

South Ossetia and the Orthodox World:

Official Churches, the Greek Old Calendarist Movement, and the So-called Alan Diocese

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A remarkable feature of the unrecognized states in the post-Soviet territory is that they are located between jurisdictions of local (*pomestnye*) Orthodox churches. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are located between the jurisdictions of the Russian and Georgian Orthodox Churches, while Transnistria is situated between the Russian and Romanian Orthodox Churches. It is true that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) does not seem to intend to repeat what it had done in regard to Georgia and Bessarabia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At that time, the ROC expanded its religious jurisdiction by incorporating Georgia and Bessarabia immediately after the changes to the secular borders, that is, the Russian Empire's conquest of the Kartri-Kakheti Principdom and Bessarabia. In contrast, the present ROC, to the chagrin of Ossetian and Abkhazian Orthodox believers, repeatedly recognizes that Abkhazia and South Ossetia belong to the canonic territory of the Orthodox Church of Georgia (OCG). The ROC repeated this position even after the war in August 2008, as a result of which the Russian secular government recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This cautiousness is reasonable because, if the ROC incorporates the Abkhazian and South Ossetian Orthodox communities into its jurisdiction, it will lose the legitimacy to criticize what it calls "violations of canonic law" by the Kyivan Patriarchate in Ukraine, by the Romanian Orthodox Church (RomOC) in Moldova, and by the Constantinople Patriarchate in Estonia. Nevertheless, as long as the clerics in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not ready to accept the OCG's supervision (*dukhovnoe kormlenie* or "spiritual feeding") at all and continue to regard Ilia II, the Georgian patriarch-catholicos, as a main provocateur of Georgian nationalism and military aggression on their territories, the ROC cannot but be involved in Abkhazian and South Ossetian problems.

The field of competition between the ROC and the RomOC has been the right bank of the Nistru River, Bessarabia, rather than the left bank, Transnistria. It is true that the Bessarabian Metropolitanate of the RomOC has a "Diocese of Dubăsari and Entire (*sic*) Transnistria" and thus claims jurisdiction over not only Bessarabia, but also Transnistria. Yet this diocese has been a virtual organization registered in Chisinau. Nevertheless, harsh competition between the ROC and the RomOC in Bessarabia cannot but affect the religious situation in Transnistria.

During the almost two decades after the civil wars at the beginning of the 1990s, Orthodox communities in these territories pursued differing strategies for their survival and recognition. During the Transnistrian conflict, most priests in Transnistria behaved in a quite pro-Moldovan (meaning pan-Romanian) manner and even refused to practice funeral services for the victims of the Moldovan aggression. Enraged Transnistrian lay believers requested the Moscow Patriarch, Alexi II, to subordinate Transnistria directly to him, bypassing the Chisinau-Moldovan Metropolitanate of the ROC.¹ However, after three years, in 1995,

¹ Do not confuse this metropolitanate with the Bessarabian Metropolitanate of the RomOC, though both are located in Chisinau.

the Transnistrian Orthodox community agreed to be subordinated to the Chisinau-Moldovan Metropolitanate when the Moscow Patriarchate introduced a vicarship in Transnistria, overcoming resentment from the civil war.² Thus, the Transnistrian Orthodox community today enjoys a canonic status in the unrecognized state of Transnistria. I call Transnistria's strategy "canonization." In Abkhazia after the civil war, Fr Vissarion (Apliaa), who belongs to the generation consecrated and raised by Ilia II, initiated the establishment of an "Abkhazian diocese" and pursued a modest strategy, carefully avoiding causing problems in the official Orthodox world composed of the fifteen local churches. As a result, the Abkhazian Orthodox community continues to suffer from its uncertain canonic status, lacking even the authority to consecrate priests. Reportedly, priests and monks of the younger generation, consecrated uncanonically by the ROC, criticize Vissarion for his modest, allegedly pro-Georgian strategy (Vnov' obostrilsya 2006). Vissarion's strategy might be called "obedience."

The ROC's Georgian exarchate in imperial Russia and the OCG, which unilaterally declared its autocephaly in 1917, more or less contributed to the "spiritual feeding" of the Abkhazians (even this contribution was motivated by its desire to Georgianize them), which cannot be said for the South Ossetians. The South Ossetians argue that the Georgians regarded them as "helpless, wild Pagans" or "pathologic Pagans."³ There was no church in the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast. 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 eparchy formally responsible for the "Tskhinval region," similar to the RomOC's Dubāsari and Entire Transnistria Diocese.

The negligence of the OCG, described above, provides a good reason for the South Ossetian clerics to argue that the OCG has no right to claim jurisdiction over South Ossetia. According to them, the OCG did not build even a chapel as long as South Ossetia was an obedient constituent of the Georgian SSR, but once South Ossetia began to seek independence, the OCG began to reaffirm loudly its canonic authority over South Ossetia (Dzhioev 2008).

In contrast to the aged and modest Vissarion in Abkhazia, South Ossetian Orthodox revival has been initiated by Aleksandr Pukhate, born in 1973. He finished higher education at the South Ossetian Pedagogic Institute after the civil war. Currently, he is "Bishop of Alania," with his monk's name of Georgi, under the Holy Synod in Resistance, one of the Greek Old Calendarist factions. Nationally, Pukhate is Ossetian from his father's and Jewish from his mother's side. The enthusiastic Pukhate pursued, first of all, gaining the appearance of a full-fledged church, which is capable of baptizing, practicing sacraments, and consecrating priests independently. As a result, the South Ossetian Orthodox community broke out of the borders of official Orthodoxy, composed of the fifteen local churches. These churches share the rule of mutual non-intervention, according to which they should never assist schismatics of other Orthodox churches. The

² In 1997, this vicarship developed into a full-fledged diocese.

³ Kratkaya 2008; my interview with Sofiya Khubaeva, head of the Department for Contacts with Religious Organizations of the South Ossetian government on March 23, 2009, Tskhinval.

South Ossetian Orthodox community roamed in quest of a patron who was ready to give it the appearance of canonic status, and changed its affiliation from the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (hereafter ROCA) to the Holy Synod in Resistance in 2003. In this journey of quest, the South Ossetian Orthodox community was inevitably tossed about in a great realignment in the Orthodox world after 2001, caused by the reconciliation of the ROC and ROCA.

I have already described Transnistria's "canonization" and Abkhazia's "obedience" in another paper (Matsuzato 2009), so this paper focuses on South Ossetia's strategy that can be called "defiance." One may easily understand why the ROC is concerned about what is happening in Ukraine, Moldova, and Estonia, but it is not easy to explain why the mouse (the South Ossetian Orthodox community) can "defy" the elephant (the ROC). In my view, a key to answering this query is the peculiar structure of the Orthodox world. To explicate this, I conducted fieldwork in Tskhinval, Vladikavkaz, Stavropol, Moscow, and Athens. Comparing the various narratives and stories of clerics scattered in this vast territory, this essay elucidates the existence of a semiospace (arena for discussion), in which the South Ossetians find abundant opportunities for maneuver.

