

**BIOPOLITICAL CONSERVATISM AND
“PASTORAL POWER”:
A RUSSIA – GEORGIA MEETING POINT**

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Introduction

This paper seeks to unveil biopolitical dimensions of Russia's increasing self-assertion in Georgia, a country that has faced the loss of two of its regions and continues to face intense political pressure from the Kremlin. We argue that one of Russia's strongest policy instruments is biopolitical, since it is aimed at imposing a socially conservative agenda of biopolitical "normalization" widely supported in Georgian society (Thornton and Sichinava 2015). In this context, the idea of empire acquires visible biopolitical connotations: Russia intends to reshape borders by expanding its version of biopolitical conservatism (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2015) and include the Georgian population, which shares the Orthodox values constitutive for Putin's ideology, in the sphere of the Russian normative counter-project.

The concept of biopolitics has a rich academic legacy, yet it also denotes a specific type of policy that distinguishes it from geopolitical strategies. In January 2016 Russian President Vladimir Putin explained the annexation of Crimea in predominantly biopolitical – as opposed to geopolitical – terms, claiming that Russia is more concerned about people than about borders. As a policy, biopolitics is conducive to the emergence of a specific Russian identity based largely on the idea of defending the threatened lives of people looking for protection, rather than on the logic of material gains through territorial acquisition. For Russia, territory as such is not necessarily at the top of its priorities – the Russian Army did not fully occupy Georgia in August 2008, and Russia is reluctant to fully and immediately absorb Abkhazia and South Ossetia (along with Donbas and Transnistria). In the meantime, Russian dominance is, to a larger extent, based on influencing different groups of the population through discourses that culturally and (bio)politically

reconnect them to the Russian collective Self.

Our argument is three-fold. First, we approach biopolitics not in a narrow technical sense as a set of policy tools that are meant to protect or control (groups of) population; we claim that biopolitics necessarily presupposes as its key strategy the social construction of a population that is never "given". Through biopolitical instruments it can be constructed differently – as a unified community supposedly sharing common normative grounding (the "Russian world"); as a group of internally displaced people that need to be taken care of (refugees in conflict areas); as recipients of humanitarian assistance, and so forth. These role identities are situational and depend on the contexts created by different modalities of biopower.

Second, the application of biopolitical – i.e. focused on controlling groups of population – instruments strengthens imperial logic in Russian foreign policy. This argument can be explored on the grounds of the projection of Russian "pastoral power" to Georgia, with its strong conservative components and moral appeal, as well as on the basis of Moscow's policy of gradually incorporating its population through passportization.

Third, we deem that the practice of biopolitics in the South Caucasus is a battlefield for a number of projects competing with each other. Being an object of Russian biopower, Georgia itself develops biopolitical approaches and thus includes them in the process of its identity-making. This reciprocal biopoliticization of Russian–Georgian relations creates spaces where the two actors either compete with each other (over loyalties of the residents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia), or find themselves in a complementary position over a plethora of policy issues pertaining to the conservative agenda with its strong biopolitical elements.

“Pastoral Power” and Russian – Georgian Relations

A major source of biopolitical discourses and practices in this field is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) that, in accordance with Michel Foucault’s thinking, can be seen as a biopolitical institution of “pastoral power”. Religion must be included in the biopolitical sphere of taking care of human lives. Along the lines of Foucault’s reasoning, pastoral power is a power of taking care of lives through “modern biopolitical rationalities” (Hannah 2011, 230-231). As Mika Ojakangas (2005, 19) posits, from the times of antiquity states exercised power “over land, whereas the shepherd wields power over a flock... The task of the shepherd is to provide continuous material and spiritual welfare for each and every member of the flock”. Pastoral power has strong connotations with biopower since its object is “people on the move rather than ... static territory” (Golder 2007, 165); biopower and pastoral power share other important characteristics – normative / spiritual components and surveillance mechanisms.

After Russia lost many forms of influence in Georgia as a result of the August war of 2008, one of the few channels of communication that remained between the two peoples was maintained by the two Orthodox Churches (Kornilov and Makarychev 2015). The accentuation of cultural and religious affinity with Georgia is for Moscow a biopolitical instrument allowing for emphasizing the incompatibility of “traditional” Orthodox values with the EU’s liberal, emancipatory agenda, which, according to its critics, “calls for respecting sin” and “forgets about nations and patriotism” (Devdariani 2014). As a Georgian Orthodox priest noted,

“We have a common Orthodox spirit with Russia...I like the way the Russian state treats same-sex marriages; it is important for us here. When the West came to resist God, we see that

we can save ourselves only with Russia”.

