Religion in South Caucasus: Encouraging or Inhibiting Pro-Democratic Attitudes?

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ABSTRACT: IThe relationship between religion/religiosity and democratic values is one of the discipline's hot topics. On the one hand, the 'secularist' school sees religion as inherently in tension with democratic attitudes (due to its dogmatism and closure) and argues that intense religiosity might pose obstacles to the diffusion of democratic values. On the other hand, many scholars have challenged these beliefs and have empirically shown that religion does not imply lower support for democracy. This paper tests different hypotheses drawn from the literature by comparing the influence of religiosity on political attitudes in Georgia and Azerbaijan. The comparison allows the sketching of a more composite picture and suggests that religion might play diverse roles in different contexts. This leaves the scenario open for further research as well as for original interpretations.

KEYWORDS: religion, political attitudes, Azerbaijan, Georgia, democracy

Introduction

For the sake of clarity, some questions need to be briefly addressed in order to introduce the question of the importance of analysing the role of religion in connection with politics; moreover, why is it particularly interesting in the case of post-Soviet countries? Several answers might be given. This article moves from the idea of religion as having a certain influence (either positive or negative) on the political attitudes and orientations of ordinary people. Many studies either accept or deny the necessity of congruent orientations *from below* for the stability of a certain political regime; however, this article will not address them systematically. On the contrary, I embrace here "the assumption that a regime that wants to remain persistent in the long run, requires a political culture that is in congruency with the institutional structure" (Fuchs 2007, 163). This is true for democracies, but also for authoritarianisms or hybrid regimes, whose survival does not depend *only* on their repressive capacities (Inglehart and Welzel 2009).

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Popular orientations[1] are thus important for the stability of a particular regime, and rather than taken as given, they adapt to the environment by evolving under the pressure of several forces, i.e., education, economic development, governance efficacy and so on. Among other dynamics, religion has often been considered as a significant cultural element which shapes political behaviour. Yet, the discussion around its role has often been characterised by a lack of sufficient empirical basis and an excess of 'ideological' impetus, both on the side of pro- and anti-secularist families.

Some questions and related macro-hypotheses can be distinguished: does religion play a positive role in strengthening democratic orientations (for example, by increasing horizontal trust within the national community), or, by contrast, does it play a negative role (for example, by weakening popular demands for democratic reforms due to a certain quietist tendency)? These hypotheses have been unpacked and tested by comparing the cases of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Rather than paying attention to the different religious traditions in the two countries, I have focused on the variable, "religiosity", in order to evaluate whether or not higher degrees of religious intensity are a threat to democratic values. By so doing, I have adopted a micro-micro approach in order to test whether "people who adhere to certain (*religious*) value-orientations engage in specific forms of (*political*) behavior" (Lane and Wagschal 2012, 86; italics mine). To this end, I have used the database of the Caucasus Barometer 2011 (CB 2011).[2]

The choice of Georgia and Azerbaijan as comparable case studies is based on several factors. First, both countries cannot be defined as "full democracies" (at least in 2011), and most international observers agree with this judgment. Although they both belong to the vast group of hybrid regimes, some distinctions can be made, starting from the theoretical framework proposed by Diamond (2002). On the one hand, Georgia can be considered a "competitive authoritarianism" (again, until the 2012 elections), although during Saakashvili's era (2004 to the present), Georgia has advanced in the realm of the prosecution of organised crime and the establishment of a more effective rule of law;[3] negative records have been registered in the realm of media freedom and political pluralism.[4] Many observers have agreed that the reform agenda drawn up by Georgian elites aimed more towards modernising the country (and integrating it in the Western economic system) rather than democratising it.

On the other hand, the classification of Azerbaijan among "hegemonic authoritarian regimes" is even less controversial, since Aliyev's system of power retraces Linz's well-known definition of authoritarianism, identified as "political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined

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[1] Individual attitudes are the basic element of a national political culture according to the well-known definition given by Almond and Verba: "the frequency of different kinds of cognitive, affective and evaluative orientations toward the political system in general, its input and output aspects and the self as a political actor" (1963, 17). This approach, variously defined as the "subjectivist variant of political culture" (Whitefield and Evans 1999, 130) or the "behavioral approach to culture" (Coppedge 2012, 225), has the merit of moving away "from the realm of literary impressions to that of testable propositions" (Inglehart 1988, 1204) and beyond the excessively homogeneous images of political culture offered by anthropology.

[2] Caucasus Barometer is a program run on an annual basis by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers in all three South Caucasus states (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) and is the most reliable and systematic source of data in the region.

[3] According to Transparency International, Georgia has jumped from the 124th position in 2003 to the 64th position in 2011 on the global corruption chart (whereas Azerbaijan has fallen from the 124th to the 143rd position). "*Saakashvili owed no favors and could clean house, which to his credit he has tried to do*" (McFaul 2005, 18).

