

A counterexample to secularization theory? Assessing the Georgian religious revival

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Abstract

Secularization theory allows for transitory religious revivals under certain conditions, such as extreme societal crises or state weakness. The country of Georgia has witnessed the largest religious revival of Orthodox countries and one of the most striking religious resurgences worldwide. This paper gives both a statistical and historical description of this revival and asks whether it is a counterexample to secularization theory. We show that the main thrust of the religious revival in Georgia lasted 25 years and seized the entire society in what was mainly a period effect. The most significant cause for the revival was a major societal and economic crisis starting in 1985 combined with a very weak state, creating massive individual insecurity. In these circumstances, the Georgian Orthodox Church was able to provide identity for individuals and legitimacy for governments. Other possible causes of the revival—state funding, too rapid modernization, or emigration—can be excluded as primary drivers of the process. The Georgian case shows a situation in which secularization theory expects transitory revivals and is thus not a counterexample.

KEYWORDS

insecurity, religious change, religious revival, secularization, state weakness

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Secularization theory claims that modernization in its various forms leads to a decrease in religion and religiosity on both societal and individual levels. While the sociological classics had almost universally upheld such a perspective, secularization theory was strongly criticized in the 1980s and 1990s (Casanova, 1994; Stark, 1999). In the last 2 decades, however, and backed by substantive amounts of data, the theory has come back stronger than before. Noted scholars in the secularization tradition again envision the possibility that the modernization-secularization link applies not just in western countries, but world-wide (De Graaf 2013, Molteni 2021, Inglehart, 2021, Wilkins-Laflamme, 2021, Norris & Inglehart, 2011 [2004], Pew 2018, Bruce, 2011).

One of the central problems for secularization theory is cases of obvious religious revival. Such revivals are often taken as counterevidence or even falsifications of secularization theory (Berger et al., 2008). Recent literature has shown that post-soviet Orthodox countries have experienced at least a certain extent of religious revival and are thus possible exceptions to secularization trends (Northmore-Ball & Evans, 2014; Pew, 2017). Yet, secularization theory has worked out several conditions under which transitory religious revivals are possible or even to be expected. In the case of strong crises, cultural menace, weak or emerging states, removal of state repression, too rapid modernization, or rapid immigration, religion may fulfil security-, identity-, and legitimation functions both for individuals and states and lead to transitory religious revivals (Bruce, 2011).

This paper investigates one of the most significant of such possible Orthodox counterexamples to secularization theory: Georgia, a former Communist Orthodox country in Eastern Europe (with small Muslim, Armenian-Apostolic, and Catholic minorities). This South-Caucasian nation has witnessed one of the most striking religious resurgences worldwide (Jödicke, 2015; Köksal et al., 2019).

This leads to our three key questions: (1) When did the Georgian religious revival happen, and what form did it take? (2) Was it created through an impact on the whole society (period effect), through cohort replacement (cohort effect), or some combination? (3) What mechanisms have led to the revival and are these mechanisms compatible with secularization theory?

We address these questions with a case study methodology and by synthesizing different types of data sources: (1) Representative surveys monitoring religious change in Georgia over 3 decades, for example, World Values Survey (WVS), European Values Studies (EVS), and Caucasus Barometer (CB); (2) contextual data on Georgia's socio-economic and political development; (3) data collected by religious organizations; and (4) various historical accounts.

2 | SECULARIZATION THEORY AND MECHANISMS OF RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

2.1 | Secularization theory

The basic claim of secularization theory is that modernization leads to secularization. Secularization can be defined as a decrease in the importance of religion in a society, at the societal, organizational, and individual level (Dobbelaere, 2002). Modernization can be defined as the process that leads societies to a level of greater technological, institutional, and cultural complexity (Stolz & Tanner, 2019). There are different ways of measuring modernization; indicators often used include GDP per capita, level of education, and life expectancy (Inglehart, 2021). Of course, modernization takes different forms in different contexts. Scholars therefore debate whether the differences thus created are large enough to be identified as different types of modernity ("multiple modernities") (Eisenstadt, 1999). While the claim that modernization leads to secularization is almost universally accepted among secularization theorists, all subsequent specifications are controversial (for a recent overview, see Stolz, 2020a).

Why should modernization lead to secularization? Many mechanisms are given in the literature (Pollack & Rosta, 2017). In our view, one of the most important general mechanisms (overarching most of the more specific causal pathways) is that modernization creates many non-religious solutions to problems in human life that seem

at least in part more effective than those offered by religion (i.e., biomedicine vs. religious healing; insurance vs. prayer; leisure opportunities vs. religious practice). At the same time, it creates individual freedom to choose between religious and secular options. Both because of functional superiority and the sheer number of secular alternatives, religious options are “crowded out” as soon as individuals have the choice.

2.2 | Mechanisms of transitory religious revival

Secularization scholars have long recognized that the modernization–secularization relationship is not linear but interrupted by a series of backlashes and transitory periods of religious stability or even revival (Wallis & Bruce, 1995, p. 702). In what follows, we identify four mechanisms that have been suggested by secularization scholars to explain religious revivals.

2.2.1 | Societal crisis

When societies experience strong economic and/or political crises, when they conflict with important adversaries, and when their states are failing, this may increase individual and societal insecurity and therefore lead to religious revival (Henrich et al., 2019; Pew, 2018). In situations of war and civil war, hyper-inflation, massive unemployment, or strong corruption, religious groups may take over functions of moral guidance, identity attribution, and welfare provision from the state and thus gain societal influence. They will try to help individuals find new ways of interpreting their lives and offer integration into a group of fellow believers. This argument builds on the well-known assumption that religion has a function of reducing insecurity (Norris & Inglehart, 2011 (2004)). An example is the success of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt or the Hamas in Gaza who offered education and welfare to individuals who did not receive these goods from the state (Ahmed, 2011). Additionally, in the case of conflict with an external foe, religion may be used as a resource “for the defense of national, local, ethnic, or status-group culture” (Wallis & Bruce, 1995, p. 702). Examples for this latter mechanism can be found in the cases of Northern Ireland, or Poland.¹

2.2.2 | Supportive and suppressive state regulation

The state may be the main cause of religious revival by either offering positive support or removing negative sanctions.

