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The Autumn of the (Georgian) Patriarch The role of the Orthodox Church in Georgia and in Georgian politics

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Analyses dedicated to Georgia's domestic situation usually omit the religious aspect and the relation between the state and the country's predominant religious organisation, i.e. the autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). The relatively few papers focused on this particular issue are exceptions. Meanwhile, the fact that Georgians as a nation are very devout (religion is an element of their national identity) and that Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II is an indisputable authority has a direct impact on the choices they make and on the policy pursued by the state. It can be said that one important reason behind the electoral success of Georgian Dream in 2012 was the support offered, albeit informally, by hierarchs of the GOC to the party's leader Bidzina Ivanishvili. Easter celebrations attended by large numbers of believers on 19 April 2020 were an open display of the GOC's power. The celebrations took place despite the restrictions due to a state of emergency declared nationwide in connection with the epidemic. Moreover, the GOC is on the eve of a succession – Ilia II who has been patriarch for more than 42 years, recently turned 87. This is causing internal tension in the Church which in turn acts as a catalyst for accelerating secularisation.



The outstanding role in the history

In an independent Georgia, the "national" Church is playing a prominent state- and nation-forming role. The privileged status of the GOC is stipulated in Article 8 of the Georgian constitution: "Along with freedom of belief and religion, the State shall recognise the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia, and its independence from the State. The relationship between the state of Georgia and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia shall be determined by a constitutional agreement, which shall be

in full compliance with the universally recognised principles and norms of international law in the area of human rights and freedoms".¹ The agreement mentioned in the text, or concordat, was signed on 14 October 2002 by the then President Eduard Shevardnadze and Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II. It confirms (among other things) that churches, including those in ruins and those defunct, are in the possession of the Church, it grants the GOC the exclusive right to establish a military ordinari-

¹ The English language version of the constitution is available on the website of the Legislative Herald of Georgia (www.matsne.gov.ge/en), which also contains the Georgian and Russian language versions.



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The views expressed by the authors of the papers do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Polish authorities

ate, authorises the GOC to perform educational activity, and introduces concordat marriages.²

” Society’s high level of trust in the Church corresponds with Georgians’ declared high religiosity.

One Caucasus scholar from Poland has pointed to three reasons behind the special role the GOC has played in the history of the Georgian state and nation: “First, although [the GOC] emerged just as the other Eastern Churches, i.e. at the beginning it was dependent on the secular system of power, the latter’s gradual weakening has enabled it to gain significant independence... Second, over the first centuries of Georgian statehood, the Georgian Orthodox Church gained the status of the creator of national culture and of national and historical identity derived from this culture... Third, the process of how the contemporary face of the Church in Georgia is being shaped is largely impacted by the fact that after more than two centuries the position of this Church is determined by its relations with its own Georgian state, rather than a foreign one”.³ It should be noted that in 1811, following Russia’s conquest of Georgia, the tsarist authorities cancelled the GOC’s autocephaly (it was reinstated in 1943 on the orders of Stalin who, during the war, for tactical reasons, slightly liberalised the Soviet state’s religious policy).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the GOC gradually consolidated its position, which was facilitated by the policy pursued by the Catholicos-Patriarch, who repeatedly acted as a mediator between the government and the opposition:

“Both sides of the conflict readily reached out to him for help because they were aware of the weakness of the institution he headed. It seemed that the Catholicos-Patriarch’s involvement in events did not threaten the balance of power in place at that time”.⁴ In the following years, Ilia II did not refuse to act as a mediator and frequently spoke in public about issues of major importance to the country. In his speeches, he never openly supported any political party, instead calling on the public figures to engage in dialogue and to take responsibility for the state.⁵ Headed by him for many years, the Church has become a strong institution independent of the secular authorities, one with solid financial resources, a large number of adherents and a special status stipulated in the constitution. Georgia’s most prominent politicians make efforts to meet with Ilia II from time to time, viewing these contacts as an additional means of boosting the legitimacy of their own position.

Polls, including those conducted by the International Republican Institute, confirm that the GOC enjoys high levels of public support. In spring 2018, 84% of the respondents said their opinion towards the GOC was favourable (8% said it was unfavourable and another 8% had no opinion)⁶ and in autumn 2019 the corresponding proportion was 85% (with 10% unfavourable and 4% with no opinion).⁷ The proportion of positive answers correspond with a high level of religiosity among Georgians and into their respect for conservative, traditional values. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center at the end of 2018, 50% of Georgia’s adult population said that they were highly religious, which placed Georgia third from

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 150.