[4] The research issued by the OSCE – Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – described the Georgian political system as "a loose multiparty system with a single dominant party" (Nodia, Scholtbach 2006, 118). Furthermore, "the three main international indices for the evaluation of freedom of the press give Georgia a worse rating in 2011 than in 2004" (Jobelius 2011, 81).

limits but actually quite predictable ones" (1964, 255).[5] Their comparability is furthermore justified by some additional factors, namely, comparable territorial and population size; similar Human Development Index rankings (in 2011, Georgia was ranked 75th, while Azerbaijan was ranked 91st); similar transitions to post-communism; the presence of territorial controversies in both cases (Nagorno Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and Abkhazia and South-Ossetia in Georgia); similar geopolitical factors (they both border with countries such as Iran and Russia).

The paper is structured as follows: the first section presents the theoretical framework that furnishes the basis for the research; the second section outlines the main characteristics of religion and religiosity in the South Caucasus countries; the third section presents the main empirical findings, which are then summarised and discussed in the final section.

Religion and Political Culture (1): some theoretical premises

As mentioned earlier, the relationship between religion and politics is currently an object of great debate. The classical paradigm of modernity has dominated the academic discourse, stating that "modernization, a process that is inseparable from rational thinking, will decrease the need for and the significance of religion both at the macro- and the micro-level" (Esmer and Pettersson 2007, 485). Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and many others have all contributed to this theory; some have focused on the role of rationality, which was supposed to undermine the grip of religion on modern societies, thus contributing to the Weberian *Entzauberung der Welt* (disenchantment of the world); others have attributed the downgrading of religion as a significant social force to the fact that "the functions that religion served in the past are in modern times being fulfilled by more rational scientific institutions" (Fox 2008, 15). These different perspectives have converged on the idea that the relevance of religion was doomed to decline, both in the public and the private spheres. Notwithstanding, if rationality (and not religious authority) was expected to govern all human action, it followed that governments should also be organised accordingly (Esmer and Pettersson 2007, 482). In this light, the inherent contrast between religiosity and democracy originates from the fact that whereas religion is based upon belief and transcendent truth, "the democratic system encourages skepticism and assumes that laws and establishments are open to change" (Bloom and Arikan 2013, 378).

These stances have been increasingly contested in recent years, both on a theoretical level and through empirical research. First, classical secularisation theories have been charged with mistaking Western cultural stereotypes with a general theory (Habermas 2007). In this light, some scholars have accused the founding generations of social scientists for not being disinterested analysts: "rather, they were advocates for the science and reason they believed should crush the ignorance and superstition" (Fox 2008, 18). Second, many empirical studies have proven the fallacy of classical secularisation theories; not only did religion not disappear on a global level, but rather, its increasing popularity led many scholars to speak of a resurgence of religion.

Furthermore, the connection between religion and minor support for democratic rules has been contradicted by several empirical studies. Among them, Stepan has tested the relationship between the increasing intensity of religious practice and four components of democratic political society in India: political efficacy, overall trust in political institutions, satisfaction with the way democracy works and voting ratios. For both Hindus and Muslims, he observed that "counter-intuitively from the perspective of much of the literature, the groups with 'high religiosity' have higher scores on each of the four variables than do the groups with 'low religiosity'" (Stepan 2010, 43).

Though providing some important insights, these studies can be further developed in two main directions. First, the dimensions analysed by Stepan are central to attitudinal studies but leave the door open to further questions about the diffusion of "intrinsic support for

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[5] For more details about Georgian and Azerbaijani political regimes, please refer to Filetti (2012).

democracy". There is no widespread consensus around what attitudes are to be considered as indicators of "intrinsic support", but it is generally argued that this has to be found in the appreciation for the rights and political freedoms that democracy embodies. By distinguishing it from superficial (people who say favourable things about democracy because it has positive connotations) and instrumental support (people who associate democracy with economic development), Inglehart and Welzel have argued that "in order to know whether people prefer democracy *intrinsically*—that is, for its defining freedoms—one needs to find out how strongly they emphasize emancipative values" (2009, 129). These, in turn, are strongly linked to popular preferences for *gender equality over patriarchy*, *tolerance over conformity*, *autonomy over authority*, and *participation over security*.

On the other side of the political culture-religion relationship, something more specific can be said by looking at religion as a multidimensional phenomenon (involving three main dimensions: *belief*, *behaviour* and *belonging*). By enriching the concept in this way, it is possible to treat religion as a "two-edged sword" (Bloom and Arikan 2012); whereas religious beliefs are supposed to have a negative effect on overt and intrinsic support for democracy because of the inherent contrast between religious and democratic values (openness vs. closure; scepticism vs. truth; universality vs. particularity), the "greater engagement in religious practices would encourage political and social activism, and hence social capital" (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 227).