A first possibility is that a state lacking legitimacy will actively support religion as a legitimation resource to sustain political power, thus creating a “religious revival from above”. Such a state may offer both legal advantages and financial resources to one or several religions close to the state, and it may at the same time suppress other religions. For example, the first phase of the Franco regime in Spain relied on Catholicism as an important legitimation resource and granted it significant legal and financial advantages (Pastor, 2007). A more recent example is the spectacular growth of Buddhism and Protestantism in South Korea in the 1970s that was strongly guided by the state (Lee & Suh, 2017). A second possibility is that the state removes suppressive regulation, thus allowing religion to rebound to a level in accordance with the “natural” level of religiosity of that society (given by the religious preferences of their population and, possibly, by the modernization level of their country) (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Stark & Bainbridge, 1989). Examples of states removing suppressive regulation can be found in countries belonging to the former Soviet Union who abolished communist suppression of religion around the 1990s. Empirical studies looking for rebounds after the removal of these state barriers, however, have led to mixed results (Evans & Northmore-Ball, 2012).

2.2.3 | (Too) rapid modernization

A third mechanism links (too) rapid modernization and urbanization with religious revival. If there is rapid modernization and urbanization, many people migrate from rural areas to the big cities, lose their usual frameworks of

interpretation, and find themselves faced with great insecurities and inequalities (Bruce, 2011, p. 186). Some get rich quickly, many others stay or become poor. In such a situation many people are looking for new social ties, new techniques of life and may be ready to join religious groups offering them reintegration. Examples for such a mechanism are the rise of Methodism in Great Britain in the late 18th and early 19th century, or the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism in Brasil and Sub-Saharan Africa (Martin, 1990; Pew, 2013). Just as conflicts with other nations, rapid modernization may be seen as a threat to traditional ways of life and religion may be used to organize the defense of ethnic or national culture. One of the most telling examples is the Islamic revival in the 1970s that is to a significant part a reaction to a massive modernization and secularization “from above” (Lapidus, 1997). Religious upswings because of (too) rapid modernization are normally transitory since the secularizing force of modernization take over after the initial shock that led to the revival.

2.2.4 | Migration

A final mechanism links migration to religious revival. Immigration can lead to religious revival in two ways. One possibility is that immigrants come from more religious countries and, without changing their individual religiosity level increase the overall religiosity in the host country. Another possibility is that immigrants become more religious when arriving in the host country. Immigrants typically have a need for keeping their cultural roots, new social capital, and all kinds of help when settling in. In such circumstances, religious groups may help to both maintain their cultural traditions and integrate them into their new surroundings (Hirschman, 2004). In consequence, immigrants may become more religious when immigrating into the new context than they were in their country of origin. Wallis and Bruce (1995: 703) call this mechanism “cultural transition”. An example is the high religiosity of immigrants in the United States (Warner and Wittner, 1998). Of course, emigration may equally lead to religious revival if – for whatever reason – secular individuals have a higher probability of emigrating than religious individuals.

It is interesting to note that many of these mechanisms of religious revival can be seen as situations in which the number and availability of secular options is drastically reduced while the attractiveness of religious options is heightened with respect to secular options. The mechanisms of religious revival are thus not just additional ad hoc explanations but can be fit into a general argument of when to expect secularization and religious revival.

Note also that secularization scholars assume these religious revivals to be only transitory. They argue that—in the long run—technological, institutional, and cultural advancement cannot be avoided. It follows that secularization will be irreversible (Bruce, 2011), and that indicators of religiosity will eventually settle back into a declining trend. The literature does not give specifics on how long a religious revival should be until we would abandon our expectation that it was only “transitory”, the choice of threshold is certainly arbitrary.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Analytical strategy

Our analytical strategy does not follow the usual quantitative template where all independent and dependent variables are measured for all units of observations in one overarching model. Instead, we employ a case study approach, synthesizing all available quantitative data for the case, modeling different elements of the chain of reasoning, and triangulating them with historical evidence (George & Bennett, 2005). For some elements of our chain of reasoning we argue with a period-cohort-analysis, for others we use an interrupted time series design, for still others we use temporal deductions of the form “Since x happened after the beginning of the revival, it could not possibly have been the initial cause of it”. We argue that by piecing together all the relevant elements and creating a logical chain of events—much like in a murder trial —, it is possible to test hypothetical explanations internal to the case.

3.2 | Data

We use several different datasets: three waves of the WVS (1996, 2009, 2014),² two waves of the EVS (2008, 2017),³ and the Caucasus Barometer (nine measurement years between 2008 and 2019).⁴ We have furthermore constructed a dataset on operating churches and monasteries in Georgia and use World Bank data on GDP in Georgia for the period 1950–2019. The data on state funding of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) stem from the Patriarchate's Capital project.⁵ An overview of the data sources can be found in the online Appendix A1. We use unweighted data.⁶ Missing values in dependent variables measuring religiosity were less than 5%. We imputed missing values both in dependent and independent variables using linear imputation models. The very few remaining missing values were imputed with the median, adding a residual.

3.3 | Variables and data analysis

Regarding the analysis of age-period-cohort problems, some authors have suggested using cross-classified models to solve the problem of the logical interconnectedness of the effects (Yang & Land, 2013) but the results of these methods have been strongly criticized as being unstable (Bell & Jones, 2014). We therefore turn to a method of linear decomposition only of period and cohort proposed by Firebaugh (1989: 253) and used recently by Voas and Chaves (2016).

Our period-cohort analysis is based on WVS data and uses the following dependent variables: Affiliation is a dichotomous variable coded 1 (affiliated to a religious denomination) and 0 (not affiliated). Importance of religion in the respondent's life is a 4-step variable ranging from 4 (very important) to 1 (not at all important). Attendance is a 8-step variable ranging from 8 (more than once a week) to 1 (never). Confidence in the Church, government, parliament, political parties are four 4-step variables with response options 4 (a great deal) to 1 (none at all). A first independent variable is survey year, that is, the year in which the survey was conducted, measuring the period effect. A second independent variable is birth year, measuring the cohort effect (an 8-step aggregated cohort variable). Variable codings of all independent variables can be found in Appendix A2. The APC-decomposition analyses are robust against using the overall population or excluding the non-Orthodox population and imputing or not the missing data. As an additional robustness check, we conducted logistic and linear regressions, where the variables gender, education, settlement size, and Orthodox can be controlled. The substantive results are very similar (Appendix A3).