We have an excellent essay by Alexej Klutschewsky on the history of the Orthodox community in post-Socialist South Ossetia. Klutschewsky also overviews the ROCA, the Holy Synod in Resistance, and other non-official Orthodox groups that have affected the religious situation in South Ossetia (2008). Klutschewsky's essay spares us the need to describe significant portions of the history and allows us to concentrate instead on the analysis of stories and narratives provided by clerics.

The Greek Old Calendarist Movement

In 1920, the Patriarchate of Constantinople issued the "Encyclical of 1920," which the Old Calendarists would later qualify as the first promulgation of an "ecumenical ecclesiology of dialogue and union based on ecumenical precepts" (Chrysostomos 1994, p. 51). Bishop Ambrose of the Holy Synod in Resistance explains the motivation of the Constantinople Patriarchate towards ecumenism by its desire to recover Istanbul as Greek territory, exploiting the occupation of Constantinople by the Entente powers that continued from 1918 to 1922.⁴ In 1924, the Greek Church, being an Exarchate of the Constantinople Patriarchate, adopted the Gregorian Calendar as its festal calendar, thus abandoning the traditional Julian Calendar. This move was followed by the Romanian and Bulgarian Orthodox Churches, as well as by the patriarchates of Antioch and Alexandria, while the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches and the Jerusalem Patriarchate continued to use the Julian Calendar. The change of the festal calendar exhausted Greek society, which, even without it, was disturbed by the massive immigration of Ottoman Greeks and confrontation between the monarchists and republicans.⁵

⁴ My interview with Bishop Ambrose of Methone, the Holy Synod in Resistance, on May 1, 2009, Athens.

⁵ My interview with Ambrose.

Monks from Mount Athos, which continued to use the Julian Calendar, initiated the Old Calendarist movement in Greece, which attracted bishops and priests, too. Before long, they began to theorize their position, arguing that what they stood against was not just the Gregorian Calendar but the ecumenist tendencies of the Constantinople Patriarchate and the official Orthodox world. By 1934, the Old Calendarists had organized over eight hundred communities throughout Greece (Ambrose 1994, p. 21). During the same 1930s, however, the Old Calendarist movement split around the issue of whether the Greek State Church was still holding grace and mysteries. The radical wing, the so-called Matthewites, denied this. The differences in the understanding of the official state church continue to be a stumbling block hindering the Greek Old Calendarists' unification. There are four groups of Old Calendarists in Greece today. The Greek government, supporting the state church, continued to suppress the Old Calendarists until the 1950s. Having realized that this policy only destabilized the political situation of the country, the Greece government not only tolerated the Old Calendarists, but also recognized their sacraments (for example, marriage) as being effective in civil law, which is quite important under the state-church system. The Old Calendarist movement also emerged in Romania and Bulgaria, where the calendar reform took place.

In the 1970s, the Greek Old Calendarist movement significantly discredited itself by endless splitting and mutual accusations. For example, in 1976, they lost the traditional communion with the ROCA that they had had since 1934.⁶ The situation began to change in 1985, when Cyprian, abbot of the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina in Fili, Attika (20 km from Athens),⁷ founded the Holy Synod in Resistance. Cyprian consolidated a moderate ecclesiology that argues for the validity of the liturgies and mysteries performed by the Greek State Church and that the Old Calendarists only "walled" themselves in against the official state church to resist ecumenism and that, therefore, their movement is by no means a schism. Cyprian's Holy Synod established communion with the Old Calendarists in Romania and Bulgaria, resumed communion with the ROCA (lost in 1976), and, what is perhaps most important, began to attract sympathizers in official Orthodoxy, such as the Jerusalem Patriarch (Diodoros 1994, pp. 132-134) and clerics of the ROC⁸ and the Serbian OC.

Since the State Church of Greece does not have communion with the Holy Synod under Cyprian, the South Ossetian clerics' assertion that the Cyprianists are an "inseparable part of the Greece Church" (Dzhioev

⁶ This communion was established when the ROCA helped the Greek Old Calendarists to overcome the deficit of bishops. According to the canon, three bishops are needed to consecrate new bishops. This means that if an Orthodox sect movement does not have three bishops (as was the case with the Greek Old Calendarists before 1934), it needs to seek assistance from another Orthodox sect to produce its leaders.

⁷ Cyprian himself started to build this monastery in 1961. At that time, he still belonged to the State Church of Greece, but under the influence of his spiritual father, Philotheos (Zervakos), a sympathizer of the Old Calendarist movement within the official church, Cyprian joined the Old Calendarist movement in 1969 (Metropolitan Cyprian, n/d).

⁸ My interview with Bishop Clement of Gardikion, the Holy Synod in Resistance, on May 3, 2009, Athens. I am grateful to Vassilios Gaitanis, professor of Philosophy and Orthodoxy of the University of Athens, who helped us to communicate as interpreter between English and Greek.

2008) is not correct. On the other hand, relations between the official State Church of Greece and the Cyprianists are much more complex than ROC leaders often construe. First, as already noted, the Greek state recognizes the sacraments conducted by the churches under the Holy Synod in Resistance as effective in civil law. Secondly, numerous bishops, clerics, and flocks, formally belonging to the state church, sympathize with the Old Calendarists and participate in authentic and traditionalist liturgies conducted by the Holy Synod in Resistance.⁹ It is strange that ROC leaders do not seem to know that the Cyprianists are pro-Russian by nature, because of their anti-ecumenism. They supported South Ossetia in the August war of 2008, when the whole mass media in the West (including Greece) were mobilized to support Saakashvili. A living example of the Cyprianists' pro-Russianness is Vassilios Gaitanis, professor of Philosophy and Orthodoxy of the University of Athens, who kindly guided me to the Sunday prayers of the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina in Fili. Professor Gaitanis wrote a dissertation on Dostoevsky's theology and is a hereditary fan of the Lada (an automobile produced by the Triatti Automobile Factory of Russia). He named his daughter Matrona after a Russian popular saint,¹⁰ and even desires that a Russian become the Patriarch of Constantinople to prevent the evils of ecumenism and dependence on Turkey, although this seems impossible under the existing composition of the Synod of the Constantinople Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad

The ROC has a long tradition of activities outside Russia—in China, Japan, Alaska, North America, and Western Europe. During the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the ROC lost connection with Orthodox churches operating in the territories ruled by the White Army. Therefore, on November 7, 1920, Patriarch Tikhon (Bellavin) issued Decree No. 362 to allow them to create provisional church administrations, led by the hierarch highest among the clerics there, in the territories severed from the Moscow Patriarchate. Responding to this decree, one of the highest hierarchs in the White territories, Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky), established the Highest Church Administration of South Russia, which would become the core of the ROCA (Maksimovich 1991, pp. 5-9).