In a nutshell, the article tries to assess the hypothesised double impact of religion in South Caucasus political attitudes; in doing this, its influence on both overt and intrinsic support for democracy is tested by taking into account several indicators drawn from the above-outlined literature.

Religion and religiosity in Georgia and Azerbaijan

"The ubiquity and relevance of religion has been dramatically evident in former communist states. Filling the vacuum left by the collapse of ideology, religious revivals have swept through these countries from Albania to Vietnam" (Huntington 1996, 96). Huntington's picture also applies to the South Caucasus although some clarifications are needed. The reasons for this 'renaissance' lie in the process of identity building: people "need new sources of identity, new forms of stable community, new sets of moral precepts (...) and religion meets these needs" (Huntington 1996, 97). Notwithstanding, two alternative paths have been taken by Georgia and Azerbaijan after the Soviet collapse.

On the one hand, Georgia soon recovered its long-dated Orthodox tradition. The Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church has always been a pillar of the national Georgian identity despite repeated periods of foreign occupation and attempted assimilation. Its weight has become particularly significant since the beginning of the 1970s when Eduard Shevardnadze, then secretary of the Georgian SSR Communist Party, adopted a more tolerant stance towards the Georgian Church compared to previous anti-religious campaigns pursued in the USSR. At the same time, Zviad Gamsakhurdia started his campaign against widespread corruption among the Soviet elites, which also involved the Georgian Church. As a result, "as never before, the Georgian Orthodox Church became a potent symbol in the resistance of the Georgians to the USSR" (Rapp 2010, 152). Unsurprisingly, later on, Gamsakhurdia himself – the first president of independent Georgia – put particular emphasis on religion in the process of identity and state building by showing up frequently with the Patriarch Ilia. The same trend continued, albeit to a lesser extent, after the return to power of Eduard Shevardnadze. As a result, the Georgian Constitution (beyond a specific reference to God in the preamble)

recognises "the special role of the Apostle Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the state" (Art. 9)[6].

Azerbaijan differs in its process of identity building mainly because of three factors: (i) the special attention paid by Soviet elites in their effort to control the Islamic communities living within the USSR; (ii) the importance of Turkishness for Azerbaijani identity; and (iii) the fear of Iranian meddling in internal affairs. In terms of the first point, we might recall the enduring effects that Stalin's purges, since the ending of the 1920s, had on religious activism in Azerbaijan; the mixture of Stalinist repression and isolation from the religious learning centres in Iran and Iraq strongly limited the development of an actual Islamic leadership in subsequent decades. Religion did retain a certain space in people's daily life, though mostly with a certain ritual and magical fashion, but without an elaborated ideological or identitarian development (Motika 2001). Secondly, in line with Musavat's slogan "Turkism, Modernization and Islam" in the first independent Republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920), Turkishness constituted an important pillar for the State project pursued by Azerbaijani elites, whereas religious identity was subordinated to the other two ideological cornerstones. In and around Baku, it is not unusual to see Azerbaijani national flags with the image of the founding father of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This eventually favoured the adoption of Turkey's strictly secularist model,[7] explicitly recognised by the constitution, which defines Azerbaijan as a "democratic, legal, *secular*, unitary republic" (Art. 1) with references to secularism in several articles. Finally, this tendency has also been reinforced by 'political' reasons since the proximity of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been frequently associated with the fear of Iranian meddling in internal affairs. This, in turn, has pushed Azerbaijani elites to control religious activism, mainly limiting the scope of action of foreign religious missionaries.

Having said that, the large majority of both populations share a common religious background. This is particularly true in Azerbaijan where nearly 93 percent of the population is Muslim (85 percent belongs to Shia Islam and 15 percent to Sunni Islam). The major religious minority is Christianity (mainly Orthodox, three percent); an additional three percent of agnostics complete the overall picture. Georgia's situation does not differ significantly, though with a bigger religious minority (ten percent of the population, mainly from the Azerbaijani ethnic minority, is Muslim), 85 percent of the population is Orthodox Christian and a comparable percentage of agnostics (also three percent).[8] This picture can be enriched with data on religious intensity presented in the CB 2011. It emerges, for example, that Azerbaijanis are relatively less pious than their neighbours; whereas 71 percent consider religion either as "rather important" or "very important" in daily life, 26 percent deem it as "not very important" or "not at all important". This percentage is considerably lower in Georgia (eight percent) where 91 percent confer importance on their religious belonging.

Some interesting insights emerge by cross-checking these data with some social control variables. Very briefly, younger generations are slightly less religious than average in Azerbaijan, while the opposite is true for Georgia. The common assumption of religion as mostly rooted in rural areas has been disproven in the South Caucasus as respondents in Tbilisi and Baku (as well as in urban areas) attach more-than-average importance to religion. Finally, another cliché, does not hold since education has no significant impact of the level of

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[6] "The Georgian Orthodox Church has a tax-exempt status not given to other religious groups. Georgian schools teach history of religion courses in which the Georgian Orthodox Church has the unofficial right to approve the textbooks. The Church requires that these textbooks give absolute precedence to Orthodox Christianity" (Fox 2008, 161).