⁵ For example following the publication, ahead of the 2012 parliamentary elections, of recordings documenting a brutal crackdown on prison inmates, the Catholicos-Patriarch called on the young demonstrators and to the authorities to refrain from escalating the conflict (J. Brodowski, *Gruzja po rewolucji róż. Obraz przemian polityczno-społecznych w latach 2003–2018*, Kraków 2019, p. 90).

⁶ *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia*, International Republican Institute, 10–22 April 2018, www.iri.org. The army was ranked second (83% of positive replies), the media placed third (68%), and the police was fourth (50%).

⁷ *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia*, International Republican Institute, September–October 2019, www.iri.org. In this survey, the army was ranked first (86% of positive replies), the media third (72%), and the police fourth (59%).

² The English language version of the concordat is available on the Freedom of Religion or Belief website, www.forb-caucasus.wordpress.com.

³ A. Furier, *Droga Gruzji do niepodległości*, Poznań 2000, p. 152.

the 34 European countries in which this poll was conducted. The top five also included three other countries inhabited by a large Orthodox population (i.e. Romania, Greece and Moldova) and Armenia.⁸

Another Pew Research Center survey carried out around this time showed that 81% of Georgian respondents said that religion was an important or very important element of national identity. The only country with a higher proportion of positive answers to this question was Armenia with 82%. 3% of the respondents (Europe's lowest proportion) approved of same-sex marriages, and 10% (again Europe's lowest proportion) approved of legal abortion procedures.⁹

” During the rule of Mikheil Saakashvili, the Church feared that it might become dominated by the secular authorities.

The correlation between conservative views and religiosity is most evident in people's attitudes to moral issues. One topic that attracts media attention each year is the attempts to organise pride parades in Tbilisi. On 17 May 2013 an event organised by the LGBT community to celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, was dispersed by Orthodox activists led by priests (28 individuals were injured)¹⁰. In 2016 a photo of a priest attacking the parade participants with a chair made headlines, and in 2018 the parade was cancelled due to security concerns.

⁸ J. Evans, Ch. Baronavski, *How do European countries differ in religious commitment?*, Pew Research Center, 5 December 2018, www.pewresearch.org. According to the 2014 census, Georgia's population was 3.7 million individuals (ethnic Georgians accounted for 86.8% of the population, Azerbaijanis – made up 6.3%, Armenians – 4.5%, Russians – 0.7%, Ossetians – 0.4%). The predominant religion was Orthodoxy – with 83.4%, the proportion of Muslims was 10.7%, members of the Armenian Apostolic Church accounted for 2.9% of the population, and members of the Roman Catholic Church – for 0.5%. The census was not performed in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. See *2014 General Population Census. Main Results. General Information*, National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat), 28 April 2016, www.census.ge.

⁹ *Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues*, Pew Research Center, 29 October 2018, www.pewresearch.org.

¹⁰ M. Matusiak, 'Georgia – between a dream and reality', *OSW Commentary*, no. 133, 15 April 2014, www.osw.waw.pl.

Tension during Saakashvili's rule

In the context of these figures, it seems paradoxical that among the former Soviet republics it was Georgia (along with the Baltic states) which has been the most consistent in its efforts to integrate with the institutional West. Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1990–1992) pursued a pro-Western policy. This was resumed by Eduard Shevardnadze (1992–2003) at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries, following a thaw in Georgian-Russian relations. The subsequent president, Mikheil Saakashvili (who was in office in 2004–2013), made his country's Westernisation his political credo. Georgian Dream, which has ruled Georgia since 2012, did not abandon this political line and merely amended it slightly. There are many indications that Georgians view their country's alliance with the West as a political and geostrategic choice (in a referendum held on 5 January 2008 more than 75% of the respondents supported Georgia's membership of NATO). However, in the cultural sense and as regards their world view, they are closer to Armenia and even the hostile, but Orthodox, Russia.

