structures must be addressed, policies should avoid broad restrictions that could undermine religious freedom. Instead, emphasis should be placed on transparency, legal accountability, and dialogue between denominations, ensuring that religious institutions remain part of civil society rather than extensions of geopolitical conflict.

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