From Atheism to Authoritarian Faith: State-Managed Orthodoxy and Islam in the Post-Soviet Caucasus

During my recent visit to Armenia, when I asked what the biggest challenge was for the country's democracy and European future, a senior political official answered that, without a doubt, it was the Church. I also regularly hear Georgian democrats and liberals lament that between 2003 and 2012, under a pro-Western government, the opportunity was missed, despite the early attempts, to place the Church in the position it should have held in a secular state. "Maybe we could have avoided what we have now," is a sentiment often expressed in liberal circles. In contrast, the successive prime ministers of the Georgian Dream party, Irakli Gharibashvili and Irakli Kobakhidze, faced with mass protests following the first attempt to pass the so-called "foreign agents law" in March 2023, dubbed the protesters "anti-state and anti-Church." Gharibashvili often presented himself as the greatest defender of the Christian faith, staging pitiful scenes in front of cameras of people greeting him during his regional visits with the cries of "Thank you for Orthodoxy!"

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Whether in Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, or Ukraine, the Churches are, for the most part, opposed to breaking ties with Russia and European integration. They are close to communist or post-communist governments and harbor hostility toward reformist, democratic, and liberal ones. It is paradoxical but the official clergy rehabilitate Stalin and other communist leaders while condemning those who seek a break from Russia and the

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communist past. Official Islam in the post-Soviet North Caucasus and Azerbaijan is equally loyal to the state and relies on it to eliminate competing Islamic communities. Why is this the case?

Why is the Church So Pro-Russian?

As I wrote earlier, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) maintain strong connections with the Moscow Patriarchate. These links were particularly powerful at the highest level of the hierarchy as the Georgian Patriarch was educated in Russia and had established contacts and held official meetings with the Kremlin whereas the Armenian Patriarch's brother served as the Archbishop of the Armenian Diocese of Russia.

This de facto allegiance of the two Christian churches to the Moscow Patriarchate is all the more singular that the GOC is institutionally entirely independent from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (autocephaly) and the AAC is not even considered as an Eastern Orthodox Church at all. Just for comparison, approximately 80% of Moldova's Orthodox believers are under the canonical hierarchy of the Metropolis of Chisinau and all Moldova (Under the Moscow Patriarchate) and the remaining 20% (Metropolis of Bessarabia) fall under the authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

In Ukraine, the picture is even more diversified: among the three Orthodox Churches, one (with approximately 30% of Ukraine's Orthodox believers) belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate, while the other two - formerly the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (together representing about 50-60% of believers) -

merged in 2018 and formed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which has no canonical relations with Moscow. But unlike Moldova and Ukraine, the GOC and the AAC have a strict monopoly on Eastern Christian believers in their countries and have a very rigid, centralized organization.

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Remarkably, the Russian Orthodox Church is more effective in spreading its influence in countries where the religious field is unified (Georgia, Armenia) than in places where multiple religious authorities coexist (Ukraine, Moldova). Canonical dependence is important but tempered by a pluralistic Orthodox environment. The very fact of canonical dependence, as in the case of Moldova's most numerous Orthodox Church, can sometimes paradoxically help the emergence within the group of some local autochthonous sub-groups trying to assert their autonomy vis-à-vis Moscow. In the case of Georgia, where the Church has always been formally independent (except from 1810 to 1917 under the tsarist regime), anti-Moscow feelings are less pronounced. This is an example of how "hegemony" can be more effective than "domination" as noted by Antonio Gramsci.

The Moscow Patriarchate respects, at least on the surface, the autocephaly of the GOC and the AAC but provides the latter with a comprehensive set of ideological directions. A telling illustration of this is that Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 did not significantly alter the GOC's Russophilia; on the contrary, its most pro-Russian factions explained in an editorial letter published in the Church's journal that the war rationale was God's punishment for Georgia's pro-Western policies. Later, several instances of hanging a Russian Federation flag in Georgian churches were reported.

As paradoxical as it may seem, these ties between the "Russian Deep State" and the Churches were forged during the Soviet Union, a state that was officially atheist. The declared atheism did not prevent the State Security Committee (KGB) from controlling religious institutions, overseeing the selection of the clergy, and managing their careers and promotions.