The relations between the state authorities and the Church authorities were coolest during the rule of Mikheil Saakashvili. The main source of tension was the country's large-scale Westernisation being carried out at that time. This triggered resistance on the part of conservative representatives of the clergy and the faithful (the direction and the pace of transformation were consistent with Saakashvili's modernisation project which covered all realms of life, including pop culture). This process also covered legislative changes intended at harmonising the Georgian legislation with Western standards (some amendments, for example those regarding "equal status" issues, were enacted upon recommendation from Euro-

pean institutions¹¹). The president recognised the importance of the Church and, for example, supported the re-Christianisation of Adjara, arguing that a good Georgian is an Orthodox Georgian.¹² However, his autocratic style of governance and almost obsessive attempts to consolidate the state made the GOC hierarchs fear that the Church might become dominated by the state authorities.

” Ahead of the 2012 elections, many hierarchs offered their informal support to Georgian Dream and its leader Bidzina Ivanishvili.

What was probably the most serious crisis was triggered by an amendment to the Georgian civil code which came into effect on 6 July 2011. According to the new legislation, all confessional groups can be granted the status of a “legal person under public law” – which had formerly been reserved for the Georgian Orthodox Church. The amendment was enacted in spite of the lack of consent from both the opposition and Ilia II who considered it divergent from the interests of the GOC and of the country. The opponents of the new legislation worried above all that it might in the first place strengthen the Armenian Apostolic Church, which in Georgia struggled to regain its former churches. In the following days, rallies against the new law were held in Tbilisi gathering several thousands of protesters. Although the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church finally admitted that representatives of all religions are equal in legal terms and called on the protesters to calm down, the hierarchs demanded that the state authorities should consult all matters regarding religion with the Church and establish a joint committee to supervise the implementa-

tion of commitments arising from the concordat and the constitution. President Saakashvili feared that a long-term deterioration in the relations between the ruling camp and the Church might have a negative impact on the government’s approval rating ahead of parliamentary elections in 2012 and the presidential election in 2013. Therefore, only one day after the statement issued by the Holy Synod, the spokeswoman for President Saakashvili assured the public that the state was not going to challenge the GOC’s special status and role, and that the enacted amendment had no connection with possible property-related disputes.¹³

Among friends and enemies

Ahead of the 2012 parliamentary elections, many hierarchs offered their informal support to Georgian Dream and its founder and leader – the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, which certainly contributed to the party’s success (Ivanishvili financially supported numerous churches and initiatives carried out by the GOC). Georgian Dream seized full power in 2013, when its nominee was elected president. This was followed by an increase in aggression on the part of Orthodox priests and believers targeting representatives of minority groups. This situation was likely the result of the liberalisation that followed Saakashvili’s tough policy of “zero tolerance” for crime. For example, on 26 August 2013 in a village inhabited by both the Orthodox and Muslim Georgians, the local authorities dismantled the minaret of the local mosque. The reasons given for this were that its construction was unauthorised, and that there had been irregularities in its importation from Turkey. This triggered protests on the part of the Muslim community, which in turn sparked riots organised by conservative Orthodox groups. To discharge the tension, Ilia II intervened in person and reached an agreement with Georgia’s Muslim community leaders.¹⁴

¹¹ This process was continued after the end of Saakashvili’s presidency and resulted from commitments Tbilisi had made in connection with the EU-Georgia Association Agreement and with the negotiations regarding the lifting of the Schengen visa regime. For example on 2 May 2014, the Georgian parliament passed the so-called “non-discrimination act” prohibiting harassment on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. This sparked protests from groups associated with the GOC.

¹² Adjara, which enjoyed the status of an autonomous republic, belonged to the Ottoman Empire until 1878, which is why many local Georgians are Muslims. See W. Górecki, *Toast za przodków*, Wołowiec 2017, p. 246–251.

¹³ W. Górecki, ‘Napięcie na linii państwo–Cerkiew w Gruzji’, *Nowa Europa Wschodnia* 2011, no. 5, p. 12.

¹⁴ M. Matusiak, ‘Georgia: Is conservative-nationalist sentiment growing?’, 4 September 2013, www.osw.waw.pl.

