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The Slow and Quick Declines in Trust in the Georgian Orthodox Church

By Dustin Gilbreath (CRRC Georgia)

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Abstract

The Georgian Orthodox Church is among the most powerful institutions in Georgia. The majority of the country identifies as Orthodox Christian. The Church's Patriarch, Ilia II, has consistently been named the most trusted person in the country in surveys. Yet, Caucasus Barometer data suggests a slow but steady decline in trust in the church over the last ten years. While the data clearly show a slow and steady decline, recent scandals also appear to be taking their toll, particularly among the religious. This article first looks at the slow and steady decline, and proceeds to describe the impact of one of the most recent scandals—accusations that the Church's Patriarch was a pedophile.

Scandals

The Georgian Orthodox Church has experienced numerous scandals in recent years. In 2017, a priest was charged and convicted of attempting to murder Patriarch Ilia II's secretary (Lomsadze, 2017). The incident, known as the Cyanide Scandal, resulted in a prominent priest being imprisoned. He claimed that the Patriarch's Secretary had been misleading him, and the incident was widely discussed in the Georgian media.

Aside from the Cyanide Scandal, the homophobic riots that erupted on the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia in Georgia that included Orthodox priests in 2013 (Antelava, 2013) were another salient event which likely hurt the church's credibility in the eyes of many in the public. With a priest notoriously chasing pro-LGBT rights activists down the street with a stool, many were appalled given that priests were clearly engaged in violence.

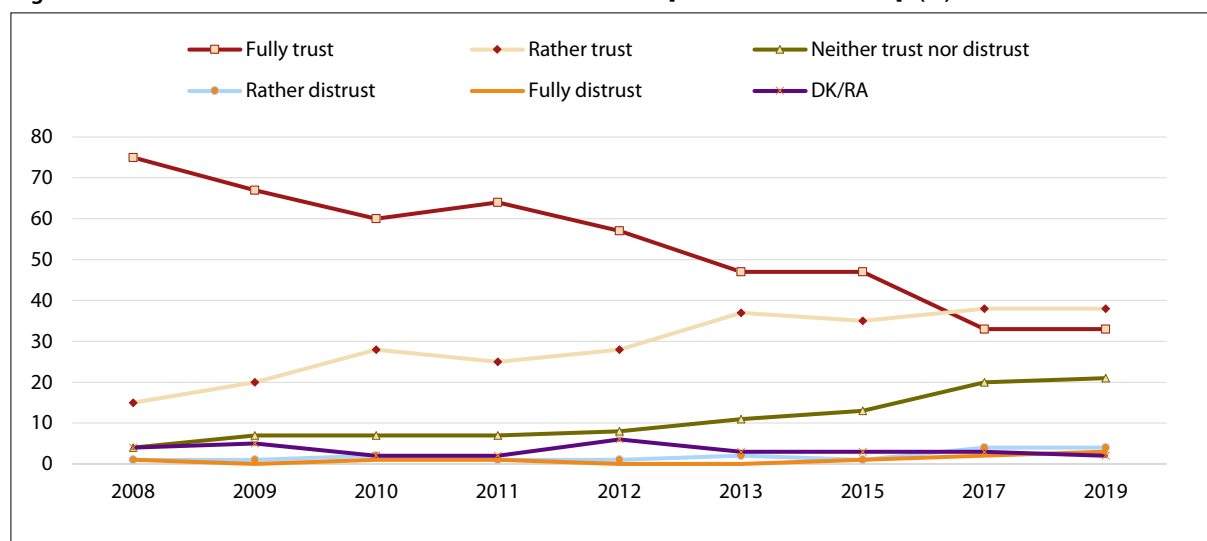
Aside from the above, on numerous occasions, scandal has emerged as a result of the government giving the church land for symbolic prices (OC-Media, 2017). Similarly, the church's moneymaking activities, including numerous shops and the water company Sno, which are not taxed, have generated further controversy. Many also question why, in a poor country like Georgia and where the Church is considered a wealthy institution, the state budget should be used to fund it.