The Model of Church-State Relations: A Limited Secularism

With the fall of the USSR and the restoration of the independence of the former Soviet republics, the Churches — now bathed in the aura of supposed martyrdom under Soviet repression — became the central ideological and spiritual reference points for populations in the quest for meaning. De facto, religion replaced communist doctrine and adherence to religious dogma and allegiance to the organization (the Church) became the new social norm.

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The political elites themselves, often former Communist Party *apparatchiks*, lacking other ideological reference points after the discrediting of communism, saw an alliance with the Church and the manipulation of religious symbols and practices as the most effective tool for legitimization. All former communist and *Komsomol* bosses, official atheists, turned, often in caricatured and grotesque ways, into ardent believers. Today, it has even become a distinctive sign in politics: if a politician ostentatiously projects his Christian faith in public, there is no doubt that he is a former communist or *Komsomol* member. Witnessing this, one

can hardly resist paraphrasing Lenin's famous dictum on capitalism: "Imperialism is the final stage of capitalism." In our case, however, it seems more fitting to say that Orthodoxy has become the final stage of communism.

As for the Church institutions, their internal sociological transformation was not significantly different from that of the political elite: the same individuals remained in leadership positions with the same ties to state services and recruitment practices, but now with vastly increased financial resources and a rapidly growing number of followers. The Church became immensely wealthier and more powerful and its booming membership attracted all kinds of individuals motivated by social advancement, personal enrichment, and local prestige.

Careers within the Church became lucrative. Nepotism, corruption, legal and illegal business ventures, the trade in "modern indulgences," and a near-total guarantee of impunity became the rule rather than the exception. Many individuals with dubious pasts — including convicted criminals or those with extensive criminal records — have risen to positions of authority.

The constitutions of the post-Soviet states formally guarantee the independence of their Churches from political authority. In most cases, this autonomy is genuine. The notable exception is Russia, where the Byzantine legacy of Caesaropapism endures, transforming the Church and the Patriarch into instruments of the ruler's will — pillars of domestic legitimacy and vehicles of imperial soft power abroad.

The Georgian and the Armenian Churches have more room for maneuver vis-à-vis their countries' political leaderships than in Russia even though they receive public funds, enjoy tax exemptions, and benefit from other forms of support to finance educational projects, maintain historic monuments, or reward military chaplains. To this should be added the substantial in-kind contributions, particularly buildings, forests, and arable land, which the state transfers to the Church. This practice is especially prevalent during election years.

Although officially secular, these constitutions grant the national Churches a "special role" or "privileged place" in the country's history (e.g., the 2002 Concordat in Georgia or the 2007 Law on the Relationship Between the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church and the State in Armenia).

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These financial sums, in-kind privileges, and tax gifts, along with de facto impunity, are often the price paid for the Church's loyalty to the ruling elite. It is difficult to discern exactly where the line lies between dependence and blackmail — especially since the state and its intelligence services often possess compromising files documenting the illegal activities of many Church representatives. These files are frequently selectively leaked to the media to make the Church more pliable during negotiations with political power.

Typically, these tensions arise from negotiations over the terms of the alliance and they almost always result in agreements and renewed mutual support. For instance, a major leak campaign of compromising files targeting Church representatives was organized in Georgia in 2021-2022 but it did not lead to a break between the Church and the ruling party.

Better the Sultan's Turban Than the Pope's Miter: Georgian and Armenian Versions

The phrase is commonly attributed to Loukas Notaras, the last Megas doux—the highest-ranking official and chief advisor to the Byzantine emperor—during the fall of Constantinople in 1453. It captured the sentiment of many Orthodox Byzantines who preferred Ottoman domination to a union with the Roman Catholic Church. In a striking post-communist parallel, many post-Soviet Churches today appear far more comfortable with corrupt, illiberal, and Russia-leaning regimes than with governments that seek to curb corruption, advance democratic reforms, and pursue Western integration— even when the latter are, by all accounts, more faithful Christian believers than the former.

In Georgia, the Church was ambiguous about the pro-independence movement at the end of Soviet rule even though some individual clerics actively supported and participated in it. The first president of Georgia, an anti-Moscow nationalist, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a deeply religious person, faced opposition from the Georgian Orthodox Church and its patriarch, Ilia II, who ultimately tacitly supported the coup against him in January 1992.