Members of the Roman Catholic Church are also the target of hostility. Protests and accusations of proselytising, although completely groundless, were voiced during two papal pilgrimages to Georgia: of Pope John Paul II in 1999 and Pope Francis in 2016. (The latter pilgrimage met with even harsher criticism because at that time the Georgian Orthodox Church was stronger than a decade and half earlier; no official delegation of the GOC attended the papal mass, although the Catholicos-Patriarch himself did meet with the Pope). In Georgia, Roman Catholic churches are being taken over by Orthodox parishes (for example in Gori and Samtskhe-Javakheti region), there has been a rise in the religious harassment of employees and also a rise in attacks – mostly verbal – on groups of pilgrims and camps organised by Catholic priests and monks. These incidents are for example reported in Polish Catholic press which on the whole is favourably inclined towards Georgia.¹⁵

” The Georgian Orthodox Church as a whole is viewed as a primarily pro-Russian force.

The attitude towards Catholics is what brings the GOC and the Russian Orthodox Church increasingly closer to each other. The two Churches have numerous personal ties, for example (just with many other hierarchs, including some younger ones), Ilia II graduated from the Moscow Theological Academy¹⁶. They share their distrust or even aversion to the West as broadly understood, and their respect for conservative values. Another factor important for their relationship is the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church has not recognised the separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia and considers the two para-states as the canonical territory of the Georgian

Orthodox Church.¹⁷ For these reasons, most Georgian hierarchs support cooperation with Russia, and the GOC as a whole is viewed as a primarily pro-Russian force (those hierarchs who are open to cooperation with the West do not form any separate group or centre).

The relations between the two Churches are also impacted by the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which occurred at the turn of 2018 and 2019. The GOC has not yet decided whether to recognise the new Church. Recognition could contribute to a further deterioration in Georgian-Russian relations because it would extend the political conflict to the realm of religion. On the other hand, refusal to recognise the Orthodox Church of Ukraine would translate into cooler relations with Kyiv. At the beginning of 2019, one Georgian hierarch announced that the decision would be made once the hierarchs have acquainted themselves with the text of the *tomos* issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople regarding autocephaly; however, he did not say when this is expected to happen.¹⁸ In this situation, individual bishops began to speak out, both for or against recognising the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Their opinion is obviously of no significance compared with the decision of the Holy Synod of the GOC, although it is suggestive of the balance of power within the body of hierarchs. According to information obtained by the Jamestown Foundation, 9 out of 47 bishops support the Ukrainian autocephaly; this group includes the heads of those eparchies of the GOC which cover Western countries.¹⁹ It cannot be ruled out

¹⁵ A. Tomczyk, 'Katolicyzm zanika w Gruzji', *Idziemy*, no. 3, 19 January 2020.

¹⁶ In Georgia, collaboration between the GOC's clergy and Soviet-era security institutions has never been the subject of a major debate.

¹⁷ The likely reason behind this situation was a political decision by the Kremlin following the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. It has enabled Moscow to influence Georgian believers via pro-Russian clerics (this is Russia's major soft power instrument). It also seems that in the situation of broken diplomatic relations, an additional exclusive channel of bilateral communication was of major importance. Formal recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parts of Georgia (in the canonical sense) does not change the fact that Georgian priests are not allowed to enter these para-states, which have their own local clerics who are closely tied to Russia.

¹⁸ 'ГПЦ огласит решение по Украинской церкви после ознакомления с томосом', *Эхо Кавказа*, 6 January 2019, www.ekhokavkaza.com.

¹⁹ G. Menabde, *The Battle for Political Influence in the Georgian Orthodox Church*, The Jamestown Foundation, 16 July 2019, www.jamestown.org.

that the decision will only be made by Ilia II's successor and will depend on who this person is (see further – Summary and an attempt at a forecast).

Succession in instalments

The Catholicos-Patriarch's advanced age and poor health have for several years prompted questions regarding the course of the succession and the successor himself. There is little available and credible information on the predominant feeling among the GOC's hierarchs, although the disclosed details suggest that intensive rivalry and struggle for influence are ongoing. Particular attention should be paid to the fact that on 23 November 2017 Ilia II nominated Bishop Shio, metropolitan of the diocese (eparchy) of Senaki and Chkhorotsku, as the "guardian of the patriarch's throne".²⁰ Although the powers of the "guardian" are limited to managing the Church should the Catholicos-Patriarch die or become unable to perform his duties, the recent announcement by Jacob, bishop of Bodbe diocese, suggests that the candidacy of Bishop Shio might be acceptable to the Georgian leadership, including Bidzina Ivanishvili. On 26 October 2019, in an interview for the independent TV station Pirveli, Bishop Jacob said that three prominent state officials, including former prime minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, had persuaded him to take part in a plot against Ilia II. Allegedly, Metropolitan Shio was to replace Ilia II.²¹ Earlier, on 2 February 2017, Protoiereus Giorgi Mamaladze, a staffer at the patriarchate, was detained at Tbilisi airport and accused of plotting an attempt on the life of the Catholicos-Patriarch. The cleric had reportedly been carrying a firearm and poison and was about to board a plane to Berlin, where Ilia II was undergoing medical treatment. According to one version, Ilia II would be the victim of the attempted attack. However, according to another version, the one assumed by the court in Tbilisi, the Catholicos-Patriarch's personal secretary was the target. In September 2017, Mamaladze was