[7] "Beyond the limitations and harassment on nonregistered religions, there are significant additional restrictions on religious activities. Political parties cannot engage in religious activity. Local governments often monitor sermons (Fox 2008, 177).

[8] Data on religious adherents are taken from the World Christian Database (WCD) and are reported on the official website of the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA). I did not include religious traditions with <1% adherents.

religiosity. Whereas no significant difference in religious intensity emerges between well- and less-educated Azerbaijanis, education and religiosity go hand in hand in Georgia. These figures contradict some important findings according to which "it was predominantly older people and people with less education who scored highest on religious commitment" (Pettersson 2009, 250).

Religion and Political Culture (2): what impact?

As previously mentioned, the empirical analysis builds upon the existing literature and tries to enrich it by integrating several contributions. Two independent variables are considered: the intensity of religious beliefs is measured with the question "how important is religion in your daily life?" and furnishes four levels of religiosity, ranging from "very important" to "not at all important". Furthermore, religious social behaviour is calculated by using "rates of attendance at religious services".

Multiple dependent variables are taken into consideration: next to the classic variable "attitude toward democracy" (measuring overt support), Stepan's four dimensions are collapsed in two[9] (vertical trust and voting rates) and intrinsic support for democracy is analysed through Inglehart and Welzel's four dimensions (preferences for gender equality over patriarchy, tolerance over conformity, autonomy over authority, and participation over security). Finally, social capital is considered in connection with religious social behaviour.

Dimension	Indicator
Overt support	Attitude toward democracy
Vertical trust	Trust in parliament/president
Political efficacy	Did you vote in the last elections?
Gender equality over patriarchy	Agree or not: university degree is more important for boys?
Tolerance over conformity	Justified or not? Homosexuality
Autonomy over authority	Government as parent/employee
Participation over security	Agree or not: participation in protest actions
Social capital	Agree or not: many people can be trusted

Table 1: Dimensions and indicators from CB 2011

Attitudes toward democracy

This first dimension records the diffusion of overt support for democracy. High levels of support have often been equated with the 'democraticity' of popular attitudes, starting from the idea that "a democratic regime is consolidated when a strong majority of public opinion holds the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern collective life in a society such as theirs and when the support for anti-system alternatives is quite small or more or less isolated from the pro-democratic forces" (Linz and Stepan 1996). This minimalist approach has recently been challenged: first, democracy is increasingly perceived as "the only game in town", and this is particularly true in the post-Soviet period. Consequently, "at this point in history, most people in most countries say favourable things about democracy simply because it has become socially desirable and has positive connotations" (Inglehart and Welzel 2009, 129). It follows necessarily that "support for democracy", even in its "detachment from authoritarianism" variant, is somehow 'doped' and cannot be considered as a reliable indicator for popular democratic attitudes. Secondly, given its complexity, democracy is

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[9] Since the analysis is conducted in non-democratic countries, the indicator "satisfaction with the way democracy works" has been set aside. Furthermore, I use voting rates as an indirect indicator of political efficacy.

simply associated with different things, ranging from truly democratic elements, such as the presence of free and fair elections, to factors that do not belong to definitions of democracy, i.e., economic growth, social peace, administrative efficiency and political harmony (Schmitter and Karl 1991, 87). In this light, "asking people whether they support democracy is, in effect, asking them whether they support whatever democracy means to them. (...) It is not surprising that support is so high virtually everywhere" (Coppedge 2012, 245-6).