Our EVS analysis of retrospective child attendance uses attendance as a child as a 8-step variables ranging from 8 (more than once a week) to 1 (never) and birthyear. Our analysis looking at the specificity of the Georgian religious revival uses the dependent variables affiliation, importance of religion, and attendance, as well as the independent variables survey year and country (see Appendix A6).

The EVS analysis testing the relationship of crisis and religious revival in different post-socialist Orthodox countries uses change in percentage of children's monthly Church attendance 1980–2011 as the dependent variable and loss in GDP per capita relative to initial GDP per capita 1991–2001 as the independent variable.

The Caucasus Barometer analysis showing the recent decline uses the dependent variables "trust in religious institutions" and attendance and the independent variable survey year (see Appendix A7). The number of functioning churches from 1945 to 2020 are based on many different historical sources given in Appendix A5. We measured insecurity with GDP per capita (in US\$, inflation adjusted). The funding of the GOC uses data from the Patriarchate's Capital and is measured in Georgian currency, Lari, and comprises funding from the state budget, the municipal budgets, and funding from the presidential and governmental reserve fund (see Appendix A9).

The interrupted time-series analysis (Huitema & McKean, 2000; Solanas et al., 2010) uses the variables GDP per capita, retrospective child attendance, and year. All models were calculated with R, version 3.6.3.

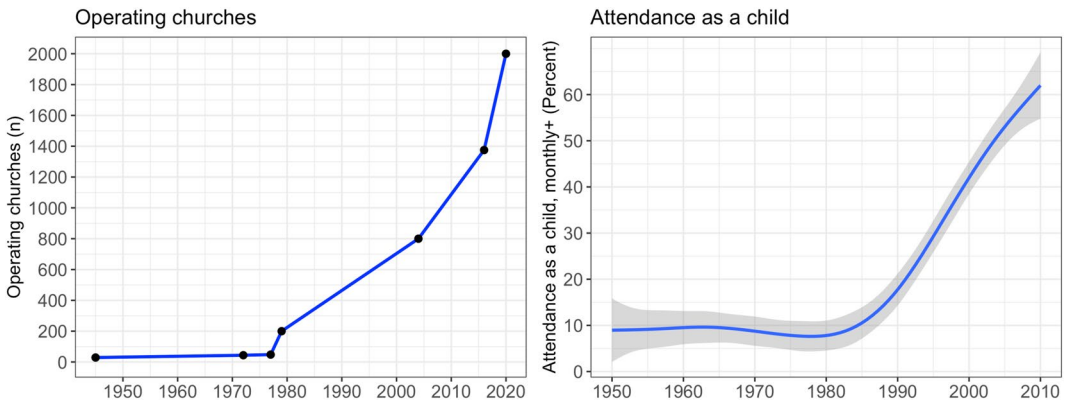


FIGURE 1 Number of operating churches and service attendance as a child in Georgia, 1950–2020. Note: Sources for number of operating churches, see Appendix A5. Source for service attendance as a child: pooled European Values Studies (EVS) 2008, 2017 data. We calculated year of child service attendance = birthyear + 12. The monthly attendance figure uses LOESS smoothing. The shaded area in monthly attendance is the 0.95-confidence interval. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

4 | MEASURING THE GEORGIAN REVIVAL

Orthodox Christianity has been a state religion since the fifth century and has for centuries played a significant role in many aspects of the country's (or rather its predecessor kingdoms') socio-political life. As in all Communist societies ruled by the Soviet regime, religion in Georgia was severely repressed during the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, in the 1940s, there remained less than 30 operating churches in Georgia. From 1943, the state became somewhat more tolerant toward religion to motivate citizens to make greater contributions to its World War Two efforts. Against this background, the Georgian religious revival started on a very small scale in the 1970s among young people and accelerated in the 1980s when civil rights activists and Orthodox activists joined forces to form the Georgian dissident movement. This movement used religion as a key element of patriotism and Georgian collective memory. Its most prominent leader was Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who would later become the first president of post-Soviet Georgia.

High-quality surveys in Georgia only started in the mid-1990s, but fortunately there are two indicators that permit measuring the Georgian revival from the 1950s onward: the number of churches in operation and service attendance as a child. These indicators confirm that a slight religious revival can be observed already before 1985, but that the main thrust of the revival happened between 1985 and 2010. The number of operating Orthodox churches in Georgia was – because of communist repression – at only 29 in 1945. This figure grew to 200 in 1979, 800 in 2004, and up to 2000 in 2020 (Figure 1, left). A second indicator is Church attendance when the respondent was a child. Using EVS data, we can assess individuals' retrospective answers on their attendance of religious services when they were twelve years old. Since respondents were twelve in different years, it is possible to create a timeline that reaches back as far as the 1950s. This question was asked twice in Georgia in the latest two EVS waves in 2008 and 2017. Figure 1 (right) shows the aggregated Church attendance in the year when the respondents were twelve. Based on these data, we see again a slight rise beginning in the 1980s and a dramatic increase from 1985 onward: Church attendance of children aged twelve is at 7% in 1980, rises to 10% in 1990, 30% in 2000% and 50% in 2010.

The various surveys (EVS, WVS, Caucasus Barometer) permit measuring religious change in a more comprehensive way from the early 1990s onward. We find a significant rise in religiosity from the beginning of the observation period between 1996 and the mid-2010s. For example, affiliation was already very high in 1996, at 94.0%, but still rose to 99% in 2014. The perceived importance of religion rose from 49% in 1996 to 85% in 2014. Weekly attendance was at 27.0% in 1996 and rose to 44.0% in 2014.

