

The Georgian Orthodox Church as a Political Actor in Uncertain Times

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Over the past 30 years, the Georgian Orthodox Church has always played a significant role in the political life of Georgia, but in recent years, it has gradually turned from a religious into a political institution. The Church, represented by the Patriarchate, has become an active political player, and instead of just “saving the souls of believers,” it has been vying to strengthen its economic value and political influence. With weak regime legitimacy, the authorities try to share part of their power, as well as material resources, with the Church to secure popular support. Its role can be significant during election campaigns; for instance, the Church lent its [support](#) to billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream during the elections of 2012.

This Government-Patriarchate tandem undermines the foundations of secularism and the rule of law and entails the establishment of a regime with elements of theocracy. For many years, the Church has held first place among positive attitudes in polls and rankings among social and political institutions. But with the growth of its aggressive involvement in politics, its popularity has slightly declined. Unexpectedly in 2019, for the first time, the Church lost its leadership in the rankings, giving way to the army as the institution with the greatest trust among the population. Nonetheless, Georgia is the [most religious](#) country in Europe, and this turns the Patriarchate into a powerful instrument of potential influence over the political behavior of believers.

The Government’s “Heavy Cross”

In return for political loyalty to the party in power since 2012, Georgian Dream, the Church regularly receives large material benefits in a tradition that originated under former president Eduard Shevardnadze. The Patriarchate receives annual funding from

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the state budget of 25 million Georgian Lari (\$8 million). The government may also allocate funds for religious events; for instance, at least 890,000 Georgian Lari (\$300,000) was given to celebrate a new religious holiday, the consecration to the Virgin Mary on May 12. According to the Concordat [signed](#) in 2002, the state undertakes to compensate the Church for damages received during Soviet occupation. But it also often rewards the Church with real estate (buildings, lands, forests, etc.), and because the Church is allowed to conduct business and not pay taxes, many enterprises are registered under its jurisdiction. Land gifts have [led to](#) confrontations between the population and the church when locals have been denied their plots.

The Patriarchate can generally demand more when the government is weak and vice versa. An example is a letter from eighty-eight-year-old Patriarch Ilia II to the prime minister and minister of culture on August 3, 2021, exactly two months in advance of (important) local elections. In the letter, the spiritual leader asks the authorities to return one of the most precious treasures of Georgian culture to the Church, the encaustic icon “Anchiskhati” that dates from the 7th century and has gilding by 12th-century master Beka Opizari. It has been stored for several decades in the National Art Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi, and to date, the authorities are holding out on making a decision. It is not hard to find examples that under conditions of political stress, such as the results of the parliamentary elections of October 2020, political parties, and in particular Georgian Dream, have made efforts to identify with the Church to try to weaken the opposition. The Patriarchate tries to make sure that the government regularly consults with it about important decisions. This past April, when Georgians celebrated Orthodox Easter, and COVID-19 restrictions banned the free movement of cars, the Patriarchate officially [stated](#), “These bans were not agreed with us,” while an influential clergyman said, “Who dares to stand against me on the street?” Ultimately, the bans did not affect the clergy.

Despite this close cooperation, the reputation of the Church has never been as low as it was under the governance of Georgian Dream. There is a suspicion that since 2012, the authorities have made a special effort to deliberately destroy the reputation of the Church so that the *Sword of Damocles* is not permanently hanging over secular power. Georgian Dream has tried to discredit the Church by encouraging scandals and confrontations within the church while at the same time turning a blind eye to legal violations by clergymen.

The Double-Headed Eagle

For many years, the authority of the Patriarchate has been based on the personal authority of Ilia II, who has enjoyed great prestige for decades and is ahead of all politicians in popularity. He has [ruled](#) the Georgian Church since 1977, since Soviet times, and is the godfather of former president Shevardnadze. In early August 2021, the International Republican Institute (IRI) [published](#) a rating of the most popular public figures in Georgia. The list included 23 public figures, among them 22 politicians, and the Patriarch topped

the list with 88 percent favorability. He is an idol for many. His portraits hang in many public and private institutions, and his personal rating has always surpassed the rating of the Georgian Orthodox Church itself. Nonetheless, over the past 30 years, there has been some modest criticism of him, mainly about his close contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church, considering that he became Patriarch during the Soviet Union when all religious institutions were controlled by the Soviet security services. He was also criticized for supporting the *putschists* in 1991-1992 who rolled back the power of the first anti-Soviet president and national hero, Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Ilia II has run the Church alone for many years, and his activity in the political arena has been characterized as behind-the-scenes participation, as well as representative or ceremonial participation in public events, such as ceremonial parades, opening sessions parliaments, annual presidential speeches, etc. But the Patriarchate refrained from promoting itself as an explicit political actor and tried to dissociate itself at least formally from political confrontation.

This has changed with the Patriarch's deteriorating health. He has been losing control of the Church, and there has been information periodically disseminated about his possible resignation. While gossip spread, the Patriarch surprised everyone: on November 23, 2017, he issued a special decree on the introduction of the post of Patriarchal *Locum Tenens* and [appointed](#) Shio Mujiri. This was preceded by a story about an unsuccessful attempt to poison the Patriarch. One clergyman was arrested for the crime, although he was convicted of attempting to poison not the Patriarch but his assistant. Apparently, the convicted clergyman was an associate of one of the contenders for the Patriarchal throne, and the scandal damaged the image of the Church.