Nevertheless, attitudes toward democracy still constitute one of the relevant dimensions for analysing political orientations from below; "while this is not necessarily a good predictor of the democratisation of a country, overt support is still viewed as a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the thriving of a democratic culture" (Bloom and Arikan 2013, 380-1). An initial overview of Georgian and Azerbaijani orientations in this regard fits coherently with the characteristics of the respective political regimes. While in Georgia, 'democrats without ifs, ands or buts' are relatively more numerous (65 percent, a relatively low percentage in a global comparison) than in Azerbaijan (52 percent), both the percentages of open-mindedness to authoritarian alternatives and of "parochials" (people who do not care about national politics) are higher in Azerbaijan. An interesting insight emerges if we compare the impact of religiosity with these figures (reported in the following table); whereas Azerbaijanis have a negative view of religious intensity (true democrats are more numerous among non-religious people), the opposite is true for Georgians who believe that religiosity and pro-democratic attitudes go hand in hand.
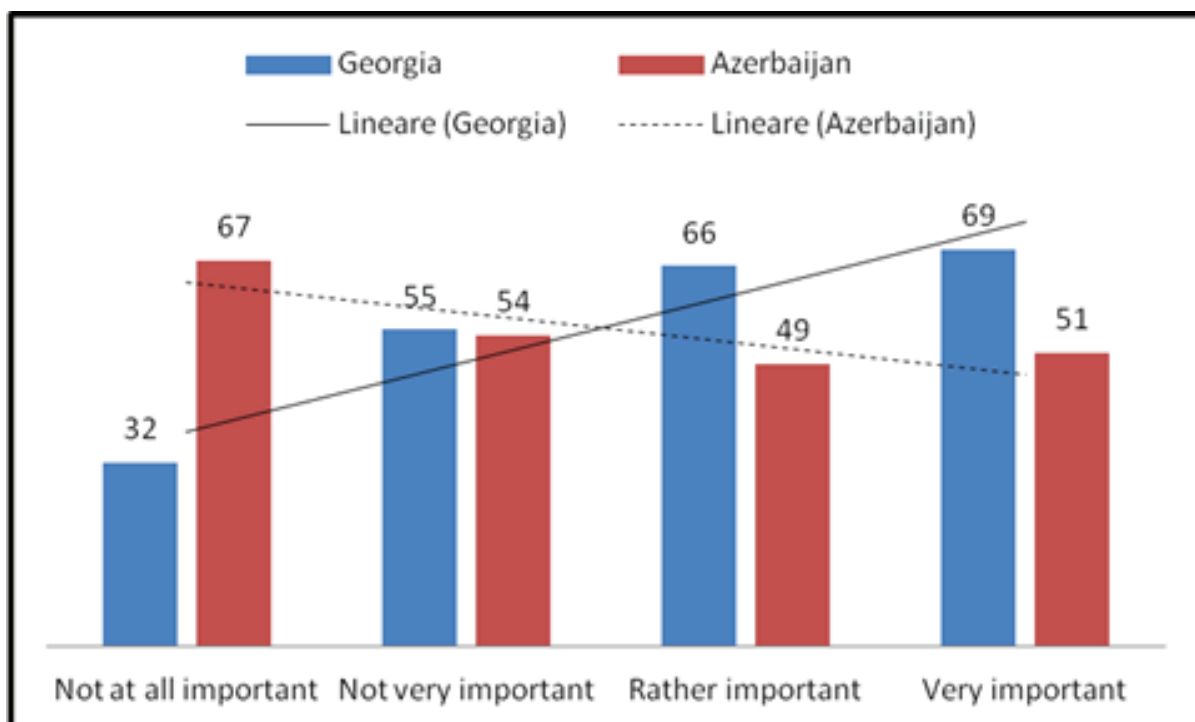

Table 2: Respondents considering "democracy as always preferable" across different levels of religiosity

Vertical Trust

Trust has recently gained widespread attention as a necessary condition for democratic culture. By recalling the classic distinction between horizontal/interpersonal trust and political/vertical trust, I focus here on the latter (the former will be considered subsequently): "institutional confidence is a measure of support for the political regime that is more important for our understanding of political stability than more volatile measures of support for authorities" (Newton 2007, 344). Since both Georgia and Azerbaijan fail at being full democracies, this indicator must be interpreted in reverse, i.e., lower trust in institutions such as parliament and

the president can be considered as an indicator of a more demanding (thus pro-democratic) attitude. As in the case of "support for democracy", religion plays divergent roles in our case studies given that trust towards the parliament is mostly diffused among religious groups in Azerbaijan (52 percent vs. 42 percent among non-religious Azerbaijanis) and non-religious respondents in Georgia (92 percent vs. 54 percent among religious Georgians).

Similarly, trust in the (authoritarian) presidential leadership – the most trusted institutions in both countries – is particularly widespread among pious Azerbaijanis (88 percent) and among non-religious Georgians (92 percent).