More recently, sexual abuse scandals have emerged. On October 31, 2019 a synod meeting was held (OC-Media, 2019). Following the meeting, the Archbishop Petre Tsaava accused Ilia II as well as other high-ranking church officials of being pedophiles and homosexuals (Civil Georgia, 2019). The Archbishop was removed following the accusations (Civil Georgia, 2019). Still, the allegations were shocking for Georgian society. Ilia II is generally accepted to be the most trusted individual in Georgian society (Civil Georgia, 2019). At the same time, large parts of Georgia are homophobic: for example, 87% of the public would not approve of someone like them doing business with a homosexual (CRRC, 2020).

All of these issues have likely contributed to the slow and steady decline in trust in the Church that has taken place according to the Caucasus Barometer Survey. While 75% of Orthodox Christians fully trusted the church in 2008, only 33% did in 2019. Over this same period, the share reporting that they "rather trust" the church has increased from 15% to 38%. Ambivalence has also been on the rise: while only 4% of the public reported that they neither trusted nor distrusted the church in 2008, 21% did in 2019. Although there has been a decline in full trust and rise in ambivalence, there has not yet been a meaningful uptick in outright distrust in the church (see Figure 1 overleaf).

This has occurred in a context where almost everyone in Georgia identifies with a particular religious group (98%), and the vast majority of the public (87%) states that religion is important in their everyday lives. Notably, regarding the latter statistic, Georgian Orthodox Christians are more likely to report that religion is important or very important in their everyday lives (92%) compared with religious minorities (72%).

Most recently of all, the church has received negative attention during the Covid-19 outbreak (Gogokhia, 2020). The church decided that parishioners should take communion from a communal spoon rather than from disposable plastic spoons, creating a clear public health risk. Many observers suggest this led to the government to declare a state of emergency in the country, despite official denials.

Figure 1: Please Tell Me How Much Do You Trust Or Distrust [the Orthodox Church]? (%)

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2015	2017	2019
Fully trust	75	67	60	64	57	47	47	33	33
Rather trust	15	20	28	25	28	37	35	38	38
Neither trust nor distrust	4	7	7	7	8	11	13	20	21
Rather distrust	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	4	4
Fully distrust	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	2	3
DK/RA	4	5	2	2	6	3	3	3	2

Source: (CRRC Caucasus Barometer, Georgia)

Methodology

Although the apparent decline described above is likely linked to the scandals, making a causal connection is difficult. Numerous factors could have led to declines in trust in the church, from changing values to less interest in religion. Indeed, trust in institutions is generally on the decline in the country.

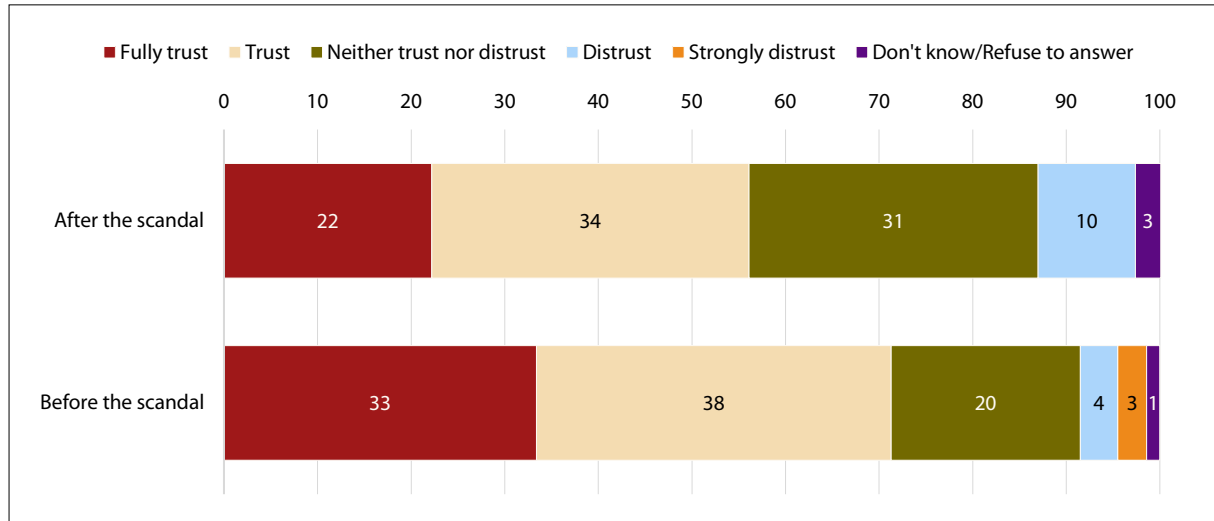
However, a natural experiment which occurred during the fieldwork for CRRC's Caucasus Barometer survey in 2019 enables a better understanding of the impact of church scandals on people's trust in the church. At the same time as the above-described pedophilia scandal was taking place, the Caucasus Barometer survey was ongoing and asked respondents about trust in the religious institution which they belong to, and religious practices, among a wide variety of other issues.