On the other hand, the GOC had a totally harmonious relationship with the government of Eduard Shevardnadze who, unlike Gamsakhurdia, was a former communist and atheist. Shevardnadze publicly converted to Orthodoxy in November 1992 (at the age of 65) and enjoyed the support of the Church hierarchy until the end of his political career.

The relationship between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the government of Mikheil Saakashvili, which came to power after the Rose Revolution of November 2003, was frequently uneasy and at times openly confrontational. Following several years of sweeping liberal reforms—particularly in education—Saakashvili encountered strong opposition from the Church and ultimately chose to avoid a direct confrontation with the clergy. He made concessions on numerous issues, especially financial and economic ones, inadvertently contributing to the Church's growing wealth and influence. Yet his Western-oriented, anti-Kremlin, reformist, and secular agenda often stood in stark contrast to the traditionalist and conservative worldview of the Georgian Patriarchate. As a result, in the decisive October 2012 parliamentary elections, many clerics openly called for the ousting of Saakashvili, with some even staging a politically inflamed mass demonstration on the very Sunday of the elections.

After its electoral victory in 2012, Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream government sought to build a strategic alliance with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Like its predecessors, the Georgian Dream continued the practice of transferring land and other state assets to the Church but it went further by openly backing the GOC in its property disputes with other religious communities—most notably the Armenian Apostolic and Catholic Churches—and by systematically delaying the construction of mosques and Muslim prayer houses. From the outset of its rule, as early as May 2013, the government effectively granted *carte blanche* to radical, Church-affiliated groups to attack LGBTQ demonstrations, electronic music festivals, and anti-homophobia rallies. Several of these assaults resulted in numerous injuries and, in July 2021, the death of a journalist. The then Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili justified the violence by declaring that "the rights of the majority must also be protected," implying that most Georgians opposed public demonstrations by sexual minorities.

As the Georgian Dream gradually shifted from social populism to far-right populism, its positions

increasingly converged with those of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Their shared populist crusade against the LGBTQ community culminated in the government's decision to institute "Family Purity Day," celebrated each year on 17 May — pointedly the same date as the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia.

The Georgian Dream even introduced a constitutional amendment to Article 30, explicitly and exclusively defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman. In an unsurprising legislative move, the Georgian Dream passed a 2019 bill officially declaring the state under the protection of the Virgin Mary.

After the reversal of the European integration track in November 2024 and the acceleration of the slide into consolidated authoritarianism and now even toward the one-party dictatorship, the Georgian Dream's religious populism has entered a new phase. It is now increasingly difficult to discern if the Church or the state represents the greater force of 'conservatism.'

The Law on the Protection of Family Values and Minors, adopted in September 2024, not only banned same-sex marriage but also prohibited the inclusion of any literary or artistic works that depict homosexual relationships in school and university curricula. It also limited freedom of expression and association related to the display of the rainbow flag and the LGBTQ theme. The law gratified the Church while effectively closing the door on Georgia's European integration.

For the Church, this marks an ideological triumph. The defense of the traditional, patriarchal family has long been central to its mission. For the government, however, the motives are political. Rather than responding to any real public demand to protect Georgians from a supposed "homosexual invasion," it is manufacturing fears that do not exist while deliberately undermining the country's EU candidacy. This strategy aligns with Bidzina Ivanishvili's broader geopolitical orientation, whether voluntary or coerced, toward Russia.

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Despite their shared agenda, the Georgian Dream and the Georgian Orthodox Church are not fully aligned. They agree in denouncing Western "decadence," demonizing pro-European opposition parties, vilifying civil society, and nurturing cordial ties with Orthodox Russia. Yet, the Church often positions itself as an autonomous actor, not a government appendage. It uses this space to negotiate with the regime, securing financial privileges and political concessions in exchange for its cooperation.

In 2024, the Georgian Dream proposed amending the Constitution to recognize Orthodox Christianity as the state religion and enshrine it as a pillar of Georgian identity. The Patriarchate initially objected but later agreed to enter consultations, emphasizing that any constitutional change must uphold the Church's institutional independence under the 2002 Concordat. The quiet use of kompromat to curb clerical ambitions reveals the unspoken rivalry between Ivanishvili's political project and the Church's quest for autonomy.