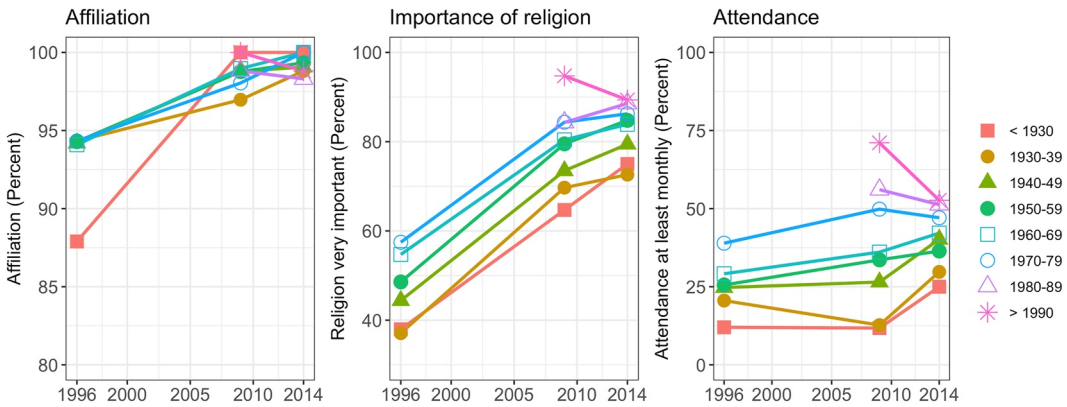


FIGURE 2 Religiosity of cohort across time periods. Source: World Values Survey (WVS) data. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

5 | COHORT OR PERIOD EFFECTS?

Having established that there was indeed a significant religious revival in Georgia, we may wonder whether it was predominantly a cohort or a period effect. Theoretically, one might imagine it being only due to a period effect—if all cohorts were “lifted upward” in a similar way. Or it might be only a cohort effect if some external shock had raised the religiosity of only one or two cohorts and the cohort replacement during the 25 years of observation had then led to the overall aggregate rise of religiosity. Then again, a mix of period and cohort effect is possible. The question of whether the revival was mainly a period effect or not is important for our overall argument that the societal crisis beginning in 1985 created the religious revival.

We are here confronted with the well-known problem of trying to disentangle cohort, period and life-cycle effects (Voas & Chaves, 2016). Individual life-cycle effects occur when individuals change their religiosity during their life course, for example, by becoming more religious when they grow older. Birth-cohort effects take place when cohorts differ in how they were socialized. Finally, period effects occur when all individuals in a society are affected in a similar way at a given period of time (regardless of age). Life-cycle (or age), birth-year cohort, and period effects are logically connected in that $\text{birthyear} + \text{age} = \text{period}$. This means that we cannot estimate the effects independently of one another (Bell & Jones, 2014). We address this problem by assuming that we can neglect life-cycle effects, since they have only a limited importance when trying to explain aggregate social change during the post-communist transition.⁷

Figure 2 on the left (Affiliation) shows that the rise of affiliation in Georgia from 1996 to 2014 is predominantly a period effect. All cohorts have been “pushed up” in their mean percentage of affiliation during the 18 years of observation. However, the cohorts that newly arrive start at a higher level than where previous cohorts had started; a certain cohort replacement effect is thus equally given. In Figure 2 in the middle (Importance of religion) we see a similar picture. Again, the overall rise of the perceived importance of religion is clearly predominantly a period effect. But there is also a clear cohort effect in that every new cohort finds religion somewhat more important than the previous cohort. These cohort differences are already in place in 1996 and do not seem to change up until 2014. What is fascinating is that we here see a graph that shows the opposite of what we see in secularizing western countries where every cohort is somewhat less religious than the previous one. In Figure 2 on the right (Attendance), we see—interestingly—a less clear period effect. Attendance only rises slightly over the period of observation, but the differences between the cohorts are larger than those previously observed. Again, we see that these cohort differences are already in place in 1996 and do not change. What is particularly notable is that we know that up until 1980 there could be no cohort differences in attendance (see Appendix A4 for an explanation). This means that from 1980 at the earliest, and especially from 1990 on, the period effect created by the breakdown

TABLE 1 Decomposition of aggregate trends regarding religiosity: individual change and cohort replacement.

	Indicator	Affiliation	Importance of religion	Attendance (monthly)
1	Start year	1996	1996	1996
2	End year	2014	2014	2014
3	Start percent	93.8	52.3	27.4
4	End percent	99.3	85.7	44.3
5	Aggregate change	5.5	33.4	17.0
6	Period length	18	18	18
7	Difference mean birth year	14	14	14
8	Within slope	0.0030	0.0172	0.0053
9	Between slope	0.0002	0.0033	0.0055
10	Period change (6 * 8)	5.4	31.0	9.6
11	Cohort-replacement change (7*9)	0.4	4.7	7.7

Note: WVVS data. The method decomposes the aggregate change (row 5) into period change (row 10) and cohort-replacement change (row 11).

of the Soviet Union must have “pushed up” attendance of every younger cohort a bit more than of every older cohort, thus creating these cohort differences during a very short time. To put this another way, generation gaps appeared not in early adulthood (as is usually the case) but as a result of the economic shock and at varying ages in varying strength.

Overall, we can summarize our findings by saying that the religious revival was due to a strong period effect, which at its beginning created cohort differences that let every new cohort show a slightly higher religiosity than the previous one. We also see that the upswing shows signs of slowing down already in 2010. As all survey data show (WVVS, EVS, Caucasus Barometer, see Appendix A8), the upswing was transitory and ended around 2014.

(See for more data showing an onset of secularization in recent years Appendix A7).