Tikhon issued Decree No. 362 because of the administrative impossibility of integrating Russian Orthodox communities scattered in the Soviet-ruled and other territories into an entity, but this decree also provided “canonic” foundations for independent activities of the ROCA in the Russian Diaspora. The so-called Catacomb Church, or the Russian True Orthodox Church, in the Soviet Union (underground Orthodox

⁹ On May 3, 2009, I had the fortune to participate in Sunday prayer at the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina in Fili. The prayer continued for three hours, and then the flock was invited to a tea party in which Bishop Clement shared the hierarchs' recent experience of an Easter visit to Jerusalem. Further, male members of the flock were invited to the internal territory of the monastery to have lunch with a Bible recitation, which ended with Eucharistic distribution of bread with incense burnt (a ritual called “ipsoisis” or exaltation). Understandably, the flock spare no time to drive from Athens to Fili to partake in such an authentic religious experience, which the official church hardly provides.

¹⁰ On the biography of St. Matrona (1881-1952), see <http://vimen2006.narod.ru/Biografiea.html> (accessed August 11, 2009).

churches that resisted Sergianism; see below) also used this decree for their legitimization. Moreover, when one or another unofficial Orthodox sect, derived from the ROC, tried to establish a new church organization, they justified their attempt by this decree.

Since Tikhon's death (1925) until 1943, the Soviet authorities did not allow the ROC to convene a local Council to elect the next patriarch. As a counteraction against the Orthodox clerics' activities to convene a local Council to elect a patriarch (Kratkaya n/d), the Soviet authorities forced Metropolitan Sergii (Stragorodsky, 1867-1944), the then highest hierarch in the USSR, to issue a declaration in 1927 requesting the Orthodox believers in the USSR and in emigration to support the Soviet authorities. This declaration resulted in a schism not only between the ROC and the ROCA, but also within the ROC itself. A significant number of bishops and clerics did not support Sergii's declaration and named this collaborationism "Sergianism," denouncing it as anti-Christ heresy (see, for example, The Antichrist n/d). In other words, both the ROCA and the Catacomb Church consolidated their position in the struggle against Sergianism.

During the 1930-60s, the ROCA steadily strengthened communion with the Old Calendarist movements in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria. The Old Calendarist movements earnestly welcomed and actually benefited from this "latecomer" to the anti-ecumenist camp, because the ROCA had enormous organizational, financial, and human resources. During the last years of the Soviet Union, it appeared that Sergianism was fading into the past, and this is possibly why the ROCA tried to shift the target of its criticism from Sergianism to what it regarded as the ecumenism of the ROC.

Nevertheless, even after the collapse of the communist regime, the ROCA continued to regard the ROC as having been spoiled by Sergianism and ecumenism. The ROCA officially qualified Russia, Ukraine, and other countries under the jurisdiction of the ROC as "regions for missionary activities." Understandably, this policy made relations between the ROC and ROCA extremely tense. To realize these "missionary activities," the ROCA relied upon the Catacomb Church that had outlived communist rule in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. This reliance upon authoritative Catacomb clerics, such as Lazar' (Zhurbenko, 1931-2005), raised the ROCA's authority in these countries, but on the other hand, the ROCA incorporated into itself the source of its own future split. During the waning months of the Soviet Union, deviant clerics shifted from the ROC to the ROCA; they also brought problems, rather than benefits, to the ROCA.

During the 1990s, once communist atheism had departed, the ROCA became steadily conscious that its rigorous self-isolation from the official Orthodox world would damage its influence. The ROCA started endeavors to normalize relations with the official Orthodox churches, which it regarded as relatively immune from ecumenism: the Serbian Church that continues to use the Julian Calendar, the OCG that withdrew its membership from the World Council of Churches in 1998, and the ROC. During the epoch-making Higher Cleric Council (*Arkhieireiskii sobor*) held in New York on October 17-27, 2000, the first hierarch, Metropolitan Vitaly (Maksimenco), could not repeat his recent (August 1st) severe criticism of the ROC as "nothing but an uncanonic creation by the Soviet powers." In his report, Archpriest Viktor (Potapov) remarked that many ROCA believers were offended by the intolerance of "some leaders" of the ROCA towards other Orthodox churches and even regarded it as "thanklessness." This is why "many Orthodox believers in the world ceased to listen to the ROCA's voice. This deepens our isolation and weakens sound Orthodoxy in the world" (Zhuravsky 2001). Another speaker appreciated the canonization

by the ROC of the massacred emperor Nikolai II and his family and of ROC martyrs by Soviet repression. The “Social Concept” that the ROC had just before published also gained the praise of the ROCA, because it articulated that “God’s commandment to accomplish deeds to save people in any circumstance stands higher than requests for loyalty.” Hence, according to ROCA modernizers, the ROC had significantly overcome the evils of Sergianism and “no church can adopt such a declaration in any state” (Zhuravsky 2001).

During 2000-2001, the ROCA split around the issue of reconciliation with the ROC. Those who supported the reconciliation allied around the new first hierarch of the ROCA, Metropolitan Lavr (Laurus). The hardliners who regarded reconciliation as unprincipled surrender rallied around the former first hierarch Vitaly (Maksimenko) and Archbishop Lazar. But this group, the ROCA (V), split further into several groups. Generally, the main body of the ROCA in North America, Europe, and Oceania supported the reconciliation, while ROCA clerics serving in the former USSR were against the reconciliation, since it might deprive them of their *raison d’être*. On May 17, 2007, the ROCA under Lavr established communion with the ROC. Preserving ecclesiological independence, the ROCA was canonically incorporated into the ROC; in other words, it obtained its place in the official Orthodox world as an “inseparable self-governing part” of the ROC.¹¹

The reconciliation between the ROCA under Lavr and the ROC worsened the ROCA’s relations with the Holy Synod in Resistance (Greek Old Calendarists), which continued to criticize the ROC for ecumenism and Sergianism. Indirectly through the ROCA, the ROC proposed that the Old Calendarist groups in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria launch a similar dialogue with the official Orthodox churches in their own countries. Understandably, the Old Calendarists did not accept this advice, but began to criticize the ROCA for its appeasement of ecumenism. In December 2005, the Holy Synod in Resistance (Cyprian) liquidated communion with the ROCA. In 2007, it established new communion with one of the hardliners derived from the ROCA, Agafangel (Pashkovsky), bishop of Odessa and Crimea, and moreover helped him to consecrate bishops, without which Agafangel would not have been able to establish his own anti-ROC hierarchy (see fn. 6). Bishop of Alania Georgi (Pukhate), who had been promoted to this post, was the one of the bishops who attended this consecration.

The end of communion between the ROCA and the Holy Synod in Resistance was a remarkable diplomatic victory for the ROC. Fr Nikolai Balashov, in charge of inter-Orthodoxy relations in the Moscow Patriarchate and then secretary of the Commission for Dialogue with the ROCA, proud of the success of his job, said: “Because of the lack of will for unity of Orthodoxy on the part of Cyprian’s Synod, its split with the ROCA became inevitable” (Russkaya 2005).

