

## Canonization, Obedience, and Defiance: Strategies for Survival of the Orthodox Communities in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia

By Kimitaka Matsuzato, Hokkaido

### Abstract

Against a background in which the Russian Orthodox Church refuses to support “schismatics,” the churches of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia have taken different approaches in establishing themselves in the Orthodox community. The Transnistrian Orthodox community today enjoys canonical status in the unrecognized state of Transnistria because the Transnistrian conflict was a conflict within the Russian Orthodox Church and its Chisinau-Moldovan Metropolitanate. Abkhazia’s church leaders initially pursued a path of “obedience,” but in 2009 switched instead to “defiance” but nevertheless seek to maintain ties with both the official Russian and Georgian churches. The South Ossetian church has, by contrast, pursued a more aggressive strategy in setting up an independent church and seeking support for an official status.

### Orthodox Politics

Will states continue to be the main actors in twenty-first century geopolitics? Will military and economic resources continue to be the main factors? Or will transnational actors adept in epistemological crafting hold sway on the international scene? The Black Sea rim’s two decades of experience after the Cold War supports the latter scenario, but this does not release us from substantially the same question: Is the Black Sea rim a harbinger of broader changes to come or an anomaly in twenty-first century world politics? Leaving the answer to this question to the future, let us examine a fascinating case in which transnational epistemological crafting plays a decisive role—Orthodox politics in and around the unrecognized states in the Black Sea rim. This issue has additional relevance because existing studies regard the politics surrounding unrecognized states as a typical interstate phenomenon and interpret them in a bipolar scheme of a new cold war between the trans-Atlantic and pro-Russian forces. This study is an attempt to “localize geopolitics” following the work of Gerard Toal.

A remarkable feature of the unrecognized states in the post-Soviet territory is that they are located between the jurisdictions of local (*pomestnye*) Orthodox churches. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are located between the jurisdictions of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Orthodox Church of Georgia (OCG). The field of competition between the ROC and the Romanian Orthodox Church (RomOC) has been the right bank of the Nistru River, or Bessarabia, rather than the left bank, or Transnistria. Nevertheless, competition between the two churches in Bessarabia cannot but affect the religious situation in Transnistria.

### A Long History

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the ROC expanded its religious jurisdiction by incorporating

Georgia and Bessarabia immediately after the Russian Empire conquered the Kartli-Kakheti Principality (eastern Georgia) and Bessarabia. The incorporation of eastern Georgia was particularly valuable for the ROC, because the Georgian Church was not only apostolic, but also one of the earliest autocephalous churches in the world. In contrast, Prince Vladimir’s conversion in the tenth century, as the beginning of Russian Orthodox history, implies that the ROC has a low status in the Orthodox world. Emphasizing the apostolic features of the Georgian Church (now incorporated into the ROC), the ROC tried to raise its own prestige. Therefore, the ROC gave Tbilisi the high status of exarchate, which even Kazan and Kiev, though already members of the empire for a long time, did not have.

The present ROC does not seem to intend to repeat this expansionist policy. Even after the Russian government recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states after the war in August 2008, the ROC, to the chagrin of Ossetian and Abkhazian Orthodox leaders, repeated its official view that South Ossetia and Abkhazia belong to the canonical territory of the OCG. The official Orthodox world is composed of fifteen local churches, which share the rule of mutual nonintervention, according to which they should never assist schismatics within other Orthodox churches. If the ROC incorporates the Orthodox congregations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia into its jurisdiction, it will lose the legitimacy to criticize what it calls “violations of canonical law” in several countries, including the Kiev Patriarchate (an unrecognized, though large, church that separated from the ROC in 1991–92) in Ukraine, the RomOC in Moldova, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (EPC) in Estonia. Moreover, the OCG might possibly take revenge on the ROC by recognizing the Kiev Patriarchate.