Participation (1): voting

Voting has been classically considered as an important indicator for political efficacy. First, this is so because it communicates that voting is considered important by supporters and critics of incumbents alike, which is another way of saying that democratic procedures are perceived as the "only game in town"; second, because it is usually assumed that democracy needs a certain level of confidence in everyone's capability to influence national affairs, and in order to limit the "exit option" in favour of the "voice" (Hirschman 1970). Once again, religion seems to have an inverse influence on people's attitudes: the "declared" turnout level (in the latest national elections) increased together with religiosity in the case of Georgia (73 percent among the very religious and 58 percent among the non-religious) and decreased in Azerbaijan (83 percent among the non-religious and 61 percent among the very religious).
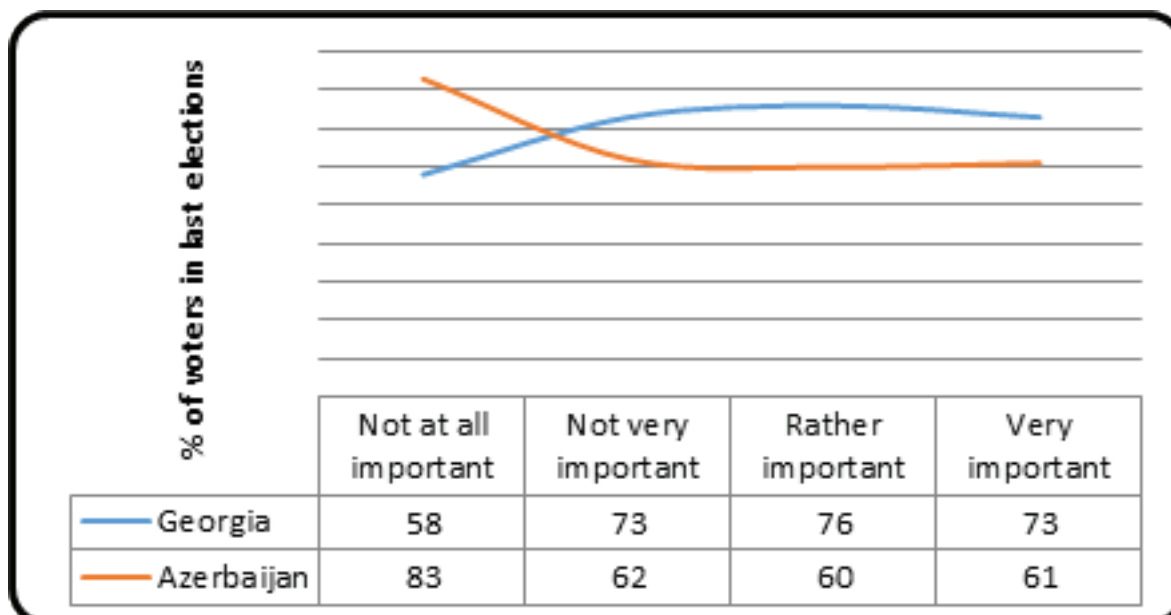

	Not at all important	Not very important	Rather important	Very important
Georgia	58	73	76	73
Azerbaijan	83	62	60	61

Table 3: Voters across different levels of religiosity

Participation (2): protest actions

Speaking of participation, it is necessary to distinguish between traditional and non-traditional forms, i.e., also considering informal channels, such as protest action. This is even more important in non-democratic countries where mobilisations from below can contribute towards de-legitimising incumbents. This dimension can also be taken as relevant for distinguishing between popular preferences either for participation or for security, i.e., Inglehart and Welzel's first dimension for emancipative values.[10]

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[10] Preference is measured by asking people whether they agree with the statement "people should participate in protest actions against the government as this shows the government that the people are in charge" or the statement "people should not participate in protest actions against the government as it threatens stability in our country".

In this case, religion has a similar impact in Georgia and Azerbaijan and is therefore consistent with the general hypothesis of religion as inhibiting pro-democratic attitudes. Indeed, agreement in relation to participation in protest actions was more diffused among non-religious than among religious respondents in both countries, whereas the percentage of people who opted for security over participation increased along with religious intensity from 42-57 percent in Azerbaijan and from 9-30 percent in Georgia).

Gender equality

Inglehart and Welzel's second dimension examines popular orientations toward gender equality, which is particularly relevant if we consider that "democracy is meaningless if half of the citizens of a country do not have equal rights and equal access to political influence and power" (Tessler and Gao 2008, 168). Indeed, beyond the concession of formal rights, social barriers often play an important role in preventing women from becoming full citizens.

In this regard, religion is commonly perceived as having a negative influence, especially (but not exclusively) within the debate on Islam and democracy. Surprisingly (and contrary to the results in the first dimension of emancipative values), religion does play a unique and positive role; both in Azerbaijan and in Georgia, the percentage of people who disagreed with the statement "a university degree is more important for a boy"[11] was higher among religious (59 percent in Azerbaijan and 80 percent in Georgia) than among non-religious people (respectively, 43 percent and 61 percent), and in general, this opinion was more diffused among Azerbaijanis than among Georgians.

Tolerance

As in the case of gender equality, religion is supposed to negatively influence popular preferences for tolerance (towards diversity) over conformity. This belief is particularly rooted because of the usual crusades by religious authorities against homosexuality, divorce or abortion. The overall picture of tolerance in Georgian and Azerbaijani societies depicts a reality in which the overwhelming majority of the populations praises conformity over tolerance by considering behaviours, such as homosexuality, as "never justified". This substantial lack of diversity of opinion prevents the drawing of some significant conclusions about the role of religion. Nonetheless, a relatively common tendency can be recognised in the fact that the proportion of people who believe that homosexuality is "never justified" increased along with religious intensity both in Georgia (from 79 percent among the non-religious to 91 percent among the religious) and in Azerbaijan (from 80-91 percent). Notwithstanding, the remaining respondents did not have a positive attitude and responded "I don't know" to the question.