South Ossetia’s Quest for the Appearance of Canonicity

¹¹ See the text of the Act of Canonic Communion, signed by Alexi II and Lavr at: www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/155920.html

In 1990, when Pukhate's group launched Orthodox activities, they did not intend to remain under the jurisdiction of the OCG at all. In other words, they were different from their more compromising Abkhazian comrades from the beginning. Fr Gedeon (Dokukin), who had directly before that become metropolitan of Stavropol and Baku,¹² was supportive of Pukhate. Georgian Catholicos Ilia II immediately wrote a letter of protest to the Constantinople ecumenical patriarch against the ROC's violation of the OCG's canonic territory, which further affected the ROC's attitude towards South Ossetia.¹³

In 1992, the ROC eventually declined to accept the South Ossetian Orthodox community into its jurisdiction, considering canonic principle and friendly relations with the OCG as more important than the South Ossetians' desire to be released from the Georgian clerics. As a result, Pukhate's group addressed the ROCA for help. The ROCA readily accepted Pukhate's group, possibly perceiving it to be analogous with the Catacomb Church, which the ROCA was actively using as organizational basis for its expansion into the post-Soviet territories. In 1993, immediately after the ROCA accepted the South Ossetian Orthodox community in its obedience, it consecrated Pukhate as deacon. Pukhate's antagonists would later refer to the baptisms and other sacraments that Pukhate had already been practicing before becoming deacon as evidence to question Pukhate's sincerity.¹⁴ In the hierarchy of the ROCA, Pukhate became a monk with the name of Georgi in 2000, and the South Ossetian Orthodox community gained the status of deanery (*blagochinnyi*) in September 2001.¹⁵

After the OCG withdrew from the World Council of Churches in 1998, some ROCA leaders tried to improve relations with the OCG, which they regarded as struggling to abandon ecumenism. The most serious obstacle in this attempt is the fact that the ROCA justified the independent South Ossetian Orthodox community by bestowing upon it the status of deanery. Thus, the ROCA began to regard the South Ossetian Orthodox community as a nuisance.

As already mentioned, during 2000-2001, the ROCA split around the issue of reconciliation with the ROC. One of the hierarchs who opposed the reconciliation was Benjamin (Lusarenko), bishop of the Black Sea region and Kuban, supervising South Ossetia. Discontented with the "uncanonic" activities of Lazar' and

¹² See his short biography (1929-2003) at *Interfax*, March 22, 2003 (<http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=archive&div=11843>). Since Orthodoxy was repressed and the number of churches diminished under the Soviet regime, the jurisdiction of the metropolitanate and diocese was unnaturally large. After the normalization of state-church relations, the Stavropol-Baku Metropolitanate "lost" the South Caucasus, Dagestan, and Kalmykia from its jurisdiction and shrank to the present Stavropol-Vladikavkaz Metropolitanate (my interview with Evgeny Bronsky, press secretary of the Stavropol-Vladikavkaz Eparchy, May 7, 2009, Stavropol).

¹³ My interview with Fr Georgi (Bestaev), priest of the Birth of St. Virgin Church of the Alan Branch (*Podvor'e*) of the ROC in Moscow, May 10, 2009, Moscow.

¹⁴ My interview with Fr Georgi (Bestaev).

¹⁵ The decree issued by Benjamin (Rusalenko), bishop of the Black Sea-Kuban Diocese of the ROCA on September 7/20, 2009, an archival document kindly provided by Fr Georgi (Dzhioev) of the Alan Diocese.

Benjamin,¹⁶ the South Ossetian Orthodox community tried to shift from the ROCA (V) to Metropolitan Lavr's dominant, pro-Russian group of the ROCA. However, the group pursuing reconciliation with the Moscow Patriarchate was, at the same time, cautious about offending the OCG, so this attempt failed.

Fr Georgi (Pukhate) and lay leaders of the South Ossetian Orthodox community wrote a letter to Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili, the Holy Synod in Resistance. In addition to the difficulties caused by the split of the ROCA, they faced challenges caused by the restitution of church properties in Georgia proper. In Georgia, church properties nationalized during the Soviet period were being returned to the OCG, which became interested in its former properties located in the South Ossetian territories, too. The letter explained the reasons that they chose the Holy Synod in Resistance to ask for help: its loyalty to authentic Orthodoxy and the Old Calendar and its resistance to innovationist tendencies and ecumenism. On the other hand, the letter praised the Holy Synod for its ecclesiological tolerance of other Orthodox churches and for immunity against "semi-sectarian extremism, unacceptable in our multinational Caucasus." The South Ossetians tried to attract the Greeks' interest by referring to Nikolai Mistik (852-925), patriarch of the Constantinople Ecumenical Church who laid the foundations of the Alan Diocese; they argued that by creating a new eparchial structure, the Holy Synod would recover historical justice. As Nikolai Mistik did a thousand years ago, the Holy Synod would give the "Alan people" (Ossetians) a national church under its jurisdiction.¹⁷ In the next section, we will examine to what extent this historical justification is convincing.

The hierarchs of Cyprian's "small synod"¹⁸ had serious discussions to decide whether to accept the South Ossetian Orthodox community into its obedience. The synod decided to do so because it found the South Ossetians' motivation to be "faith, not politics." Bishop Clement of Gardikion says that the Holy Synod often receives similar requests for help. For example, several years ago, a group of Orthodox believers in Croatia and Montenegro tried to create a church and asked the Holy Synod to accept them into its obedience. But in this case, the Synod rejected them because the motivation was political. In contrast, Fr Georgi (Pukhate)'s vigorous activities in the ROCA's obedience were impressive, which made the Holy Synod decide to become involved in the South Ossetian matter.¹⁹ This was a delicate decision because the

¹⁶ Letter from Fr. Georgi (Pukhate) to Cyprian, metropolitan of Oropos and Fili, the Holy Synod in Resistance, dated January 29, 2003, an archival document kindly provided by Fr Georgi (Dzhioev) of the Alan Diocese.

¹⁷ Letter from Fr. Georgi (Pukhate) and lay leaders of the South Ossetian Orthodox community to Cyprian ("Vysokochtimyi Preosvyashchennyi Vladyko Mitropolit Kiprian, dostopochtennye ottsy Svyashchennogo Sinoda Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi Protivostoyashchikh Gretsii"), dated March 5, 2003, an archival document kindly provided by Fr Georgi (Dzhioev).

¹⁸ The Holy Synod in Resistance holds a "plenary" synod meeting only once a year, but the small synod (practically the executive organ) is held twice a month. My interview with Bishop Ambrose.

¹⁹ Klutschewsky 2007, pp. 423-425; my interview with Bishop Clement of Gardikion.