But it is not necessarily that the ROC directly instructs the GOC on specific policy issues. There is no strong evidence of Georgia’s high importance for the ROC, which does not have a well-developed and articulated policy towards Georgia, yet it is the GOC that explicitly or implicitly uses the conservative discourse emanating from the ROC for the sake of signifying the traditional value-based core of Georgian authentic identity. *“Presumably, what irritates the West is the high authority of religion in Georgia, which appears to contravene experiences of democratic countries. Yet our patriarch does have a high authority that they (the West. – authors.) would like to destroy”*, - this statement by a Georgian priest resembles the conspiracy theories that are also popular in Russia. The same goes for Eurosceptic voices in the Georgian religious community: *“Perhaps, Europe has already detached itself from Christianity... It does not deem it essential any longer to fill your liberties with eternal values ... The most fundamental for Europe is the untouchable freedom of choice. Yet is there a deep wisdom in this?”*.

Against this backdrop, the ROC undoubtedly has an essential influence on Georgian Orthodox culture, to a large extent through Russian language theological literature. Yet, as one of local priests mentioned,

“since 1990s the situation has changed. When Georgian priests begun to move out of Georgia and the USSR, to Greece or Romania, we have started learning from others. Older priests are closer to Russian religious traditions, while their younger colleagues share more with the Balkan canons”.

The specificity of the latter is mostly related to such religious practices as frequency of Eucharist or confession, though these canonical differences have also contributed

to the spread of European cultural values to the Georgian clergy in general. The shared Orthodox faith can also produce some ambiguity towards Russia. Some priests within the GOC are not happy to see themselves dependent on their Russian brothers.⁵

"As I see it, we don't have such big problems with Russia as we do with the West... Both of them are empires that wish to control the world... We don't want to be parts of either of the two projects... As far as Russia's policy is concerned, it is rude... If Russia comes again with its aggressive attitudes – well, something that already happen can repeat... We have lost a lot, yet kept intact our language, faith and morals, which are the main values for us... You Russians have force and culture, we also have our own spirituality, and we all together can say to the West – no, what exists with you will not exist here; we can take from you something good, but not homosexuals".

The GOC is a diverse and fragmented agglomeration of different religious platforms, and does not speak with a single voice on policy issues. Within the GOC there are priests who share classical theories of Western conspiracy against Orthodoxy, and there are also those who accept the liberal values of human dignity and freedom. Yet both of them see Russia as an empire.

"Georgia does not wish to submit itself to Russia, since this would entail a loss of the political freedom that we have gained... A blend of Christianity and imperialism does not give us anything healthy. The spirit of Byzantium that could have had historical roots nowadays looks obsolete. Russia does have that kind of inclinations, which is bad... In the meantime I can't say that the ROC is short of the holy spirit"

The GOC is thus a controversial institution: it may both support the European integration of Georgia and team up with Stalinist sympathizers; Ilia the Second may be critical of Russia's policy in the occupied territories,

while also meet the explicitly-pro-Kremlin group of the "Night Wolves" biker club, which is known for its neo-imperial image (Chinkova 2014, Kevorkova 2013). However, even if we take the GOC narratives that radiate pro-Russian sympathies, the question arises: are those sympathies a product of Russian biopower, or do they stem from the ideological consonance of the two kindred churches? It is true that the Patriarch Ilia has called Putin "a wise ruler who will necessarily help reunite Georgia... Russia's idea is about the protection of spirituality" (Apsny 2013). It is also true that Georgian priests can refer to their Russian spiritual teachers in public pronouncements and copy many practices of the ROC, but still the latter is overwhelmingly perceived by the Georgian Orthodox community as an external force indirectly influenced by the Kremlin:

"There is a presumption that people who propagate pro-Russian sympathies might have been working for Russian special services, or for kindred Georgian organizations for which religious connections are important".

There is an undeniable potential for ROC influence in Georgia, but that hardly leads to direct practical implications. The head of the GOC has, on numerous occasions, made pro-Western statements, and celebrations of the 30st anniversary of his enthronement were held without representatives of the ROC. It is telling that GOC representatives try to keep a critical distance from Russian policies towards Ukraine. Thus, the Metropolitan Nikolay suggested that "what happens in Ukraine is close to us: in 1993 we went through pretty much the same. In an Abkhazian village a monk, who never took arms in his hands, was killed just because he represented the GOC" (RIA 2015). By saying that, the Georgian priest drew a parallel between separatists in the two countries, and indirectly identified GOC with the Kyiv-based Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Normatively, Russian religious diplomacy revolves around a conservative agenda that plays a political role: the pro-LGBT vs. anti-LGBT dichotomy transforms into a pro-EU vs. pro-Russian dilemma. Thus, some in Georgia think that Russia manipulates the widely spread religious feelings and the veneration of Orthodox values to isolate Georgia from the West:

"Church in Georgia is a key identity maker. It imposes two bans on those who are supposed to be loyal to the idea of the nation – on being non-Orthodox and being LGBT... On May 17 2013 Orthodox priests called for joining a homophobic demonstration. 40,000 people celebrated hegemonic masculinity against a dozen of their LGBT opponents".

Yet some of Georgian priests didn't support this idea:

"The May 17 event has elucidated a stark difference between locally educated priests and those who had the experience of studying in Europe. Everyone was contacted by the Patriarchy and invited to come to the public action with their entire parish, but not everyone liked this... It's a shame that this manifestation took place under the aegis of the GOC".