What has been shown visually, should now be modeled numerically. We thus estimate the importance of period and cohort effects for our three dependent variables, using a method originally proposed by Firebaugh (1989) (Table A3). The method of linear decomposition uses a simple OLS regression:

$$y = b_0 + b_1 \text{ survey year} + b_2 \text{ cohort} + e.$$

The goal is to partition the overall change in y into a part that is caused by the passage of time and a part that is caused by birth-year cohort. In our formula, the coefficient b_1 shows the average change of y with every additional year over time (that can be attributed to either a life-cycle or a period effect), controlling for cohort. The b_2 coefficient, on the other hand, shows the effect of an additional birth year (a birth-year cohort effect), controlling for the survey year in which the individual was interviewed. b_0 is the intercept and e is the error term. The degree of change due to the two mechanisms can then be calculated as Intracohort change = $b_1 (t_T - t_1)$; Cohort replacement = $b_2 (C_T - C_1)$. Where $t_T - t_1$ equals the range of survey years covered and C_T denotes mean birth year at time T , C_1 denotes mean birth year at time 1.

Our results are shown in Table 1. For example, the aggregate change of affiliation is plus 5.5% (row 5) from 1996 to 2014. The method decomposes this percentage in a part due to a period effect (individual change, row 10): 5.4% and a part due to cohort replacement (row 11): 0.4%. Since the relationships are not perfectly linear, the decomposition is not perfect, but it clearly shows in this case that the change in affiliation is overwhelmingly caused by a period effect. The same is true for the change in importance of religion of 33.4% (row 5) that is decomposed in 31.0% (period effect) and 4.7% (cohort effect). Finally, for attendance, the overall change of 17.0% (row 5) is decomposed into a period effect of 9.6% and a cohort replacement effect of 7.7%. In all three cases, the period effect is more important than the cohort effect and, only for attendance, the cohort effect is central to explain the change.

6 | REVIVAL MECHANISMS

In what follows, we discuss whether and to what extent the mechanisms of transitory religious revival presented in the theory section were given or absent in the Georgian case. We rely on historical, ethnographic, and statistical data to make our case, with a special focus on the timing of the various mechanisms.

6.1 | Societal crisis and state weakness

In our view, the Georgian religious revival was created by the fact that the Perestroika-related reforms and the subsequent breakdown of the Soviet Union led to an extreme societal and economic crisis which allowed the well-organized GOC to take over important functions for individuals and the state.

The *political* side of the crisis included both war and civil war and showed the independent Georgian state to be very weak (Kotz & Weir, 1997). The background was the introduction of Perestroika in 1985 in the Soviet Union in general, which sought to install free elections, more democracy, separation of powers, and transparency. Shortly after the victory of the nationalist political party, under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the first democratic elections in Georgia in 1989, violent conflicts broke out in South Ossetia and Abkhazia—two territorial units within Georgia but populated by the minority groups. The key problem was that autonomous republics within Georgia feared not being adequately represented in the new state and were contemplating building their own nation-state projects (in Abkhazia) or remaining part of the former Soviet rule, this time within the Russian Federation (in South Ossetia). After the declaration of independence on April 9, 1991, these tensions increased, and extreme political instability ensued. In the beginning of 1993, Gamsakhurdia was overthrown by armed opposition, allegedly supported by Russians, and was forced to go into exile. The former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze took over and repressed an armed Gamsakhurdian opposition, resulting in a short but bloody civil war. To sum up this point, during the time of the main revival, Georgia lost its long-time political system and was thrown into extreme political insecurity.

The *economic* side of this crisis was possibly even more important. The Georgian economy started to slide immediately in 1985 with the beginning of the Perestroika reforms. The Perestroika tried to remedy the structural problems of the Soviet Union by introducing market elements into the planned economy framework. This proved to have catastrophic results: Supply chains were interrupted, energy import costs skyrocketed, and hyper-inflation ensued (Huber, 2004, p. 57). GDP per capita dropped from around 4900 in 1985 to 1500 USD in 1998, wiping out about 70% of the country's economy. This was the strongest drop among post-socialist countries (except for Moldova) (Sapsford & Abbott, 2006). Known for widespread *corruption* even during the Soviet times, Georgia's corruption levels shot up in the 1990s, putting Georgia among the ten most corrupt countries of the world (Huber, 2004) (see also Appendix A9).

The beginning of the religious revival coincides with the deep societal and economic crisis in Georgia that followed the Perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Figure 3 shows the standardized GDP per capita and the standardized Church attendance of children between 1970 and 2010. It is interesting to note that the revival continued after 1995, even though the economy was again growing. It did so strongly for 5 years and in a less pronounced way for 10 more years. We believe that there is a lag involved: the economic recovery of Georgia only led to a slowdown of the revival and later a new decline of religiosity with a certain delay. It must also be kept in mind that even in the years from 1995 to 2010, the societal situation in Georgia remained extremely unstable.

We now seek to statistically model the two time series of GDP and child attendance. We use an interrupted time series design as proposed by Huitema and McKean (2000). This allows us to estimate the numerical size and possible statistical significance of the effects. An interrupted time series analysis is useful when researchers are faced with a single time series ($N = 1$) in which an intervention occurs (or is hypothesized to have occurred). In the simplest case, the time series only has two phases and the relationships are thought to be linear. The goal is then to find the

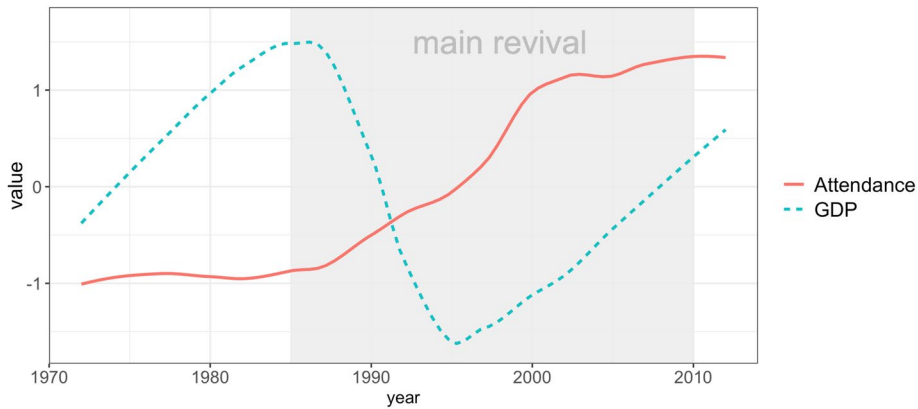


FIGURE 3 GDP per capita and children's Church attendance in Georgia. GDP per capita in USD; shaded area indicates time of strong religious revival. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

year of the intervention as well as the intercepts and the slopes of the two phases, before and after the intervention. Following Huitema and McKean (2000: 40), the model we use is:

$$Y_t = b_0 + b_1 T_t + b_2 D_t + b_3 [T_t - (n_1 + 1)] D_t + e_t,$$

where

Y_t is the dependent variable score at time t ,

T_t is the value of the measurement occasion variable T at time t ,

D_t is the value of the dummy variable indicating the treatment phase at time t ,

$[T_t - (n_1 + 1)] D_t$ is the value of the slope change variable at time t ,

b_0 is the regression intercept,

b_1 through b_3 are the partial regression coefficients, and

e_t is the error of the model at time t .