Holy Synod already had its church operating in Georgia and its support for South Ossetia might result in repression of the believers who belonged to the church.²⁰

On February 20, 2003 (Old Style), Cyprian wrote a letter to Lavr, first hierarch of the ROCA, with which the Holy Synod still held communion, and conveyed his will to accept the South Ossetian Orthodox community temporarily.²¹ Perhaps to get rid of the nuisance, Metropolitan Lavr readily confirmed Cyprian's decision.²²

Fr Georgi (Pukhate) and the South Ossetian Orthodox community dizzily enjoyed promotion in the obedience of the Holy Synod in Resistance. In 2005, the South Ossetian Orthodox community was raised from a deanery to the "Alan Diocese," and the Cyprian's Synod consecrated thirty-two-year-old Georgi as bishop of this diocese. As bishop, Fr Georgi independently consecrated Uruzmag Dzhioev, director of the gymnasium, as deacon (he also received the name of Georgi).²³ Bishop Georgi has built extremely cooperative relations with South Ossetian secular authorities. In 2000, when the South Ossetian deanery was being established, the church concluded a concordat with the then president Lyudvig Chibirov.²⁴ This cooperation developed under the next president Edvard Kokoity. Bishop Georgi earnestly appealed to the South Ossetians to vote for Kokoity in the 2006 presidential elections.²⁵ In response, the protection of this unrecognized church by the secular state became much stronger than under the first president Chibirov.

Canonicity of the Alan Diocese

²⁰ My interview with Bishop Ambrose.

²¹ Letter from Cyprian to Lavr, dated February 20, 2003 (Old Style), an archival document kindly provided by Fr Georgi (Dzhioev).

²² Letter from Lavr to Cyprian, dated May 29/June 11, 2003, an archival document kindly provided by Fr Georgi (Dzhioev).

²³ Fr. Georgi (Uruzmag Dzhioev) has an interesting biography. He is a graduate from Moscow University, was minister of foreign affairs of South Ossetia during the war with Georgia (1990-92), and criticized the Dagomys (Sochi) Peace Agreement. He developed an Orthodox gymnasium to become an elite school even famous in Russia, and was a successful military commander in the conflict with Georgia in 2004.

²⁴ Letter from Fr. Georgi (Pukhate) and lay leaders of the South Ossetian Orthodox community to Cyprian (see above). Article 33 of the South Ossetian Constitution guarantees the privileged status of Orthodoxy and the Ossetian traditional religion (meaning paganism).

²⁵ Bozhe 2006. It is quite interesting how Bishop Georgi explains the spiritual situation of South Ossetia and Georgia in this appeal. "Unfortunately, in our troubled times, the destructive anti-Ossetian forces are trying to spoil naïve spirits and confusing them by flattery, luring inexperienced people toward a 'Western Heaven,' skillfully described in bright colors but, in fact, pretentious, pouring various temptations from outside, and internally cruelly cold. The unhappy Georgian people fell into this 'heaven,' following their 'blind leaders,' who indoctrinated them that the sun rises in the West."

Further, let us examine various narratives and stories around the Alan Diocese. We have four actor groups to examine: the South Ossetian Orthodox leaders,²⁶ the ROC,²⁷ the Holy Synod in Resistance,²⁸ and Fr Georgi (Bestaev), priest of the Birth of St. Virgin Church also called the Alan branch (*podvor'e*) of the ROC in Kitai Gorod of Moscow. Bestaev is South Ossetian by origin but a harsh opponent of Bishop Georgi (Pukhate).

The territorial division of the early Christian church had no ethnic connotations. The word “diocese” derives from the Roman Empire’s secular administrative division and focuses on only managerial convenience. There are different understandings of the decisions of the Council in Ephesus (431), which ensured the autocephaly of the Cyprus Church; this can be interpreted both as the principle of non-intervention in neighboring churches and as the proto-national principle of ecclesial formation (Matsuzato 2009; Turcescu 2003, p. 459). On the way to the Constantinople Ecumenical Church’s gradual split into national churches in the nineteenth century, there appeared the ethnocentric belief that Orthodox Christians should be divided into separate exarchates, based on ethnicity, but the Council of Constantinople in 1872 denounced this belief as “phyletism” or ethnophilism. It is true that Orthodoxy reveals a tendency where independent secular states would eventually have their own autocephalous churches, but in Orthodoxy, independence of a secular state from another state never turns into religious independence automatically. Romania needed forty-seven years after its independence until it obtained national autocephaly.

ROC leaders note Georgi Pukhate’s ethnophilist deviation, and in fact, the South Ossetians call their church a “national church” (*natsional'naya tserkov'*). ROC leaders emphasize that the independence of South Ossetia does not guarantee its religious separation from the OCG. Currently having only several priests, it will take a long time for South Ossetia to have a legitimate eparchy.²⁹

The South Ossetian Orthodox leaders do not attach significance to the ROC’s criticism that the Alan Diocese is not canonic. They argue that “if” their church is uncanonic, it is because the ROC continues to refuse to accept South Ossetia into its jurisdiction. If the ROC continues this policy, it has no right to criticize the Alan Diocese for its lack of canonicity. According to the South Ossetian religious leaders, the

²⁶ I interviewed three clerics of the Alan Eparchy and Sofiya Khubaeva, head of the Department for Contacts with Religious Organizations of the South Ossetian government.

²⁷ I interviewed Fr Vladimir, dean of the Orthodox churches of North Ossetia, Fr Timofei (Ostaev), priest of St. Georgi Cathedral in Vladikavkaz, Evgeny Bronsky, press secretary of the Stavropol-Vladikavkaz Eparchy of the ROC, and Fr Aleksandr (Nartov), secretary to Stavropol-Vladikavkaz archbishop Feofan (Ashurkov). Despite our friendship and mutual professional respect, Fr Nikolai (Balashov), secretary of inter-Orthodox relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, declined to talk with me on this “too-sensitive issue” (Balashov) of South Ossetian Orthodoxy, which perhaps limited the academic quality of this paper.

²⁸ I interviewed Bishop Ambrose of Methone, Bishop Clement of Gardikion, and Vassilios Gaitanis, professor of Philosophy and Orthodoxy of Athens University and a sympathizer of the Holy Synod.

²⁹ My interview with Evgeny Bronsky, press secretary of the Stavropol-Vladikavkaz Eparchy.

ROC and the ROCA accused each other of being uncanonic while their relations were bad, but they now recognize each other's canonicity.³⁰ Fr Georgi (Dzhioev) notes that the OCG became autocephalous from the ROC in a criminal way, even murdering representatives of the ROC, but when Stalin needed to mobilize the Georgians for the war with Germany, he forced the ROC to recognize the OCG (Dzhioev 2008). Serapion (Khripkov), a young monk (b. 1978) who shifted from the ROC to the Alan Diocese, provides the interesting theory that there are two kinds of schism: formal and canonic. The ROC's relations with the Kyivan Patriarchate are an example of canonic schism, but the Alan Eparchy's relations with the ROC only represent a formal schism. There should be no problem between the two churches when the problem of the OCG is resolved. Serapion adds that, historically, the birth of a new autocephaly was often a painful process and the OCG was no exception.³¹

Giving verbal respect to the concept of canonicity, it is obvious that the South Ossetian religious leaders have a realist or even cynical understanding of canonicity in the Orthodox world; they are aware that this concept has been used in a quite instrumental and utilitarian manner.