### Differentiation among Three Strategies

After the civil wars at the beginning of the 1990s, Orthodox congregations in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia pursued differing strategies for their survival and recognition. In 1988, the ROC decided to raise the status of its Moldovan bishopric to the **Chisinau-Moldovan Metropolitan See** (not to be confused with the Bessarabian Metropolitanate of the RomOC, reestablished in 1992) to prevent its pro-Romanian tendencies. This newly-formed metropolitanate's priests serving on the Left Bank (Transnistria) were predominantly pro-Moldovan (pan-Romanian) despite their belonging to the ROC. During the Transnistrian conflict in 1992, they even refused religious services to "separatist" victims (volunteers and Cossacks), accusing them of being the same as bandits. The bereaved had to bring the bodies to Odessa for their funerals. Offended by this attitude, some Transnistrian Christians petitioned the Moscow patriarch to set up an independent diocese directly subordinated to him (bypassing the Chisinau-Moldovan Metropolitanate). Despite these unpleasant memories, when the Moscow Patriarchate introduced a vicariate in Transnistria in 1995, this vicariate agreed to be subordinated to the **Chisinau-Moldovan Metropolitanate**. In 1997, this vicariate developed into a full-fledged diocese. Thus, the Transnistrian Orthodox community today enjoys canonical status in the unrecognized state of Transnistria. This strategy, which I call "canonization," was possible because the Transnistrian conflict was a conflict within the same ROC and the same Chisinau-Moldovan Metropolitanate. This solution barely seems applicable to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where local clerics are not ready to accept the OCG's supervision at all, but continue to regard Ilia II, the Georgian patriarch-catholicos, as a major provocateur of Georgian nationalism.

In the Russian Empire, the ROC placed Abkhazia under the jurisdiction of the Georgian exarchate, as noted above. In the 1880s, the ROC introduced the Sukhum Diocese to separate Abkhazia from the Imeretian (western Georgian) Diocese and thus to limit the Georgian clergy's influence on the Abkhazians. After the February Revolution in 1917, the Georgian Church unilaterally declared that it would resume the autocephaly that it had enjoyed before 1811 and subordinated Abkhazia to its jurisdiction during the Menshevik occupation of Abkhazia. The ROC did not recognize the OCG's independence, and pro-Russian parishes continued to exist in Abkhazia. In 1943, Stalin forced the ROC to recognize the OCG and Abkhazia's subordination to the OCG. During almost the whole period of this subordination, the OCG ordained no Abkhazian priests to serve the Abkhazians. After Perestroika started, Cathol-

icos Ilia II started negotiations with the EPC, which in 1990 recognized that the OCG had been continually autocephalous since the fifth century.

During the same Perestroika, religious contradiction between the Georgians and Abkhazians intensified because the OCG began to use the Sukhum-Abkhazian Diocese as a bastion of Georgianism in Abkhazia. On the other hand, Ilia II needed to show goodwill to the Abkhazians and ordained Vissarion (Apliaa) as the first ethnic Abkhazian deacon in 1989 and, a year later, as priest. At that time, Vissarion was already more than forty years old. He is a unique person; in his youth, he was an outlaw and was even jailed repeatedly. During the civil war, the Abkhazian Church split. Even today, OCG's Sukhumi Diocese continues its virtual existence in exile in Tbilisi, while Vissarion's group established a "Sukhum-Abkhazian Diocese" after the war. Vissarion pursued a strategy of modesty and "obedience," carefully avoiding causing problems in the official Orthodox world. For example, after the ROC rejected the incorporation of Abkhazia into its jurisdiction, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA), competing with the ROC in the territories of the former Soviet Union, proposed that Abkhazian Orthodox leaders be included in the ROCA. In contrast to his South Ossetian colleagues, Vissarion refused this proposal. This strategy of "obedience" helped the Abkhazian Church, in contrast to the South Ossetian Church, to preserve more or less normal relations with both the ROC and the OCG, but the other side of the same coin is its uncertain canonical status without even a self-proclaimed bishop.

If the Georgian Church (both the ROC's exarchate during the tsarist period and the OCG during the Soviet period) contributed to the Abkhazians' spiritual life to some extent, there had been no church in the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast in the Georgian SSR. During Perestroika, a church located in Nikozy, which is near South Ossetia's capital Tskhinval, but nevertheless in Georgia proper (outside the South Ossetian autonomy), functioned to satisfy the spiritual needs of ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia. Today, Nikozy is the site of the virtual OCG bishopric formally responsible for the "Tskhinval region" (South Ossetia). The OCG's neglect of the Ossetians provides a powerful reason for South Ossetian clerics to argue that the OCG has no right to claim jurisdiction over South Ossetia. According to them, the OCG regarded the South Ossetians as "helpless, wild Pagans," and did not build even a chapel as long as South Ossetia was an obedient constituent of the Georgian SSR. Once South Ossetia began to seek independence, the OCG loudly reaffirmed its canonical authority over South Ossetia.