We model the time from 1975 to 1995 for GDP and from 1975 to 2010 for child attendance. We use a longer timeframe for child attendance since the relationship becomes clearer and since one can assume that the revival would last somewhat longer than the economic crisis. The results are robust to using the same timeframe, however. We assume linear relationships. We further assume that the interruption (the "treatment") is the Perestroika and the following breakdown of the Soviet Union. This treatment possibly changed the level and slope of the time-series.

Using the two-phase model, we find the year of the change of the phases by maximizing the R-squared in different possible years. The empirically found year of change (or: the intervention) turns out to be 1987 for GDP/capita and 1986 for child attendance. This leads to the models presented numerically in Table 2 (and visualized in the Appendix A7). For GDP, we see that the slope in the first phase is positive with 149.76 \$ higher GDP per capita per year and becomes negative $-553.66\$$ per capita per year GDP (calculated as $149.76 - 703.42$) in the second phase. Both slopes are highly significant. Conversely, the slope of child attendance in the first phase is 0 and becomes positive and highly significant (0.02) in the second phase. Substantively, this means that the percentage of children going at least monthly to Church increased by 2% per year (or by 20% in 10 years). The intercept change is not significant both for GDP and child attendance. The models have a very good fit with 92.7% and 83.9%. There is no problem of autocorrelation of the error terms, which is why no ARIMA model has to be used (Huitema & McKean, 1998).

Our interrupted time series analysis has permitted us to show that both GDP and child attendance are changing significantly at around the same time (just after the beginning of the Perestroika). While we cannot prove the causality between the two variables, we argue that there is a high plausibility that the Perestroika and the subsequent breakdown of the Soviet Union led to both the societal and economic crisis and the religious upswing in Georgia, and that the societal and economic upswing in its turn strongly reinforced the religious revival even further. It may be that

TABLE 2 Model of interrupted time series for GDP and child attendance.

	GDP	Child attendance
Predictors	Estimates	Estimates
(Intercept)	3263.85***	0.09
t	149.76***	0.00
D	-80.69	0.03
t1 *D	-703.42***	0.02**
Observations	21	38
Adjusted R ²	0.927	0.839

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

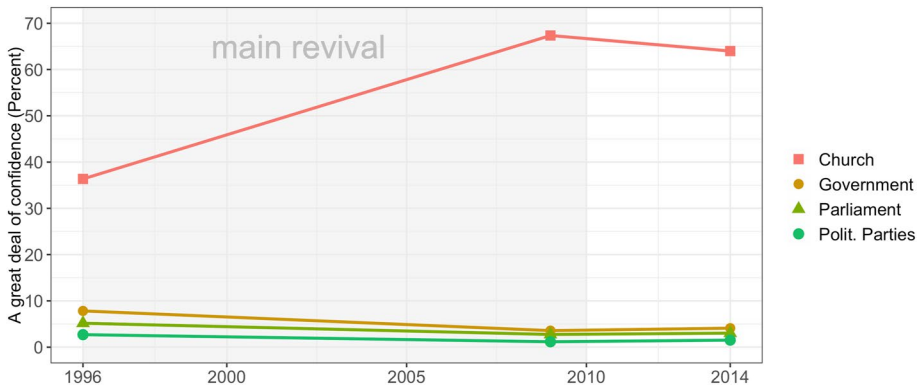


FIGURE 4 Confidence in the Church, government, parliament, and political parties in Georgia, 1996–2014. Source: pooled European Values Studies (EVS) and World Values Survey (WVS) data. Shaded area indicates time of strong religious revival. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

other causes than the societal crisis present at the same time could have led to the religious upswing - but we will show below that the main candidates for such other causes can be excluded.

During the extreme political and economic crisis in Georgia in which many, if not all, state institutions seemed to break down and all possible self-ascriptions became questionable, there was one institution that remained untouched and even spread a positive message: The GOC, headed by what seemed to be a wise, old, holy man, Patriarch Ilia II. In sociological surveys, the Patriarch had always been ranked as the most respected, trusted, and popular figure in Georgia⁸ and was often referred to as “the spiritual leader of the nation” (Grzelidze, 2010, p. 170). The ideology proposed by the Church was that to be a Georgian meant to be Orthodox. Georgians, according to the religious-nationalist myth, are a people chosen by God. For centuries, the members of this select group had survived attacks from ever-changing external and internal enemies, but they were and remained strong because of Orthodoxy (Chelidze, 2014). Subscribing to the religious-nationalist myth, Georgians could find a positive identity, self-worth, and an interpretation of their current situation. This is the reason why surveys found that the Church was increasingly trusted, while trust in the government, the parliament, and the political parties was extremely low (Figure 4). This is also why all Georgian governments between 1990 and 2013 sought legitimation from the GOC. To give just two examples: in 1992, Shevardnadze, at the age of 64, let himself be baptized by the Patriarch into the GOC and President Saakashvili often praised Ilia II for reinforcing “the link between Orthodoxy and Georgian culture” (Conroy, 2015). All Georgian presidents and prime ministers made a point to publicly show themselves together with Ilia II. To recap, facing an extreme societal crisis and state weakness, the Church and religion in general could step in as a source of solidarity, identity,

and nationalism. The analysis of data from the International Social Survey Programme further suggests that being a Christian Orthodox is a key component of Georgian ethnic national identity (Gugushvili, 2016).