sentenced to nine years in prison, however, some clerics argued that he had become entangled in the assassination plot as a result of an intrigue within the patriarchate.

The weeks that preceded this year's Easter (which in some Churches, including the GOC, was celebrated on 19 April 2020) saw a confrontation between Ilia II and the state authorities – which the Catholicos-Patriarch won out. Unlike in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church, all over Georgia most churches belonging to the GOC remained open (the GOC churches located abroad were closed) and held an Easter liturgy. This happened in spite of appeals from President Salome Zourabichvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, who announced that they would stay at home and tried to persuade Georgian citizens to do the same.

” The process of succession – the first since the collapse of the USSR – will be the most difficult test for the Church.

The GOC's authorities agreed that the attendees should maintain a safe distance from each other (some had to stand outside the churches) and remain on the church premises during curfew hours (between 9 pm and 6 am), in line with the restrictions imposed as part of a state of emergency (which was declared on 21 March and which remained in force until 22 May). The patriarchate called on individuals from high-risk groups (ill people, senior citizens and children, as well as "all those who fear that they may contract the virus") to stay at home. It was announced that staying at home will not be considered a sin. In response to this, five days before Easter, Prime Minister Gakharia issued a statement in which he tried to present these restrictions as a difficult compromise: "In this case I am convinced that every reasonable, wise citizen will understand [this] and will not shift responsibility onto the Church or wait for the Church to call on everyone to refrain from attending a mass or for the state to call for [believers] to not breaking the law. This is the answer and the golden mean and

²⁰ The Latin term is "locum tenens" which literally means "the place holder".

²¹ See 'Епископ Иаков: „При участии властей готовилось покушение на Илию Второго“', Эхо Кавказа, 26 October 2019, www.ekhokavkaza.com.

I am convinced that each citizen will find the best solution [for themselves]”.²²

It seems that Ilia II has used the threat posed by the epidemic to strengthen his position regarding the state authorities and to demonstrate that he is efficiently supervising the Church – only a small number of parishes did not hold Easter liturgies. Perhaps this is what he needed to force through a candidate for his successor whom he would approve of himself (this, obviously, is sheer speculation). Contrary to pessimistic forecasts, the number of individuals infected with the novel coronavirus has not increased significantly since Easter: on 19 April the figure was 399, whereas a fortnight later – on 5 May – it was 593 (the number of fatalities was 4 and 9, respectively).²³ These figures have additionally boosted the position of the leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Summary and an attempt at a forecast

The Georgian Orthodox Church is facing the most difficult test in its modern history – the first succession after the collapse of the USSR. Each subsequent Catholicos-Patriarch, even if he turns out to be an excellent organiser and diplomat, will be a weaker leader than Ilia II because he will not have his achievements and position built over several decades. Moreover, the period of Ilia II's leadership of the GOC includes the country's watershed moment of regained independence, when he had to rebuild the Church structures from scratch. The Georgian Orthodox Church will remain a major political actor that the state authorities will always need to take into account. However, it cannot be ruled out that it will be unable to manoeuvre as efficiently (both domestically and in the international arena) as it has done during Ilia II's leadership – for example when it comes to recognising the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Nor can it be ruled out that under a new leader the GOC will yield to pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church and

will ultimately refuse to recognise the Ukrainian autocephaly.²⁴ In this situation, it remains unclear how Tbilisi's foreign policy will evolve and whether it may possibly become more pro-Russian.