This utilitarian understanding by the South Ossetian religious leaders of canonicity is strangely compatible with their megalomaniac historical justification of their diocese as the successor of the medieval Alan Metropolitanate. As mentioned in the previous section, they flattered Metropolitan Cyprian by comparing him to Nikolai Mistik, a great patriarch in the tenth century and the founder of the Alan Diocese. The Alan Diocese, which existed from the tenth to the sixteenth century, was very prestigious in the Caucasus. This eparchy even had the status of metropolitanate for a while, and its prestige is shown by the fact that an Alan bishop was one of the Eastern Christian bishops invited to the Council of Constance in 1414-18. As a result of the general decline of Christianity in the Caucasus, the Alan Diocese ceased to exist in the sixteenth century. Ossetian primordialist historiography regards this diocese as ethnically Ossetian. The South Ossetians argue that they renewed this national diocese with the help of the Greeks (the Holy Synod in Resistance), exactly as Nikolai Mistik laid the rudiments of the Alan Diocese, distinguished from the Mtskheta (Georgian) and Syrian Christian tradition.³²

According to this logic, however, Abkhazian clerics would also have full right to argue that what they established after the war with Georgia in 1992-93 was a renewal of the Pitsunda-Imeretian Diocese, whose demise came at the end of the seventeenth century. Moreover, any Orthodox sect would enjoy abundant opportunities to remove its headquarters to a city that used to have a prestigious ancient Orthodox eparchy but has been Islamized or depopulated (there are many such cities in the Black Sea Rim), and claim that they renewed it.

³⁰ My interview with Sifiya Khubaeva.

³¹ My interview with Priest-Deacon (*ierod'yakon*) Serapion (Khripkov) on March 26, 2009, Vladikavkaz.

³² My interview with Fr Georgi (Dzhioev) of the Alan Diocese, director of the Orthodox gymnasium, "Rukhs," on March 25, 2009, Tskhinval.

The Holy Synod in Resistance did not necessarily support the South Ossetians' megalomania. Bishop Ambrose of Methone, who is responsible for foreign missions of the Holy Synod and is also Pukhate's "spiritual father," did not find it adequate to call the South Ossetian diocese "Alan," considering the significant geographic differences between them (South Ossetia is only a small part of the historical Alan Diocese). However, Ambrose could not change the course of events when he launched the process to open a diocese of the Holy Synod in South Ossetia, because Pukhate's group had already registered the name "Alan" with the South Ossetian Ministry of Justice.³³ Representatives of the ROC remark that parts of the medieval Alan Diocese entered the ROC's jurisdiction, while the others entered the OCG's, and that it is therefore impossible to renew it automatically.³⁴

The ROC was disturbed by the behavior of the South Ossetian Orthodox leaders and the Holy Synod in Resistance, according to which jurisdictions between local Orthodox churches can be changed and new dioceses can be introduced by their unilateral decision (*yavochnym poryadkom*). ROC leaders argue that these problems can be solved only "at the negotiating table," in this case, with the OCG.³⁵ In contrast, Bishop Clement of the Holy Synod in Resistance provides an interesting argument; it is true that Orthodox clerics can never ignore the canonic territories of the local churches, but there is a time when an extreme situation, such as war and changes to state borders, intensifies the contradiction between canon and faith. In this situation, Orthodox people put faith in the first place and canon in the second. When the extreme situation has passed, the contradiction between faith and canon will be soothed. "If we exclude the theoretical possibility of contradiction between faith and canon, we will become something like Catholic."³⁶

Evgeny Bronsky, press secretary to the ROC Stavropol-Vladikavkaz Eparchy, argues against this view: the Holy Synod in Resistance intervened in the South Ossetian matter exactly when the extreme situation had passed and "medical treatment (*lechenie*)" for the ecclesiological relations between Georgia and South Ossetia was needed. It is difficult to recognize the introduction of a diocese, which might eternalize the confrontation, as a life-saving measure to save faith in an extreme situation. In contrast, Fr Aleksandr, secretary to the ROC Stavropol-Vladikavkaz archbishop, praises the ROC's help to the Abkhazian Orthodox believers. When the Abkhazians desperately needed priests, the Maikop bishop of the ROC consecrated several young Abkhazian Orthodox activists. Although this caused furious protest from the OCG, few would think that the ROC would pretend that "the Abkhazian flock is ours, since we consecrated

³³ My interview with Metropolitan Ambrose.

³⁴ My interview with Fr Aleksandr (Nartov), secretary to the Stavropol-Vladikavkaz archbishop, on May 7, 2009, Stavropol.

³⁵ My interview with Fr Vladimir (Samoilenko), dean of the Orthodox churches of North Ossetia, on May 5, 2009, in Vladikavkaz.

³⁶ My interview with Bishop Clement of Gardikion, on May 3, 2009, Athens.

the priests.”³⁷ Borrowing Bishop Clement’s expression, this is a life-saving aid for faith even in certain contradiction with the canon.

To resolve canonic problems, the ROC proposed that the OCG allow the ROC to open a branch (*podvor’ie*) in South Ossetia, as well as in Abkhazia. These branches will function as religious administrations in these regions, but at the same time, South Ossetia and Abkhazia will de jure continue to be regarded as the OCG’s canonic territories. The ROC made a similar proposal to the RomOC in dispute with the ROC over the jurisdiction of Bessarabia (right-bank Moldova). In this case, the ROC suggests that the RomOC open its branch in Chisinau to serve the religious needs of pro-Romanian Orthodox believers in Bessarabia, but at the same time, the ROC requests that the RomOC recognize the canonic belonging of Bessarabia to the ROC.³⁸ The OCG did not give a definite answer to this proposal, and the negotiation itself was shelved after the August war of 2008. However, the South Ossetian Orthodox leaders are absolutely against this “branch” method. First, this means a significant degradation of South Ossetia’s church status from diocese to branch. Although the former is a self-proclaimed and uncanonic status and the latter is canonic, this does not bother the South Ossetians. Secondly, what is more serious, the South Ossetian clerics will need to be consecrated by the ROC again to belong to the ROC legitimately. This will pose a serious threat to the South Ossetian clerics, because their flocks will legitimately ask them who they were before this repeated consecration and whether the sacraments they performed before were in fact canonic.

Ossetian Nationalism and Anti-Georgianism

Bishop Georgi (Pukhate) regards Ilia II, patriarch-catholicos of the OCG, as the very provocateur who provided Gamsakhurdia and Saakashvili with a fascist and racist ideology and religiously justified Georgia’s repeated military aggression against Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³⁹ Obviously, Pukhate is irritated by the ROC’s apologetic understanding of Ilia II and those who surround him as unfortunate religious leaders who did not have enough influence to prevent Georgia’s racism and military aggression.

