

Patriarch Won't Claim Rebel Regions

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Kirill, center, worshipping with Ilia, left, and Ukrainian Orthodox leader Vladimir, right, in Kiev on Wednesday. **Vladimir Sindeyev**

KIEV — The Russian Orthodox Church will not claim clerical authority over Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian and Georgian church leaders said.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill and Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilia met in Ukraine for the first time since the five-day war in 2008 over the Moscow-backed breakaway region of South Ossetia.

Patriarch Kirill said he had a "brotherly" discussion with his Georgian peer on issues that included church life in the rebel regions.

"It is clear that the Georgian Patriarchate has canonical jurisdiction over the territory of Abkhazia and South Ossetia," he told reporters Tuesday.

Patriarch Ilia called the meeting "a good start" and said he hoped to continue talks with the Russian church.

None of the clerics spoke about the political side of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia issue.

Tensions between Georgia and Russia have remained high since the 2008 war, which strengthened Russia's influence over the two rebel regions.

The Georgian church's pro-Russia stance has created tensions between it and President Mikheil Saakashvili's pro-Western government.

Adding to Georgia's frustrations, the Russian government has recognized both regions as independent countries. Moscow and Tbilisi have since traded multiple accusations of "provocations" and sabotage.

This month, a Georgian court found several photographers, including one who had worked for Saakashvili, guilty of spying for Russia.

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