

Georgia after the Patriarch's death: greater state involvement in the Church?

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On 17 March, Ilia II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, died at the age of 93. He had led the autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) since 1977, the longest tenure in its history. The Patriarch enjoyed unquestioned authority among a clear majority of the Georgian public, as confirmed by public opinion surveys. The government declared national mourning, which will last until the funeral which is scheduled for 22 March. The Catholicos will be buried in Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi's Old Town, which served as his seat until 2004.

The first succession in the GOC since the collapse of the USSR will be a test of strength for the Georgian hierarchy. Limited and difficult-to-verify leaks suggest that conservative bishops dominate this group. They tend to view the broadly defined West with scepticism, which brings them closer to the ruling Georgian Dream party, in power since 2012. Ilia's authority ensured that differences of opinion and positions did not play a decisive role. His successor, however, will hold a much weaker position. The secular authorities may seek to exploit this and attempt to draw the GOC into the state's ideological machinery. Pressure from Russia cannot be ruled out either, with the aim of preventing the GOC from recognising the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. To date, it has not taken a binding decision on this issue.

Commentary

- **For much of its history, the GOC maintained independence from the government.** In earlier periods, this largely reflected the weakness of the state itself. From the late Middle Ages until Russia became present in the Caucasus at the turn of the nineteenth century, Georgia did not exist as a unified political entity, and the Church served as the custodian of national culture. In 1811, Moscow revoked Tbilisi's autocephaly, which was restored on Joseph Stalin's orders during the Second World War. Following the collapse of the USSR, Ilia II distanced himself from day-to-day political disputes, although he spoke out on the most important issues for Georgia, acting as a stabilising figure. At various times, he mediated between the government and the opposition, skilfully navigating between extremes and thereby strengthening both his own position and that of the Church as a state- and nation-building force. He secured a constitutional provision granting the GOC a privileged role and oversaw the conclusion of a concordat.
- **The GOC's strong institutional position translates into its influence within society,** although this has been undergoing a gradual but steady erosion in recent years. According to an International Republican Institute survey from autumn 2023, 71% of

respondents expressed a favourable view of the GOC (only the military enjoyed greater approval), while 21% held an unfavourable view. As recently as 2019, positive responses stood at 85% and negative ones at 10%. As secularisation advances, this trend is likely either to continue or to accelerate further in the coming years. Much will depend on who becomes the next Catholicos.

- **The GOC's current high level of independence from the state could be significantly reduced. Ahead of the 2012 parliamentary elections, both the GOC as a whole and individual hierarchs expressed sympathy for Georgian Dream.** This stemmed from opposition to the Westernisation promoted by Mikheil Saakashvili, as well as from the fact that the party's founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, financed numerous churches and religious initiatives. There are indications that the authorities would favour Bishop Shio as Ilia II's successor – Metropolitan of the Senaki and Chkhorotsku diocese (eparchy), who currently serves as locum tenens (he was appointed guardian of the patriarchal throne as early as 2017). Such a scenario would further diminish Georgia's prospects for European integration, as Ilia II saw modernising potential in cooperation with Brussels. The new Catholicos is expected to be elected within 40 days.
- **Moscow may seek to exert pressure on the new Catholicos not to recognise the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.** So far, the GOC has not taken a decision on this issue. On the one hand, this reflects its ties with Russia (Ilia II himself graduated from the Moscow Theological Academy, and the Russian Orthodox Church regards Abkhazia and South Ossetia as canonical territories of the Church in Georgia). On the other hand, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the late Patriarch immediately called for an end to hostilities. A decision by the GOC favourable to Moscow on this matter would represent a success for Russia in the Caucasus.