In fact, ROC leaders think the South Ossetians’ criticism of Ilia II and the OCG is exaggerated. According to them, it is important to understand in what political circumstances the OCG is operating. Although it appears strange that the church leaders talk about Georgia’s “territorial integrity,” there is no tradition in Georgia to separate church interests from national (state) interests.⁴⁰ Any slippery speech made by clerics

³⁷ My interview with Fr Aleksandr (Nartov), secretary to the Stavropol-Vladikavkaz bishop.

³⁸ This method of “branch” reminds us of the Japanese government’s proposal to Russia to solve the Northern Territories issue; the Japanese government is ready to agree with Russia’s rule over this territory in the foreseeable future only if Russia recognizes Japan’s de jure sovereignty over this territory.

³⁹ My interview with Georgi (Pukhate), bishop of Alania, the Holy Synod in Resistance, on March 24, 2009, Tskhinval.

⁴⁰ My interview with Fr Timofei (Ostaev), priest of St. Georgi Cathedral in Vladikavkaz on May 5, 2009, Vladikavkaz.

can become a target of nationalists' attack.⁴¹ Fr Vladimir, ROC dean of North Ossetia, remarks that the "evidence" (speeches and video clips) to which the South Ossetians love to refer as proof of the OCG's racism and militarism is quite dubious. The South Ossetians' quotations from Ilia II's various speeches are fragmental, severed from the context, dubious in translation from Georgian to Russian, and often many times repeated, because of which it is almost impossible to identify the original source. Fr Vladimir is disgusted with the militant rhetoric that Pukhate and other South Ossetian clerics love, according to which the Georgian patriarch is a fascist and the Russian patriarch (Kirill) is Georgian lobbyist. As far as Fr Vladimir knows, Ilia II is a very balanced and careful man and it is difficult to believe that he actually said what the South Ossetians claim he did. Fr Vladimir repeats an axiom of Soviet diplomacy: relations between political leaderships are one thing, but friendship between peoples is another. He questions how is it possible to destroy the centuries-old tradition of friendship between Russia and Georgia and to deny the great Georgian culture, only because of what Saakashvili did.⁴²

The different understandings of the Georgian Church between the ROC and South Ossetian clerics culminated in a scandal caused by Metropolitan Kirill's interview in November 2008. Metropolitan Kirill (Gundyaev), who was then in charge of the inter-church relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and would later become the patriarch, repeated the ROC's official position that South Ossetia belongs to the canonic territory of the OCG. Kirill criticized the Holy Synod in Resistance, to which the Alan Diocese belongs, as uncanonic and added that "on the one hand, Russian soldiers shed blood for the Ossetian people in order to defend South Ossetia, but on the other, the spiritual leaders of this country belong to the jurisdiction of a schismatic church, whose main purpose is to destroy the unity of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is impossible, however, to behave this way" (Mitropolit Kirill 2008). Here, Kirill implied that the Holy Synod helped Bishop Agafangel of Odessa and Crimea, antagonist against the reconciliation of the ROC and the ROCA, by consecrating bishops. There is a rumor in the Orthodox world that Kirill wanted Lavr, the first hierarch of the ROCA, to criticize his former comrade (Cyprian) and subordinates (South Ossetians). Despite the recent almost complete obedience of the ROCA to the ROC, Lavr could not go that far. This is why Kirill himself criticized the South Ossetians and Old Calendarists.⁴³

Kirill's arrogant comment, quite unusual for this experienced diplomat, provoked furious protest in South Ossetia and embarrassment in the ROC itself. As ROC clerics in the nineteenth century sympathized with the Bulgarian autocephalist movement, there are a large number of ROC clerics who support South Ossetians' and Abkhazians' religious independence from Georgia. As the ROC in the nineteenth century feared that its possible support of the Bulgarian autocephalist movement might stimulate the same movement in Georgia, the ROC does not allow its near-abroad allies (Abkhazians and South Ossetians) to violate the canon, since this would pour fuel on the fire in Ukraine, Moldova, and Estonia. However,

⁴¹ My interviews with Evgeny Bronsky and Fr Vladimir, dean of the Orthodox churches of North Ossetia, on May 5, 2009, Vladikavkaz.

⁴² My interview with Fr Vladimir.

⁴³ My interview with Bishop Clement of Gardikion, the Holy Synod in Resistance.

Kirill's bureaucratic cautiousness did not console those with pro-Ossetian sentiment in Russia after the August war.

Orthodox hierarchs have a sorrowful tradition of avoiding martyrdom at any cost, beginning with Ecumenical Patriarch Gregory Mammas who fled Constantinople to Italy in 1451,⁴⁴ even two years earlier than the fall of the Byzantine Empire, ending with Daniel (Datuashvili), bishop of Abkhazia of the OCG, who escaped from Sukhum in September 1993. In contrast, not one priest escaped from Tskhinval during the August war of 2008; they not only stayed in the heavily shelled city but also served day and night at their churches, to which tens of citizens fled, erroneously expecting that the Georgians would not shell churches. These clerics served to mitigate the flocks' fear and agony and, in the worst case, to secure their decent Christian deaths. The devotion and courageousness that the South Ossetian clerics exhibited could not but provoke sympathy among their ROC colleagues. This is why Kirill's interview was unpopular among the ROC clerics.

How Should the Alan Church Be Built?

There has been a long-standing idea of integrating the Orthodox communities in North and South Ossetia into a single diocese. Two problems are intertwined here: the first is the possibility of changing the canonic borders between local Orthodox churches to integrate North and South Ossetia, as has been discussed in this essay. The second is the status of Vladikavkaz and North Ossetia. As its name shows ("Vladikavkaz" means "ruling the Caucasus"), Vladikavkaz used to be the strategic stronghold of the Russian Empire in the Caucasus; in this city, both secular and religious headquarters, namely the governor generalship and eparchy, were located. This status has been surrendered to Stavropol, currently the capital of the South Russian Federal District and the site of the third-largest eparchy of Russia, extending to North Ossetia at its eastern extreme. Economically, Vladikavkaz is a stagnant, depressed city, not comparable to the vigorously developing Stavropol. Ethnic Ossetian clerics, for example, Fr Georgi (Dzhioev) in Tskhinval and Fr Georgi (Bestaev) in Moscow, despite their harsh antagonism against each other, both question why North Ossetia cannot have its independent diocese, while Kalmykia with a population of less than three hundred thousand with an overwhelmingly Buddhist composition may have its independent ROC diocese.