In contrast to the aged and tactful Fr Vissarion in Abkhazia, the South Ossetian Orthodox revival has been initiated by Aleksandr Pukhate (with his monk's name of Georgi), born in 1973 and having finished higher education at the South Ossetian Pedagogic Institute after the civil war. The enthusiastic Pukhate pursued, first of all, gaining the appearance of a full-fledged church, which is capable of baptizing, practicing the sacraments, and independently ordaining priests. As a result, the South Ossetian Orthodox community broke out of the confines of official Orthodoxy and roamed in quest of a patron who was ready to give it the appearance of having canonical status. The South Ossetians were inevitably tossed about in a great realignment in the Orthodox world after 2001, caused by the reconciliation of the ROC and the ROCA. This reconciliation split the ROCA and orphaned the South Ossetian congregation, which in turn changed affiliation from the ROCA to the Holy Synod in Resistance, one of the Greek Old Calendarist factions, in 2003. Currently, the South Ossetian Orthodox community identifies itself as being "Alan Diocese," a prestigious bishopric in the medieval Caucasus. The Holy Synod consecrated Pukhate as "Bishop of Alania," when he was as young as thirty-two years old.

### **The Abkhazian Congregation's Conversion to a Strategy of "Defiance"**

Despite their painful strategy of "obedience," Abkhazian clerics enjoyed neither compassion nor assistance from the official Orthodox world. Due to the absence of a legitimate bishop and hierarchy, the Abkhazian clergy suffers from a lack of discipline. Each ordainment of a priest requires tremendous tact and diplomacy, often uselessly expended, to evade the OCG's accusations, with nervous tension rising in the process. To the young clerics of Abkhazia, educated in Zagorsk, Thessalonica, and other foreign Orthodox centers during the 1990s, Vissarion's leadership appeared excessively appeasing to the OCG. The Abkhazian clergy split in 2005–07 between Vissarion's old guards and young reformers. Vissarion won out in this struggle, while the leader of the young reformers, Fr Dorofei (Dbar), decided to leave Abkhazia for Thessalonica "to complete his doctoral dissertation."

After this victory, Vissarion took the initiative of guiding the Abkhazian Orthodox community from

an "obedience" to a "defiance" strategy. On September 15, 2009, an episcopal meeting of the Sukhum-Abkhazian Diocese unanimously adopted a resolution that terminated its existence as part of the OCG and instead declared the creation of the "Pitsunda-Sukhum Diocese of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church" and to ask the local Orthodox churches, particularly the ROC, for help in resuming the Abkhazian autocephaly that existed until 1795.

Here, we need to take a tour of the religious history. In the ninth-tenth century, the Byzantine Empire strengthened its influence in the North Caucasus to build a defense line to prevent the Nomads migrating from the Central Eurasian Steppe from flowing into the heartland of the empire. For this purpose, the EPC Christianized the Abazgians and Alans (whom the present Abkhazians and Ossetians believe to be their respective ancestors). The EPC recognized the Pitsunda Catholicos in Abkhazia, independent from the Mtskheta Catholicos in eastern Georgia under the Antioch Patriarchate's influence. Thus, in the territory of the future Georgian SSR, two catholicos coexisted until the demise of the Pitsunda Catholicos in 1795. Likewise, Ecumenical Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos (patriarch in 901–906 and 912–925) founded the Alan Diocese, which would develop into a metropolitanate, prestigious enough to be invited to the Constance Council (1414–15) as a representative of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Tamerlane's (Timur's) invasion of the Caucasus resulted in a general decline of Christianity in this region, and the Alan Eparchy met its demise in the sixteenth century. The South Ossetian and Abkhazian Orthodox communities argue that they reestablished this historical bishopric and this catholicos.

Although sharing a logic of defiance to legitimize their congregations by reference to historical churches, the Abkhazians are more modest than the South Ossetians because, while the South Ossetians unilaterally declared the rebirth of the Alan Diocese, the Abkhazians are asking for help to reestablish the Pitsunda Catholicos. While the South Ossetians did not care about the canonicity of their possible patron, the Abkhazians addressed their request only to official Orthodox churches, including the OCG.

#### *About the Author:*

Kimitaka Matsuzato is a professor at Hokkaido University.