The GOC also maintains a direct channel of communication with Moscow through the Russian Orthodox Church, operating in parallel to the polit-

ical connection managed by the Georgian Dream. For the Kremlin, this dual-track approach is convenient: rather than relying on a single intermediary, it preserves multiple levers of influence that can be activated as circumstances require.

The same fluctuating pattern in state-Church relations can be observed in Armenia between the government and the Armenian Apostolic Church. The relationship between Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first president of independent Armenia from 1991 to 1998, and the AAC was generally distant, cautious, and at times tense. A historian and philologist by training, Ter-Petrosyan was known for his secular and modernist approach to politics. He was not personally religious and did not regard the Church as a central pillar of national identity or state-building. His political philosophy emphasized rational governance, Western-style secularism, and a decisive break from Soviet dogma, including the religious institutions shaped by it.

Ter-Petrosyan upheld the secular character of the Armenian state and refrained from symbolic gestures of piety or formal alliances with the clergy. He resisted attempts to integrate the Church into the spheres of education, government, or the military, something later leaders would prove far more willing to do. Many in Armenian society, particularly in conservative and nationalist circles, including segments of the diaspora, viewed his cool attitude toward the Church as alienating or even unpatriotic. Yet, Ter-Petrosyan neither sought the Church's endorsement nor used it as an instrument of political legitimacy, maintaining a clear distinction between religious and state affairs. His decision not to constitutionally enshrine a special role for the Church reflected this conviction.

The situation changed dramatically under the two successive presidents, Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008) and Serzh Sargsyan (2008-2018). During their tenure, the Armenian Apostolic Church forged significantly closer ties with the state, gaining material privileges, symbolic influence, and political weight. This relationship was mutually beneficial, serving both as a tool of legitimation in times of electoral controversy, oligarchic rule, and widening social inequality. Kocharyan and Sargsyan, who had both held positions in the Komsomol and Communist Party structures of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, embraced the Church as a core institution of national identity and political authority once they rose to the presidency. They frequently attended religious ceremonies, appeared publicly alongside Catholicos Karekin II, and provided the Church with substantial material support. In turn, the Church implicitly endorsed their leadership, particularly during disputed elections and political crises.

Under their administrations, the state began transferring land and property to the Church, including buildings and agricultural land. In 2007, the Law on the Relationship Between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Republic of Armenia was adopted, granting the Church privileged legal status, generous funding, tax exemptions, and access to schools and military chaplaincies. Oligarchs close to the ruling elite also made lavish donations to the Church, often motivated as much by political loyalty as by faith.

A significant rupture occurred under Nikol Pashinyan. The Velvet Revolution was widely perceived as a popular revolt against the corrupt, oligarchic system intertwined with the Church. The AAC, particularly under Catholicos Karekin II, had come to be viewed as aligned with the former Republican Party leadership of Kocharyan and Sargsyan. Pashinyan's rise to power, therefore, marked both a symbolic and practical distancing from the Church. While he has publicly acknowledged its cultural and historical importance, he does not treat it as a political or moral authority. Unlike his predecessors, Pashinyan rarely attends Church-led national ceremonies or religious events.

Relations between Pashinyan and Catholicos Karekin II have been notably cold. Karekin II criticized the Velvet Revolution from its early stages and warned against the erosion of "traditional values." Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, he and other senior clerics sharply denounced the government's conduct and the terms of the ceasefire agreement. Some clerics openly called for Pashinyan's resignation and joined opposition rallies. The Church also became one of the most vocal opponents of Pashinyan's peace initiatives with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, accusing him of betraying Armenia's national interests. Although the Catholicos himself was less overtly political, statements by several high-ranking clerics created the impression that the Church was evolving into a quasi-political actor with some even suggesting Karekin II as a potential interim Prime Minister in the event of Pashinyan's departure.

In the run-up to the 2026 elections, tensions escalated further. The ruling party launched a coordinated offensive against the AAC, demanding the resignation of the Patriarch, whom the Prime Minister accused of violating his vow of celibacy. Two senior clergy members were arrested on charges of plotting a coup against the government, marking an unprecedented confrontation between the Armenian state and its ancient Church.