Autonomy

The last dimension outlined by Inglehart and Welzel recalls the classic theory by Adorno et al. (1950) on "authoritarian personality", which is theorised as a state of mind characterised by one's belief in absolute obedience or submission to authority. By contrast, a preference for personal autonomy is supposed to be part of the more general 'emancipative syndrome'. As in the first three dimensions, religion plays a negative role in Azerbaijan since the more religious people were, the more likely they considered the government as a parent (and the less likely they considered it as their employee). The opposite was true in Georgia where the higher a respondent's religiosity, the more likely the government was considered as an employee

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[11] The data was taken from Caucasus Barometer 2010 as CB 2011 did not have suitable questions on gender equality.
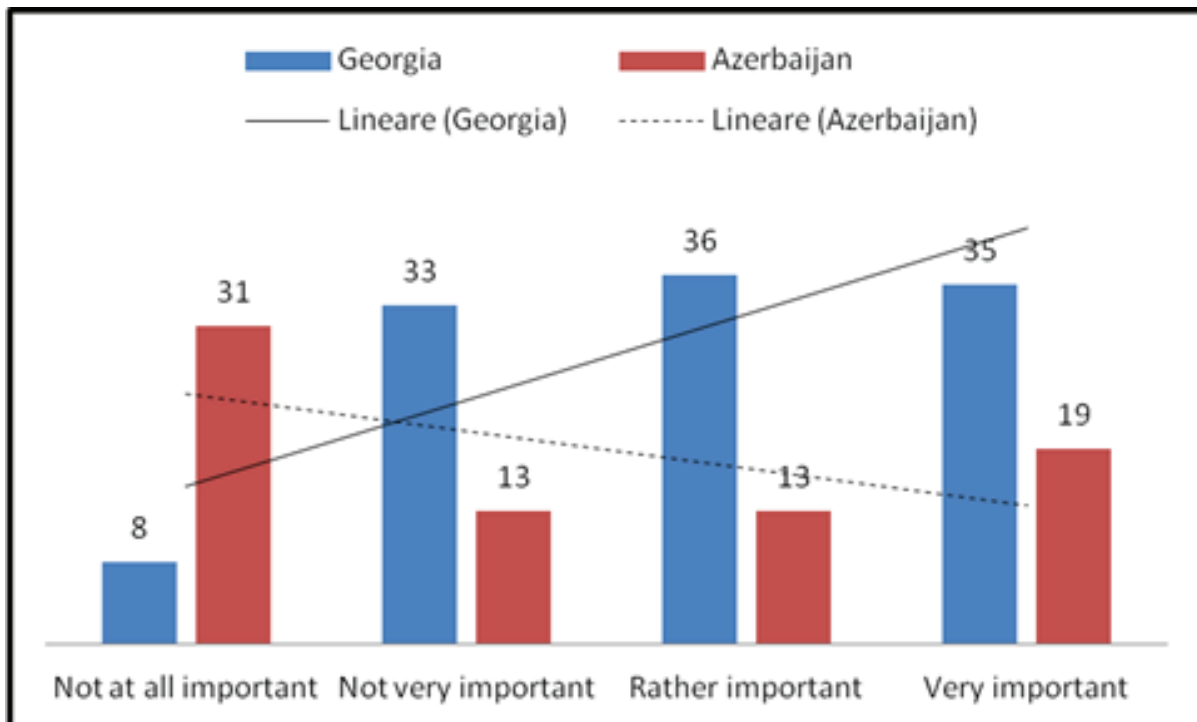
Table 4: Proportion of respondents considering government as an employee across different levels of religiosity

Social capital

Finally, the last dimension allows an evaluation of the other side of the two-edged sword, i.e., the hypothesised positive role of religion as a social behaviour. It is argued that "the effect of social religious behaviour on support for democracy is mediated by the generation of social capital in the form of political involvement and trust in institutions" (Bloom and Arikan 2013, 391). The idea of trust as an essential characteristic for a functioning political system is anything but new and has been promoted by many theorists, from Hobbes and Locke to Smith and Tocqueville. More recently, this has meant that interpersonal trust is necessary for citizens to engage in collective political actions, thus enhancing the functioning of a democratic regime (Putnam 1993).

In both countries, a relatively positive impact of religion can be observed. Whereas people who attended religious services either once weekly or at least once monthly felt that there were many people they could trust (respectively, 47 and 52 percent in Azerbaijan and 28 and 33 percent in Georgia), these figures decreased in the case of groups attending religious services either less often or never (respectively, 35 and 40 percent in Azerbaijan and 22 and 25 percent in Georgia).