To test whether this scandal had a significant impact on trust in the church and for whom, this article makes use of two analysis strategies. The first uses the natural experiment and multiple regression testing for a significant change before and after the scandal while controlling for the following variables: age, settlement type (Tbilisi, other urban, and rural), years of education, sex, respondent employment status, and household wealth. Second, the study uses multivariate matching with genetic weighting to test for an impact of the scandal. Matching is a quasi-experimental method. It tries to achieve as-if randomization through identifying people who are statistically similar to those exposed to a treatment (in this case, the pedophilia scandal) to those who have not (people who were interviewed in the same survey, but before the scandal took place). The impact of the event is then estimated using ordinary least squares regression. The same variables used in the multiple regression analysis described above were used to generate the matched control group. For both analyses, the analysis is only run on individuals reporting they are Orthodox Christians. Replication code for the analysis is available at CRRC Georgia's Github page: <http://github.com/crcgeorgia/>.

Results

Descriptive statistics suggest that the scandal led to a significant decline in Georgians' trust in the church, with a 15 percentage point decline in those reporting they either fully or partially trust the Georgian Orthodox Church following the scandal. Although there are relatively few respondents in the survey following the scandal (126 Orthodox Christians), this difference is still statistically significant.

Figure 2: Please Tell Much How Much You Trust or Distrust the [Georgian Orthodox Church]? Before and After October 31 (% of Orthodox Christians)



Source: (CRRC Caucasus Barometer, Georgia)

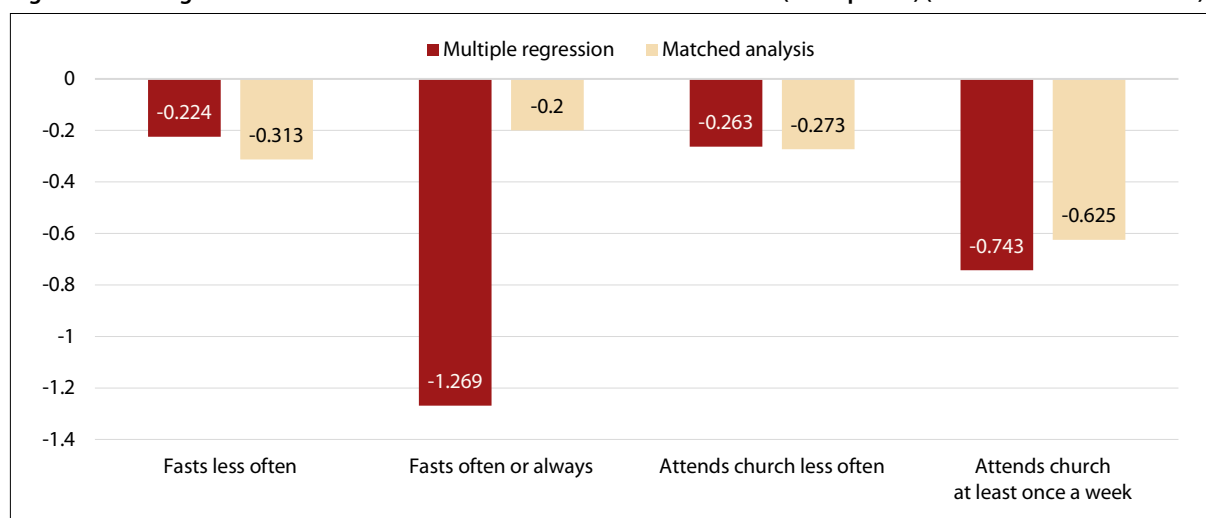
Further data analysis was conducted to test whether the apparent decline resulted from different kinds of respondents being interviewed before and after the scandal rather than the scandal itself. After controlling for the factors described in the methodology section, the lower level of trust in the church remains statistically significant. Responses to the question were recorded on a five point scale with 1 equivalent to fully distrust, 2 distrust, 3 neither trust nor distrust, 4 trust, and 5 fully trust. The difference in trust before and after the scandal is 0.26 points on the five point scale, while it is 0.32 after controlling for other factors in the multiple regression analyses. A second analysis that compares whether people trusted (responses 4 and 5) the church to other responses (1, 2, 3) shows a similar pattern. Without controlling for other factors, the decline in trust (fully trust and rather trust) following the scandal is 15 percentage points. When controlling for other factors, the effect of the scandal is 18 percentage points. This suggests that the respondents who were interviewed after the scandal were if anything more predisposed to trusting the church than those who were interviewed before. The same analyses using the matched data suggests that there was a 17 percentage point (0.31 scale point) decline in trust in the church as a result of the scandal.