At least in the coming years, the Georgian Orthodox Church will maintain its major impact on society which is likely to continue to be conservative. However, just as in other countries, society will presumably gradually become secularised, which will pose a major challenge to priests and hierarchs.²⁵ Domestic violence will be among the issues which in the future are likely to become the subject of public debate questioning the patriarchal family model.²⁶ On the other hand, the practical decriminalisation of marijuana smoking announced on 30 July 2018 by the Georgian Constitutional Court (which ruled that penalising citizens for smoking marijuana is unconstitutional) is one sign of a gradual liberalisation criticised by numerous GOC hierarchs (including for its “Western” style).²⁷

Without the authority of Ilia II, the increasingly frequent intrigues and scandals within the GOC may contribute to a more intensive outflow of believers. (Besides the developments discussed earlier in the text, events reported in recent months included a bishop claiming that the Catholicos-Patriarch is homosexual²⁸ and a shooting incident in a monastery in central Georgia which the Church authorities attempted to cover up).²⁹

²² ‘Георгий Гахария: Церковь не закрывается, особенно в пасхальную ночь’, Эхо Кавказа, 14 April 2020, www.ekhokavkaza.com.

²³ See figures updated on an ongoing basis available on the Georgian government's website StopCov.ge, www.stopcov.ge.

²⁴ One Russian hierarch suggested that should the GOC recognise the autocephaly, the Russian Church might consider recognising the Church of Abkhazia. See TV programme *Церковь и мир* aired on 26 January 2019, www.vesti.ru.

²⁵ LGBT interest groups are among those who distance themselves most from the GOC. See for example: W. Wojtasiewicz, ‘Środowiska LGBT pod ostrzałem społeczeństwa, cerkwi i polityków’, *Polityka*, 3 June 2018, www.polityka.pl.

²⁶ See for example: S. Budzisz, *Pokazucha. Na gruzińskich zasadach*, Poznań 2019.

²⁷ Decriminalisation happened as a result of youth protests, the so-called NarcoMaidan, backed by a portion of politicians, and of lobbying activities carried out by various social movements and the Girchi party (“girchi” is Georgian for “cone”). Decriminalisation is not complete, though – consuming the drug in the presence of children and in public places, as well as storing it, continues to be illegal. See W. Górecki, ‘Rok 2018 na Kaukazie Południowym. To przyszła młodość’, *Nowa Europa Wschodnia* 2019, no. 2.

²⁸ Д. Мониава, ‘А потом мы каялись...’, Эхо Кавказа, 11 November 2019, www.ekhokavkaza.com.

²⁹ В. Унанянц, ‘Церковный стрелок. Испытания Иова’, Эхо Кавказа, 29 April 2020, www.ekhokavkaza.com.

Paradoxically, the GOC's power (measured by the number of believers, parishes and churches, as well as by the scope of legal provisions granting it privileged treatment) may turn out to be its greatest weakness. This power is the source of the popular belief (which at present is very true) that the GOC enjoys a special status in the Georgian state and society. However, although in the immediate future this status seems undisputed, in the more distant future, due to the above-mentioned factors, it is likely to erode. As long as the Church does not need to worry about

government reshuffles, economic problems and new social phenomena, its leadership may fail to notice the signs of this erosion and also fail to launch the relevant preventive actions. Furthermore, its failure to respond to new challenges or to offer an inappropriate or belated response may accelerate this potential erosion. However, regardless of the possible future problems, the Church's key importance in Georgia's history, including in its most turbulent periods, and its involvement in building Georgia's culture and identity are unquestioned.

Appendix

The profile of Ilia II, the 80th Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia

Ilia II was born on 4 January 1933 in Ordzhonikidze (now Vladikavkaz) in North Ossetia as Irakli Ghudushauri-Shiolashvili. He grew up in a multi-ethnic community including Georgians, Ossetians, Russians, Armenians and Ingush people. He graduated from the Moscow Theological Seminary (in 1956) and the Moscow Theological Academy (in 1960). He was ordained as a monk in Tbilisi back in 1957.

He started his work in Batumi, in 1963 he was consecrated as a bishop and in 1969 as a metropolitan. He headed the Eparchy of Tskhum-Abkhazia and at the same time was rector of a seminary in Mtskheta.

On 23 December 1977, he was chosen to be the 80th Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church. In 1978–1983, he was co-president of the World Council of Churches (in 1997 the GOC announced its withdrawal from this organisation).