CONCLUSIONS

The figures presented so far seem to confirm that "persons with strong authoritarian tendencies are likely to negate the abstract political basics of democratic political cultures, whether they are religious or not" (Canetti-Nisim 2004, 338). However, by calling into question classic assumptions around the role of religiosity, the present analysis does not dismiss the importance of modernisation theories but rather tries to sketch a more complex and realistic picture of the role of religion. More specifically, it contributes to throwing light on the so-called "paradox of modernity": on the one hand, classic theories associated modernity with the progressive decline of religion in public and individual life. On the other hand, some scholars stressed that since "modernization brings about uncertainty which in turn creates a demand

for orthodox religions" (Esmer and Pettersson 2007, 488), modernity would more likely be associated with the resurgence of religion. This apparent paradox does not take into account the dynamic relationship between the individual and religious beliefs. For instance, whereas it is true that modernity associates the decline of the orthodox approach with the relationship between religion and politics (e.g., the political regime's belief in a religion-based source of legitimacy), this does not entail the dismissal of religion as an important source of identity, especially in times of globalisation. The two arguments are not mutually exclusive. Arguing for the failure of secularisation theory in the name of persistent religious identities is debatable and overlooks the process through which religion has evolved within modernity (Fox 2008, 21-24). Secularisation theory has failed to the extent that it foresaw the progressive demise of religion, yet it did not fail completely insofar as religion plays a fundamentally different role today than it did in traditional societies.

Turning to the main findings, the article has tried to test the robustness of the so-called two-edged sword hypothesis, i.e., by testing the positive impact of religious participation and the negative impact of religious beliefs on some indicators of pro-democratic attitudes. Starting from the former, religious social behaviours can potentially enhance democratic attitudes by strengthening social capital, but this cannot be considered as an "iron law". People who regularly attend religious services in Georgia and Azerbaijan are indeed slightly trustful of people around them, but the statistical trend is not linear enough to consider it a strong confirmation of the hypothesis. This might be due to the fact that social capital is also a product, and not only a source, of a democratic system (and this is the case neither in Azerbaijan nor in Georgia).

More robust and interesting reflections emerge from the analysis of the other edge of the sword since the figures presented challenge the initial hypothesis of a negative impact. Few dimensions show a coherent influence of religion in Georgia and Azerbaijan. First and most surprisingly, higher degrees of religiosity seem to favour positive attitudes towards gender equality in both countries. Nonetheless, more religious people also tend to disagree with participating in protest actions. Here, religiosity might constitute a factor of stability in non-democratic contexts. This is coherent with usual assumptions of religion as a cultural element leading to a certain degree of quietism. The Arabic adage "better a thousand years of tyranny than one day of anarchy" is one of the most powerful expressions of this accepted wisdom. It has been influential throughout Islamic history although it is not exclusive to this religious tradition.

In most dimensions, religion seems to have an opposite influence on political orientations (rather than displaying a unique trend) and this is particularly true if we consider the most classic dimensions of pro-democratic attitudes (attitudes towards democracy, political efficacy and vertical trust). This opposite trend can be variously interpreted. One possible reading could follow a 'purely culturalist' path by attributing to Orthodox Christianity a higher affinity with democracy. Yet, this would contrast with the results of previous research that have convincingly showed that "religious involvement among both Muslims and Christians seemed to drive in the same direction and to have similar consequences" (Pettersson 2009, 264).

Another explanation seems more promising if one were to look at the different processes of identity building before and after the Soviet collapse and the (consistently) divergent models of the state-religion relationship established in the two South Caucasus countries. As previously explained, social and political processes since the 1970s have pushed post-Soviet Azerbaijan to embrace a strictly secularist model, whereas Orthodox Christianity has been granted a special status in the Georgian Constitution. Consequently, it can be hypothesised that religion has been differently embedded in the two cultural heritages during the post-Soviet process of identity building. This, in turn, would explain the different effects of religiosity on political attitudes across the two examined populations.

All in all, the analysis suggests that the absolute predictive power of religiosity in relation to political attitudes seems to be undermined by other factors, first of all, the manner in which religion has been originally entrenched in the cultural heritage of a given country. More specifically, the Georgian and Azerbaijani cases suggest an underlying logic in the impact of religion on political attitudes, which can be interpreted as follows: whereas religiosity might pose a threat to the diffusion of pro-democratic values in contexts where religion has been set aside during the process of identity building (or, even more, stigmatised as an anti-modernisation force), this effect does not hold in countries where religion has been embedded in the same process. This might be due to the fact that in the latter case, religion has gone through an evolution within modernity, as Fox has described (2008), which can eventually make it compatible with democratic principles. This conclusion, albeit not definitive, can be interpreted as a working hypothesis for further research, perhaps including a larger number of countries, in order to test the influence of different models of the state-religion relationship to reach more generalisable results.

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