Further analysis was conducted to look at who the scandal affected most. The results suggest that people in urban areas outside Tbilisi and those with higher levels of education had larger declines in their trust in the church as a result of the scandal. In contrast, men and women, those who are working and not, and older and younger people were no more or less affected by the scandal, controlling for other factors.

To understand whether the scandal had differential impacts on those that are more or less intensive practitioners of Orthodox Christianity, multiple regression and matched analyses were conducted. The multiple regression analysis suggests that the scandal primarily affected people who were more engaged in Orthodox practice, while the matched analysis is more ambivalent on this point.

The survey asked respondents about religious attendance and fasting. Taking into account other factors in the multiple regression analysis, those who attended church at least once a week were significantly more likely to report lower levels of trust following the scandal compared to those who reported attending church at least once a week prior to the scandal. Similarly, those who reported that they fasted often or always when religion dictates were significantly less likely to trust the church after the scandal than those who reported the same prior to the scandal in the multiple regression analysis. In contrast to the multiple regression analysis, the matched analysis does not suggest statistically significant effects on people who are more engaged in religious practice. However, the pattern in terms of effect size generally remains similar. The one exception is that in the matched analysis, the effect on those that fast often or always is much smaller than in the multiple regression analysis.

Taken together, the evidence leans towards suggesting that the religiously engaged were more affected by the scandal than those Orthodox Christians who do not regularly fast or attend church. Still, further evidence is needed to confirm this. The chart below provides the effect of the scandal in terms of the average point change in attitudes among those who are more religiously engaged versus those who are not in terms of scale points.

Figure 3: Marginal Effect of the Scandal on Attitudes Trust in the Church (Scale points) (Caucasus Barometer 2019)

Source: (CRRC Caucasus Barometer, Georgia)

Outlook

While the above data analysis strongly suggests that the events of late October shook the public's trust in the church, this could be a short-term effect. The data used for this analysis were collected in the weeks before and days after the scandal. Whether the decline in trust associated with the church scandals is a lasting one is an open question as far as the data is concerned. However, the long term decline in trust in the church that has taken place concomitantly with numerous scandals suggest that the Church's woes are having a lasting impact on Georgians' trust in their religious institutions. The recent scandals surrounding Covid-19 have likely only exacerbated matters for the church.

This trend is important. While some in Tbilisi's more secular circles might celebrate the decline in trust in the church to a certain extent, people should not forget the many benefits of a unifying institution in society. As Robert Putnam has pointed out in his tome *Bowling Alone*, church going is one form of social capital, and social capital matters a great deal. It is associated with numerous positive outcomes, from economic development to social well-being. In turn, this decline calls for investment in institutions that can unite Georgians—be they religious or secular.

About the Author

Dustin Gilbreath is the deputy research director at CRRC Georgia. The views presented in this article do not represent the views of CRRC Georgia or any related entity.

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