The Russian North Caucasus Model: Official Islam Versus Salafism

The Soviet legacy of intertwining political authority with religious institutions extended beyond Christianity; it equally affected Islam, although in even more repressive ways. Soviet distrust and hostility toward Islam were profound, rooted in both geopolitical and ideological anxieties. Unlike Orthodoxy—whose adherents were contained mainly within the borders of the Russian-Soviet realm, with the exception of the Greek and Byzantine churches—the Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam, encompassing territories where Muslims formed the majority) largely lay beyond Moscow's direct control. The Caucasus, Central Asia, and the remnants of the Golden Horde along the Volga constituted peripheral zones of the Islamic world whose spiritual and cultural centers remained outside the empire's reach and thus appeared inherently subversive to Soviet power.

Aware of Islam's lower level of secularization and its enduring potential to mobilize populations against what was viewed as an impious regime, the Soviet authorities treated it with particular suspicion and severity. Soviet Islam was isolated from almost all external contacts, denounced as backward and incompatible with socialist progress, and subjected to relentless persecution. Mosques and madrasas were destroyed on a massive scale, far exceeding the repression directed at Christian institutions. By the mid-20th century, only about 300 to 350 mosques remained operational across the entire Soviet Union—around 40 in the North Caucasus, half of them in Dagestan, and fewer than ten in Azerbaijan.

Imams were extremely few and their level of education and knowledge of Islam was minimal in the overwhelming majority of cases. Popular Islam, however, survived despite state pressure, especially in regions where Sufi brotherhoods endured—such as in Chechnya, for example. There also existed an official Islam, just as there were official Christian Churches, whose leaders and hierarchies (for instance, the Muftis and the Sheikh ul-Islam of Transcaucasia) were loyal servants of the state, the Communist Party, and the KGB.

With the collapse of the USSR and the opening of borders, post-Soviet Islam (in the Caucasus and Central Asia) was strongly destabilized by the influx of information, teachings, and propaganda from abroad. Preachers from the Middle East, the Gulf countries, Türkiye, Pakistan, and Iran (particularly in Shiite Azerbaijan), as well as young people

from former Soviet republics who went to study Islam in places where it had not been restricted, all played a role. This phenomenon was unknown in the Orthodox post-Soviet countries, where the religious revival did not threaten the established religious institutions.

These new Islamic propagators quickly gained influence, to the point of seriously challenging—and in many cases surpassing—the "traditional" imams who, unlike the newcomers, had few scholarly arguments to debate and most of whom could not even read or speak Arabic. The new arrivals, or returnees, attracted believers—especially the youth—because they came from the "real" Islamic countries, and not from atheist ones, appeared more rigorous in their observance of Islamic norms and rituals, and were able to respond to the questions of ordinary believers, even when their answers were completely fanciful or unscientific.

This Islamic revival soon became problematic for the authorities and rapidly turned into a major channel of opposition. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s in the North Caucasus, the central conflict within society was the confrontation between so-called traditional Islam and radical, purist Islam (Salafism)—mistakenly and purposefully labeled Wahhabism by the Russian authorities (to underline their ties with Saudi Arabia, an American ally in the Muslim world).

In the North Caucasus, the official Islamic religious authorities are organized under Muftiates, also known as DUMs (*Dukhovnoe Upravlenie Musulman*) - Spiritual Administrations of Muslims. These are not state bodies but they are officially recognized religious organizations that oversee the Islamic clergy, mosques, and Islamic education in their respective republic. Although the Muftiates are formally independent religious bodies, in reality, they maintain very close, often subordinate relationships with the republican governments and, indirectly, with Moscow.

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The regional governments treat them as partners and instruments of policy and their relationship is often described as one of "state-managed Islam" or "official Islam." These Muftiates promote what both the Kremlin and the regional elites call "traditional Islam" — generally Sufi, loyal to the state, apolitical, and opposed to Salafism or "non-traditional" movements. In return, they receive material support, security protection, control over mosques, and public prominence. Independent or oppositional clerics are marginalized, pressured, and often prosecuted as extremists. Official Islam acts as a moral pillar of regime legitimacy in republics like Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya, and Dagestan. It provides an "Islamic face" for state control and social stability. It also helps Moscow claim that Russia supports "traditional Islam" while fighting "terrorism."