According to Georgi (Bestaev), the previous archbishop of this region, Gedeon (Dokukin, 1929-2003) was pro-Ossetian and sympathized with the idea of creating a single North and South Ossetian diocese (his assistance to the nascent South Ossetian Orthodoxy in the early 1990s is mentioned above), but then president of North Ossetia, Alania Aleksandr Dzasokhov, who would be fired in 2005 because of the Beslan tragedy in 2004, was antagonistic to this idea. After 2003, when Feofan (Ashurkov), more loyal to Moscow, succeeded Gedeon's post, the issue of forming an independent Alan diocese was never raised, let

⁴⁴ This surprised Mehmet II, the Ottoman emperor, who intended to use, not execute, the ecumenical patriarch of the Eastern Christian world. See Runciman, 1968, pp. 165-185.

alone the possibility of including South Ossetia in this diocese.⁴⁵ The present dean of North Ossetia, Fr Vladimir Samoilenko, is ethnic Ukrainian and cautious about the idea of introducing an independent Ossetian diocese.⁴⁶ Ethnic Ossetian Fr Timofei (Ostaev), priest of Sr. Georgi Cathedral, echoes this view, noting that the problem of Ossetia's independent diocese should be decided from God's point of view, rather than human desire.⁴⁷ Leaders of the Stavropol-Vladikavkaz Eparchy repeat their position that division of the diocese should be decided with consideration given to managerial convenience, not ethnic factors.⁴⁸

In Christian history, rebaptism has been a most radical way to demonstrate one or another activist's religious position, because rebaptism is an assertion that the church that baptized the person first is not a real Christian church. This is why the Rebaptists were most harshly repressed in the Holy Roman Empire during the Reformation and religious wars (sixteenth to seventeenth centuries). The ROC does not intend to go this far. However unpleasant its relations with the South Ossetian clerics have been, the ROC has not ordered its clerics to rebaptize the South Ossetians who have already been baptized by the South Ossetian clerics, because this will damage the religious convictions of the South Ossetian Orthodox believers. Even when ROC clerics went to South Ossetia to help the population during and after the August war of 2008, they tried not to make contact with the South Ossetian clerics not because they regarded them uncanonic, but because they tried not to show the population that something was wrong with their priests.

In contrast, Fr Georgi (Bestaev), priest of the Birth of St. Virgin Church (Alan branch), which serves the Ossetian Diaspora in Moscow, rebaptizes the South Ossetians, regarding the sacraments performed by Pukhate and other South Ossetian clerics as ineffective.⁴⁹ Enraged by this behavior and the repeated overt criticisms of the Alan Eparchy, the South Ossetian leaders (not only religious but also secular) call Bestaev "Georgia's notorious lobbyist."

The Moscow Patriarchate passed the Birth of St. Virgin Church in Kitai Gorod to the Ossetian Diaspora in Moscow in 1996; Fr Stanislav (Bazzate) became the priest of this church and served for ten years. He was popular in South Ossetia since he was practically a spokesman for South Ossetia in Moscow. But he proved to be a weak manager, who could not restore the church building after serving for ten years; a huge sum of donations from the Diaspora was spent for nothing. Ossetian businessmen in Moscow requested that Fr Georgi (Bestaev), who then was the abbot of one of the Troitse-Sergii monasteries (Moscow suburbs),

⁴⁵ My interview with Fr Georgi (Bestaev).

⁴⁶ My interview with Fr Vladimir (Samoilenko).

⁴⁷ My interview with Fr Timofai (Ostaev).

⁴⁸ My interview with Bronsky.

⁴⁹ Bestaev argues that Pukhate performed baptism even before 1993, when the ROCA consecrated him as priest, and during 2003, when he did not belong to any hierarchy because of his conflict with the ROCA (V). According to Bestaev, Pukhate baptized believers even without anointment.

become the priest of this church, warning that otherwise, they would not donate even one ruble more. Bestaev regarded Stanislav's political activities, for example, writing various appeals on the Internet under a pseudo name, unallowable for a cleric and in 2007 replaced him.⁵⁰ Currently (2009), the South Ossetian Orthodox leaders intend to invite Stanislav (Bazzate) to the Alan Eparchy.⁵¹

Conclusion

The Eastern Christian world experienced the fall of empire, which protected the church, twice: in 1453 and 1922. In both cases, the Constantinople Ecumenical Patriarchate tried to be saved from extinction by approaching the West, by ecumenism (Meyendorff 1996, ch. 6). In the fifteenth century, the Metropolitanate of Kiev and All Rus', already located in Moscow and closely cooperating with the Moscow state, emerged as a leader of the opposition to Constantinople's ecumenist tendencies (Meyendorff 1989). Although often misunderstood, the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome emerged in this context, in other words, not as a response to the fall of the Byzantine Empire, but as an opposition slogan against the ecumenist tendencies prevalent in the late Byzantine Empire. Ecumenism in the twentieth century did not face similar powerful opposition since the ROC itself faced danger of extinction under communist rule. Domestic opposition emerged in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria, where the church abandoned the Julian Calendar, while Metropolitan Sergii's declaration to support the communist regime in 1927 consolidated both international and domestic opposition, namely the ROCA and the Catacomb Church. During the 1930 - 60s, these opposition movements steadily consolidated their alliance with the legitimizing narrative that the real issue was not the calendar and that real danger was not only overt atheism; they were struggling against ecumenism, innovationism, and betrayal of authentic Orthodoxy. After the bankruptcy of communist atheism, however, the ROCA began to think that they needed to make their attitude towards other Orthodox churches more tolerant and started dialogue with the ROC to establish communion and gain a place in the official Orthodox world via the ROC. The Old Calendarists continued to regard the ROC as not yet overcoming Sergianism and ecumenism, and thus inevitably split from the ROCA. The reconciliation of the ROC and the ROCA caused a tremendous realignment of the unofficial Orthodox world; this paper elucidates one aspect of this historical change.

Although stubbornly resisting what they perceived as ecumenism and Sergianism, the ROCA and the Holy Synod in Resistance did not surrender themselves to sectarian psychology. They paid attention, no less earnestly than official Orthodox churches, to canonicity and the ecclesiological nuances of their activities. Perhaps this attitude was determined by their founders' official positions that they had had in the recent past and by these churches' self-affirmative endeavor to justify their existence as the witness of canonicity of the whole Orthodox world. As a result, they created a peculiar gray zone between canonicity and non-canonicity, which even the official churches of Russia and Greece cannot ignore. It is in this gray zone

⁵⁰ My interview with Fr Georgi (Bestaev).

⁵¹ My interview with Sofiya Khubaeva.

that the South Ossetian Orthodox community maneuvers. In contrast to the Transnistrian Orthodox community, it was impossible for the South Ossetians to reconcile with the former aggressors for canonization, and Fr Georgi (Pukhate)'s ambition did not allow him to pursue his Abkhazian colleagues' strategy of "obedience." The South Ossetian Orthodox leaders impatiently hurried to achieve canonic appearance, and it was thus not by chance that they found a comfortable place in the gray zone created by the ROCA and the Greek Old Calendarist movement.

This essay has anatomized a peculiar mechanism in the Orthodox world, because of which a mouse (the South Ossetian Orthodox community) is capable of causing an elephant (the ROC) to tremble. One may find here a similarity with secular politics, in which small and poor Georgia could twist the United States around its little finger, while South Ossetia with a population of thirty thousand eventually convinced Russia to challenge the world order by recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia, although at the cost of nearly four hundred civilian deaths in August 2008.

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