While this paper is mainly concerned with the Georgian case, it is interesting to ask whether the crisis-induced revival mechanism could have played out also in other post-socialist Orthodox countries. An in-depth analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that a simple comparison of the importance of the economic crisis (measured in relative loss of GDP per capita between 1991 and 2001 and the change in religiosity (measured in at least monthly child attendance) between 1980 and 2012 shows that Georgia is indeed exceptional in that it had a much higher relative loss in GDP per capita than all other post-socialist Orthodox countries - and it had a much stronger religious revival (Appendix A6, Figure 2).

6.2 | State regulation

As shown in the theoretical section, religious revivals may not only be created by insecurity and state weakness, but also by other mechanisms. In what follows we discuss other mechanisms, showing that they were not or only partly causes of the Georgian religious revival.

Thus, the Georgian revival is not just a "correction" because of the removal of state repression. It is true that religion was heavily suppressed in Georgia (although the State's position on religion softened considerably in the 1970s and even more so in the 1980s) (Köksal et al., 2019). Obviously, the removal of communist repression was a necessary condition for the revival, and it did occur in Georgia - but so did it in all other post-soviet countries, where revivals were much smaller. A more specific variant of the correction hypothesis would expect that Georgia could have returned to a "natural level of religiosity given the modernization level". This expectation is equally not corroborated by the data. If this were true, countries that were poorer than Georgia (e.g., Armenia) should have shown an even larger religious revival than Georgia.

Neither was the Georgian revival primarily caused by positive state support. It is true that the Georgian government recognized the GOC publicly with a concordat in 2002 and that all presidents and prime ministers routinely showed themselves together with the Patriarch Ilia II to try to legitimize their power. The government also financed the Church with direct transfers on a very significant scale. As we show in detail in the Appendix A10, the financing rose strongly after 2000, going from 1,960,000 Lari (882,000 USD) in 2002 to 27, 648, 166 Lari in 2009 (16, 588, 900 USD). These figures include financing through the state budget, the municipal budgets, and funding from the presidential and governmental reserve fund. But obviously, both the legal recognition and the financing cannot be the initial cause of the religious upswing simply because they happened in the 2000s, whereas the revival started already around 1985. The Georgian religious upswing was, at least initially, not a "revival from above". It might very well be, however, that the positive state support and the "piety politics" in Georgia helped keep the momentum of the religious upswing going.

6.3 | (Too) rapid modernization

Another mechanism that might explain the Georgian religious revival involves (too) rapid and uneven modernization. According to this argument, individuals who are dislocated on a massive scale must reintegrate themselves and can do so with the help of religious groups. Furthermore, religions may be strengthened when resisting the modernizing and secularizing tendencies of too rapid modernization. This mechanism may have played a role in Georgia, but its influence seems nevertheless secondary. The breakdown of the Soviet Union certainly led to the relatively unchecked intrusion of capitalist economy and to a wealth of western goods, fashion, and leisure options. However, the severe economic crisis prohibited most people from engaging in the consumption of such goods in the 1990s. Large scale modernization only ensued following the so-called Rose Revolution in 2003, when Georgia was governed

by President Saakashvili and a team of young Europhile ministers. In the first years after assuming power, this new administration aggressively and in many ways successfully modernized the country (Rinnert, 2012). These changes created high economic growth rates from 2003 to 2008 which were very well received both domestically and internationally, Georgia being ranked as one of the top reformers in the 2000s by the World Bank. Increasing GDP per capita led to increasing secular leisure options that became a competition for religious lifestyles (e.g., establishing annual Rock festivals, Tbilisi becoming one of the centers of techno and club music in Eastern Europe). Increasing religious pluralism and secular pluralism (e.g., the higher visibility of the LGBTQ community) led to a questioning of religiously legitimated traditional lifestyles. At the same time, modernization and its effects were very unevenly distributed, with about half of the population living in rural areas and engaged in subsistence agriculture. Western goods, values and lifestyles created some backlash and were especially strongly criticized by the GOC (Kekelia, 2012). While (too) rapid modernization thus may have been an additional factor strengthening the religious revival, it was certainly not the most important factor, since the upswing started around 1985, while significant modernization and the resulting backlash only happened in the 2000s.

6.4 | Migration

A final mechanism concerns migration. From 1989 to 2014, the population of Georgia decreased from 5.4 million to 3.7 million because of out-migration and low fertility (Hakkert, 2017). Such an emigration might have influenced the religious upswing if secular individuals had a higher probability of emigrating than religious individuals. This in turn would have been the case if the type of individuals who were more secular at the time (older, rural, and less educated) had a higher probability of emigrating, or if, alternatively, religious individuals had been persecuted and therefore emigrated. However, the data on emigration does not support any of these conjectures. Individuals in the 1990s did not emigrate for religious reasons, but to seek employment. They were often younger and slightly more educated than the general population (recall that at the time, younger and higher educated individuals had a higher probability of being religious) (Hakkert, 2017; Hofmann, 2015). They were not on average more Europhile (and thus more secular) and often did not go to western Europe or the US, but mainly to Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Greece which are geographically and culturally closer to Georgia.

7 | CONCLUSION

With this study we have attempted to provide answers to the following three questions. (1) When did the Georgian religious revival happen, and what form did it take? (2) Was it created through an impact on the whole society (period effect) or through cohort replacement (cohort effect)? (3) What mechanisms have led to the revival and are these mechanisms compatible with secularization theory?

Regarding the timing and the form, we have shown that the Georgian religious revival started already before the breakdown of the Soviet Union but had its main thrust between 1985 and 2010. The religious upswing was striking and showed in all indicators we observed: the number of churches in operation, affiliation, perceived importance of religion, and Church attendance. It was the strongest religious upswing of all post-soviet Orthodox countries, but it was only transitory and ended around 2014. The reason for this seems to be that Georgia is nevertheless on a general modernization path with its well-known modernization–secularization mechanisms.