Meanwhile, representatives of a different religious group were in agreement that

"LGBT is a convenient point of consolidation for the Church... Even if LGBT disappears from the agenda, the Church would find another issue – they would campaign against Coca-Cola, McDonald's, etc.".

Relations between the two Churches are complicated by the religious situation in Abkhazia, where the Orthodox clergy of local origin started to gain influence in the diocese only in the 1990s and welcomed the military success of their compatriots in the war of 1992-1993. By contrast, the clergy of Georgian origin continued to hope for a unity of all lands that are claimed as the "canonical territories" of the Georgian Orthodox Church (Ieromonakh Dorofey 2006). Plans

of the Abkhazian clergy to create their own Church with the assistance of the Moscow Patriarchate were supported after the war of 2008.

The Moscow Church has taken the pragmatic stand of non-recognition of the independence of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church. The Russian Patriarch Kirill stressed many times that both Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue to fall under the jurisdiction of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The ROC did not challenge the outcome of the August war of 2008 but followed the principle of respecting the borders of the "canonical territories" (Venediktova 2013). In response, the Tbilisi Patriarchate refused to recognize the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which had proclaimed its independence from Moscow. Answering why the GOC has made such a decision, one of our experts suggested that "should we support any of these churches, we'll lose the Orthodox unity".

ROC's support for the integrity of the canonical territory of the GOC comes out of the fear of losing influence in post-Soviet countries and the interest to have the GOC on its side in issues that are important to the ROC - its property in Estonia and uneasy relations with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Unlike the Kremlin, the ROC is disinterested in reconsidering the extant borders, and for pragmatic reasons is more interested in keeping relations with Georgia rather than with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Yet politically, the stand of the ROC has created controversy, since the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church keeps insisting that the lost territories will ultimately return to Georgia (Rosbalt 2013). The Georgian Patriarch has also said that Moscow Patriarch Kirill does everything possible to help restore the unity of Georgia (Apsny 2013). The reaction in Abkhazia to this statement was predictably negative.

Nevertheless, as our interviewee said,

"non-officially the ROC administers the Abkhaz diocese by sending monks and priests to serve in Abkhazian churches... A local fellow of mine admitted that these actions were not canonic, yet the Georgians simply close their eyes to it. We don't protest and don't make a case out of it since we can't physically be in Abkhazia, yet our co-believers who need spiritual help remain there".

The GOC itself is unhappy with some of the ambiguity of the ROC's policy toward the two break-away territories.

"We are very concerned about what is going on in Abkhazia. In words, the ROC recognizes it as an integral part of the Georgian patriarchy, yet de-facto ROC administers the Abkhazian Church. Churches over there are reshaped in closer compliance with the Russian style. This is an intentional policy of doing away with traces of the Georgian Orthodoxy. It is impossible to hold services in the Georgian language there any longer. This is an unfriendly stance".

Another Georgian priest shared similar concerns:

"Georgians are being expelled from Abkhazia... A few remaining priests proclaimed their independent parish... Their policies are non-canonical... It would be ideal if the ROC

could be an intermediary between the GOC and the Abkhaz priests, but instead the ROC started taking a top-down position... GOC does not raise this issue, being reluctant to agitate anti-Russian attitudes. But emotions persist".

However, high representatives of the GOC raised some issues internationally: for example, Archbishop Andrian Gvazava asked UNESCO to monitor churches and monasteries in the regions that are beyond the Georgian government's control (Interpressnews 2015). The Holy Synod of the GOC issued a statement accusing the ROC of converting churches built in Sukhumi and Tkvarcheli in September 2013 into Russian Orthodox Churches. As the President of International Foundation for Unity of Orthodox People Valery Alexeev explained, however, Russian Orthodox priests only attended the ceremonies according to the agreement between the ROC and GOC on the spiritual nurturing of Russian soldiers located in Abkhazia (Prikhody 2014). Therefore, controversies over separatist territories inhibit religious communication even though the two churches share a common conservative agenda grounded in strong practices of biopolitical regulation and control over human bodies.

Conclusion

In this article we have reached three main conclusions. First, the application of biopolitical policy tools creates new forms of inclusions to and exclusions from political communities-in-the-making, and thus it influences practices of border making and unmaking, the logic of which might not coincide with national jurisdictions. We have seen that biopolitical instruments (care and protection of human lives) are inseparably connected with constructing role identities of groups of people as related

to protecting and taking care of their everyday lives. This explains the role of biopower as one of nodal points in Russian neo imperial project.

Second, we have justified the application of biopolitical frame for studying vast areas of consonance between Russian and Georgian religious discourses. Apart from ideological affinity we have seen that both parties use each other for political gain: the ROC is eager to project its conservative agenda onto Georgia for the sake of expand-

ing the Moscow-patronized community of Orthodox believers, while the GOC refers to the authority of ROC for boosting its exceptional role in Georgian society and politics.

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