Henceforth, a dual power structure began in the Church. Gradually it became unclear who was the administrative leader of the Patriarchate, and Mujiri became mentioned as a possible future Patriarch. He studied at the Moscow Theological Academy and Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University. He is a close friend of Georgian businessman and pro-Russian politician Levan Vasadze, who has close ties with Russian geopolitical strategist Aleksandr Dugin. In 2021, Vasadze created the party, "Unity, Essence, Hope," which is characterized by its ultra-radicalism, nationalist, and anti-Western sentiment.

Traditionally, it is believed that the Georgian Church as an institution and a multitude of Georgian clergymen play a soft power role for Russia in Georgia. The Patriarchate has been a mediator between Georgia and Russia on some issues. Sympathy for Russia as a country – with the same religion – is often preached during services. While the Church tries to remain discreet about its relationship with Russia, some scandalous spiritual leaders do not hide their sympathy for Moscow. For instance, Archbishop of Skhalta and member of the Holy Synod of the Church, Spiridon Abuladze, [said](#) during a church service that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are one people and that in Ukraine, bloodshed was provoked by the West. He also mentioned that Catholics have rejoiced that

Orthodox Christians in Ukraine have been killing each other and he predicts that Russia will unite all Slavic people, creating such a strong state that even Satan will be afraid. Another leader, Metropolitan of Kutaisi-Gaenati Ioane Gamrekeli, [claims](#) that a revival began in Georgia under Tsarist Russia. It is also worth mentioning that the Georgian Church does not presently recognize the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church.

In a recent development, excerpts from released secret papers [indicate](#) that Georgian special services collected information about the connections of Georgian religious leaders with Russia, including with the Russian security services, and also with the Georgian criminal world. Apparently, some religious leaders conveyed information to Russia about the political situation in Georgia and happenings at the Patriarchate. The files contain information about the property, income, and lifestyle of the highest Georgian hierarchs. They appear to confirm that Georgian Dream strives to weaken the influence of the Church, has blackmailed its representatives, and uses it to preserve power.

The Call of the Church's Conservative Voice

There have long been suspicions about the ambivalent ties of the Georgian Patriarchate with Russia in the name of pan-Orthodox solidarity, and lately, anti-Western rhetoric on the part of the country's religious leaders has been louder and louder. Many local religious leaders insist on the unacceptability of liberal and Western values and predict an apocalypse in the event of a rapprochement between Georgia and the West. For instance, Archbishop Abuladze [said](#), "In the USA, there are big black houses with the inscription: House of Satan." Archbishop of Vani and Baghdati Anton Bulukhia called on the authorities to hold a new referendum on the possible entry of Georgia into NATO, being sure that the population would be against it.

At first, Georgian theologians did not consider Mujiri as a representative of the radical wing of the Patriarchate, although already in 2021, it was with his name that the strengthening of anti-liberal sentiments in the Patriarchate was associated. On August 2, 2021, against the backdrop of aggravated confrontation between the Church and liberal groups of Georgian society, Mujiri [stated](#), "Another attempt to inculcate a godless ideology in Georgia will fail." With this statement, he confirmed that he is driving the conservative, if not reactionary, policies of the Church.

Under the semi-leadership of Mujiri, the Church is no longer such a single monolith as before. There are many warring factions inside the Church that are in close contact with the political elite. Dozens of ordinary clergymen have appeared in the public arena, and the highest religious hierarchs (Bishops and Metropolitans) are overly involved in social and political life. There seem to be more scandals; some [priests](#) have gone rogue, some fight among themselves or with the parishioners, and some beat or insult journalists. It also appears that the Patriarchate acts in sync more and more with the authorities on some issues. A soft example may be when it banned journalists from working in churches this

year. Mujiri has demanded the adoption of a law on insulting the feelings of believers similar to the "anti-blashphemy" law in Russia, which is perceived in society as an attempt to legitimize censorship.

The most aggressive and politicized wing of the Church is led by the Metropolitan of Bodbe, Archbishop Jakob Yakobashvili. Some activists have accused him of participating as a fighter in a paramilitary unit in the 1991-1992 Civil War against the legally elected authorities, although he himself categorically denies this. Prior to the appointment of Mujiri as the *locum tenens*, Archbishop Jakob claimed the seat of the Patriarch. Having lost hope for this, he then thought about forming his own political party. He has been a supporter of Georgian Dream and has [indicated](#), for example, that he would "not exclude an armed struggle" against the government if former president Mikheil Saakashvili returned to power. Taken together, such aggressive rhetoric from Church representatives has become a common form of communication with Georgian society.

Conclusion

The politicization and radicalization of the Church, the strengthening of ultra-conservative and pro-Russian groups within the Patriarchate, as well as the tendency of the highest hierarchs of the Church to live a luxurious life, have caused negative reactions from society. Some call for Church reforms, but given the still very high popular ratings of the Patriarchate and the Church itself, the entire political elite refrains from criticizing it. The exception may be liberal NGOs, a narrow circle of theologians, and a few small parties, which, due to their modest political ambitions, do not rely on the support of believers anyway, and are asking for the abolition of the Concordat. Still, [according](#) to an August 2021 IRI survey, 80 percent of the population has a positive attitude toward the Church, dwarfing all other figures and institutions. But the downward trend in popularity is evident: its rating was colossal and amounted to 95 percent at the early stage of the rule of Georgian Dream. Nonetheless, for the political elite in such conditions, there are only two choices: to enter into political resistance to the Church or contribute to the transformation of the political system of Georgia into a theocratic regime.