As to the cohort-period question, we have shown that the revival combined a relatively strong period effect and a weak cohort effect. As a result of a strong societal crisis, the whole society was “pushed up” in its religiosity (period effect). At the same time, younger cohorts became typically more religious than older ones, since they were more affected by the societal crisis (cohort effect). However, this cohort mechanism could only have a limited effect since the upswing took place in the short time span of 25 years.

The third question pertains to the underlying factors that led to the revival of the GOC. We have argued that a major catalyst for this revival was a simultaneous occurrence of a severe societal and economic crisis and a weak state, which enabled the Church to assume a central role in providing a sense of identity for individuals and legitimacy for the government. The Perestroika reforms and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in an economic crisis for Georgia, which was further exacerbated by a looming threat from a much stronger neighbor, Russia, that questioned the country's territorial integrity. The weak state was unable to meet the basic needs of its citizens, leading to widespread insecurity and anxiety. In this context, the GOC emerged as the only functioning and stable institution. It prospered because its religious nationalism provided security and identity for individuals as well as legitimation for the successive governments. Luckily for the Church, its leader patriarch Ilia II was both intelligent and charismatic and could be stylized to a nation's saint and spiritual leader.

A comparison of Georgia with other post-socialist Orthodox countries reveals that Georgia stands out in terms of its magnitude of societal and economic crisis, measured by the relative decline in GDP per capita, and the intensity of its religious revival. The key factor was certainly that the societal and economic crisis in Georgia was more profound than in all comparable countries. While the societal and economic crisis in Georgia was more severe than in other comparable countries, it does not seem to have been a sufficient cause for the religious revival. Other countries, such as Ukraine and Armenia, experienced significant economic turmoil, yet their religious revivals were less pronounced. We argue that the unique combination of an exceptional economic crisis and the presence of a well-organized Church, led by the charismatic Patriarch Ilia II, played a crucial role in explaining the religious revival in Georgia. The Church effectively filled the identity and legitimacy needs for both the people and the state.

Simultaneously, we have engaged in discussions and partially dismissed alternative explanations for the Georgian Revival. The removal of state repression was not the primary factor behind the revival, although it was a necessary condition that did occur in Georgia. It is important to note that this also took place in other post-Soviet countries, yet the revival was much smaller in comparison. Additionally, the religious revival in Georgia was not primarily instigated by state financing of the GOC. Although state financing did occur, it occurred at a later stage of the revival and may have only served to reinforce it, rather than initiate it. Another mechanism that can be ruled out is "excessive modernization", as significant modernization policies were not implemented until well after the revival had already commenced. Finally, the revival was not caused by the substantial emigration that occurred in the 1990s, as there is no evidence in the data to suggest that the non-religious population was the main group that emigrated.

Pointing to these mechanisms, we have shown that the religious revival in Georgia is not a counterexample to secularization theory, since it can be satisfactorily explained with some of the mechanisms proposed for transitory religious revivals. The most recent data also seem to confirm that the upswing was transitory, thus giving additional credibility to the explanation in a secularization framework.

We acknowledge that we cannot make strong causal claims regarding the link between the societal crisis and state weakness and the revival, and neither can we measure the strength of the causal effect. To do so would have required a specific causal research design requiring very special conditions that are not always given (e.g., using difference-in-differences, regression discontinuity designs, etc). (Angrist and Pischke, 2009). We therefore cannot rule out that other, unobserved variables could have created the revival. We nevertheless argue that our account is highly likely. The societal crisis and state weakness happen exactly at the time when the main religious upswing starts; both the societal crisis and the religious upswing are much higher in Georgia than in comparable post-soviet Orthodox countries, and the religious upswing is demonstrably a period effect impacting the overall society as one would expect if a general crisis was the cause. Other possible mechanisms—state funding, emigration, a modernization-shock—could be excluded as possible causes. One question one might ask is why there is not more of a lag between the economic crisis and the onset of the religious upswing. We believe based on the historical record that nationalist and religious actors had already prepared the ideological ground for the upswing in the late 70s and early 80s. This is, in our view, why the crisis had an almost immediate religious effect.

Our study contributes to the literature in three ways. We give the first comprehensive and in-depth account of the Georgian religious revival with historical and longitudinal data. We show that the Georgian case can be

accommodated by an extended secularization theory, thus adding to the understanding of the applicability of secularization theory in general. Finally, we show methodologically how to analyze a single case of a religious revival with a combination of case study methodology, the Firebaugh method of period-cohort analysis, and interrupted time-series analysis.

Following Lakatos (1978), research programs advance by showing that they are able to accommodate even seemingly contradictory evidence. We have here shown that the Georgian case can be accounted for in a secularization framework. We welcome studies that seek to investigate other religious revivals in a similar fashion.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>. There is an additional replication package with all R scripts and additional data at the OSF page of Jörg Stolz.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Note that a prolonged societal crisis could be seen as a form of de-modernization (less differentiation, less longevity, less technological advancement, less education, etc.) and would therefore lead us to expect a religious revival already by sticking only to the core assumptions of secularization theory.
- ² WVS (2015). Inglehart, R., C. Haerper, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin and B. Puranen et al. (eds.). 2014. World Values Survey: All Rounds - Country-Pooled Datafile Version: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>. Madrid: JD Systems Institute.
- ³ EVS (2021): EVS Trend File 1981–2017. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA7503 Data file Version 2.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13736> Accessed 11.7.2022.
- ⁴ Caucasus Research Resource Centers. "Caucasus Barometer". Accessed 11.7.2022. <http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/>
- ⁵ Patriarchate's Capital (2019): <http://sapatriarqoskapitali.documenti.ge> Accessed 11.6.2021.
- ⁶ Individual weights were only available for the EVS 2008 dataset. Including or excluding them did not change the results of the analysis in a substantial way.
- ⁷ Cohort effects and period effects necessarily lead to social change, but life-cycle effects do not. For example, a strong life-cycle effect making individuals more religious over time will ceteris paribus lead to no aggregate change in overall religiosity, since young individuals will again start out at a low level of religiosity (Voas & Doebler, 2011).
- ⁸ Poll by the International Centre on Conflicts and Negotiation (2008) and survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Pew Research Center (2013) (cited according to Köksal (2019). Compare also to Gugushvili et al. (2017).

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