The struggle against this "official Islam" was the goal of various dissident groups, most of them affiliated with Salafism, a puritan movement seeking to return to the practices of the Prophet and early Muslims. They denounced the official clergy for their corruption and their ties to the state and government which by definition are considered impious and represent the Kremlin's interests in the North Caucasus. The state, if it does not rule by Sharia, is viewed as illegitimate and infidel and all clergy that allies with it is called Munafiq or hypocrite, as it practices Islam in appearance but hides its unbelief.

The conflict is not only theological but also social, political, and generational — tied to ques-

tions of legitimacy, authority, and power in a region where Islam has long been central to identity. In Dagestan, these tensions turned violent in the late 1990s and the two Chechen wars (1994-2009) radicalized many Muslims across the region. By the mid-2000s, armed underground movements spread from Chechnya into Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. The state responded with a massive counterinsurgency — assassinations, disappearances, and "counter-terrorist operations" (KTOs). By the mid-2010s, the insurgency was crushed, its leaders killed or defected to ISIS. Inside the Caucasus, "radical" communities were heavily policed; many Salafis were imprisoned, tortured, forced to recant, or fled. Today, the conflict is mostly ideological and social, not military. Salafis still exist — often quietly — in parts of Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria, but state Islam dominates public life, even if the divide persists beneath the surface.

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Russia, as a neo-colonial empire, manages the Islamic question and the entire Caucasus region as in the 19th century, by relying on colonial proxies. These are the leaders of the North Caucasian republics as well as the religious leaders of official Islam. The pretext of the fight against extremism is not valid. In reality, what matters to the Russian state is the loyalty of its leaders and religious figures. The theological debates between Sufis and Salafis, between moderates and radicals, hold no real interest for Moscow. What matters is loyalty to the center, whether it be to a political or religious leader, the content is secondary.

When analyzing the situation in Chechnya in this regard, what stands out is that Ramzan Kadyrov has established a regime that uses extremist Islam, often in a colorful and extravagant manner, to consolidate his power. At the same time, he is considered to be the pillar of Russian domination in the entire North Caucasus region and even beyond. In an odd manner, Kadyrov managed to organize the world's biggest rally after the shootings of Charlie Hebdo in France, against the newspaper and indirectly in support of terrorists, in a country that officially fights against Islamic terrorism (Russia). The same Kadyrov organized almost state-sponsored funerals of the Chechen youth who decapitated a high school professor in a French town in 2020.

Kadyrov has sought to centralize control over religious institutions in Chechnya, ensuring that all religious activities are aligned with the state and its policies. He has appointed religious leaders who are loyal to him and has exerted influence over mosques, religious schools (madrasas), and other Islamic institutions. This control extends to Islamic education and religious practices, with Kadyrov's government funding and overseeing religious activities to ensure they comply with his vision of Islam.

Kadyrov is promoting traditional, conservative Islamic practices in public life. This includes supporting gender segregation, the wearing of the hijab by women, and discouraging Western-style behavior such as the consumption of alcohol and the promotion of LGBTQ rights, for which he established special detention camps. Chechnya now boasts some of the largest mosques in Russia, such as the Akhmat Mosque in Grozny, named after his father, who was killed in a bomb explosion. Compulsory pilgrimages to the tombs of Akhmat Kadyrov or some Sufi sheikhs for all state employees are widely practiced.

Kadyrov has used his position as a Muslim leader to reinforce his political legitimacy. By presenting

himself as the guardian of Islam in Chechnya, he consolidates power and stifles dissent. His authority is often justified through religious terms, portraying any opposition to his rule as not just political rebellion but a violation of religious principles.

Ideology Before Faith

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Three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Churches and official religious structures that emerged from its ruins have largely inherited—not rejected—the authoritarian DNA of the system that once repressed them. Their apparent piety masks an institutional culture shaped by state patronage, secrecy, and hierarchy.

In the post-Soviet world, faith did not replace ideology; it became ideology's successor. The same mechanisms of control, co-optation, and surveillance that once defined the Communist Party now sustain the political role of national Churches and "official Islam." Their allegiance to Moscow or to local strongmen is less a matter of theology than of shared interest: protection, privilege, and impunity in exchange for loyalty.

This symbiosis of the sacred and the secular explains why so many religious hierarchies view democratization, liberal reform, and European integration not as spiritual opportunities but as existential threats. The paradox is tragic: the institutions that survived 70 years of militant atheism have emerged not as defenders of freedom, but as guardians of submission ■