

Georgia’s European Choice and the Role of the Orthodox Church in Civilizational Transformation: An Analysis of Ilia II’s Public Discourse and Prospects

საქართველოს ევროპული არჩევანი და მართლმადიდებელი ეკლესიის როლი
ცივილიზაციურ ტრანსფორმაციაში: ილია II-ის საჯარო დისკურსის ანალიზი და
პერსპექტივები

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Abstract

Introduction: This study aims to examine how Georgia’s European choice is conceptualized in the public discourse of Ilia II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, and to assess the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the cultural and symbolic legitimation of European integration. **Methods:** The study employs a qualitative thematic and discourse analysis. It examines several key public statements and epistles delivered by Ilia II between 2014 and 2023 that directly address Georgia’s European choice, integration with the European Union, democracy, national identity, and cultural heritage. The primary sources are analyzed in the context of the existing academic literature on Georgia–EU institutional relations and the role of the Orthodox Church. **Results:** The analysis identified five major frames in Ilia II’s European discourse: (1) Georgia as a historical part of Christian Europe; (2) European integration combined with the preservation of national and religious identity; (3) European democratic institutions as mechanisms for safeguarding peace and freedom; (4) European integration as a reciprocal relationship in which Georgia not only benefits from Europe but also contributes culturally and spiritually to the European community; and (5) support for major stages of rapprochement with the European Union and their interpretation as confirmation of Georgia’s historical European choice. At the same time, Ilia II’s officially pro-European position should not be equated with a uniform position among all clergy or groups within the Georgian Orthodox Church. **Conclusion:** In Ilia II’s public discourse, European integration is presented not as the mechanical importation of a Western model, but as the realization of Georgia’s historical and civilizational belonging. A distinctive feature of this discourse is the linking of the European choice with Christian heritage and the preservation of national identity. Such a framing may contribute to the cultural legitimation of European integration among social groups for whom Orthodox Christianity constitutes an important component of national identity.

Keywords: European integration; Georgia; Ilia II; Orthodox Church; European identity; civilizational choice; Christian values; national identity; democracy.

აბსტრაქტი

შესავალი: წინამდებარე კვლევის მიზანია შეისწავლოს, თუ როგორ არის კონცეპტუალიზებული საქართველოს ევროპული არჩევანი სრულიად საქართველოს კათოლიკოს-პატრიარქის, ილია II-ის საჯარო დისკურსში, და შეაფასოს საქართველოს



მართლმადიდებელი ეკლესიის როლი ევროპული ინტეგრაციის კულტურულ და სიმბოლურ ლეგიტიმაციაში. **მეთოდები:** კვლევაში გამოყენებულია თვისებრივი თემატური და დისკურს-ანალიზი. მასში განხილულია 2014-2023 წლებში ილია II-ის მიერ წარმოთქმული რამდენიმე საკვანძო საჯარო გამოსვლა და ეპისტოლე, რომლებიც უშუალოდ ეხება საქართველოს ევროპულ არჩევანს, ევროკავშირთან ინტეგრაციას, დემოკრატიას, ეროვნულ იდენტობასა და კულტურულ მემკვიდრეობას. პირველადი წყაროები გაანალიზებულია საქართველო-ევროკავშირის ინსტიტუციური ურთიერთობებისა და მართლმადიდებელი ეკლესიის როლის შესახებ არსებული აკადემიური ლიტერატურის კონტექსტში. **შედეგები:** ანალიზმა ილია II-ის ევროპულ დისკურსში ხუთი ძირითადი ჩარჩო (ფრეიმი) გამოკვეთა: (1) საქართველო, როგორც ქრისტიანული ევროპის ისტორიული ნაწილი; (2) ევროპული ინტეგრაცია ეროვნული და რელიგიური იდენტობის შენარჩუნებასთან სინთეზში; (3) ევროპული დემოკრატიული ინსტიტუტები, როგორც მშვიდობისა და თავისუფლების დაცვის მექანიზმები; (4) ევროპული ინტეგრაცია, როგორც ორმხრივი ურთიერთობა, რომელშიც საქართველო არა მხოლოდ სარგებელს იღებს ევროპისგან, არამედ კულტურული და სულიერი წვლილიც შეაქვს ევროპულ თანამეგობრობაში; და (5) ევროკავშირთან დაახლოების ძირითადი ეტაპების მხარდაჭერა და მათი ინტერპრეტაცია, როგორც საქართველოს ისტორიული ევროპული არჩევანის დადასტურება. ამავდროულად, ილია II-ის ოფიციალურად პროევროპული პოზიცია არ უნდა გაიგვიდეს საქართველოს მართლმადიდებელი ეკლესიის ყველა სასულიერო პირისა თუ ჯგუფის ერთგვაროვან პოზიციასთან. **დასკვნა:** ილია II-ის საჯარო დისკურსში ევროპული ინტეგრაცია წარმოდგენილია არა როგორც დასავლური მოდელის მექანიკური იმპორტი, არამედ როგორც საქართველოს ისტორიული და ცივილიზაციური კუთვნილების რეალიზება. ამ დისკურსის დამახასიათებელი ნიშანია ევროპული არჩევანის დაკავშირება ქრისტიანულ მემკვიდრეობასთან და ეროვნული იდენტობის შენარჩუნებასთან. ასეთმა ჩარჩო-სტრუქტურამ შესაძლოა ხელი შეუწყოს ევროპული ინტეგრაციის კულტურულ ლეგიტიმაციას იმ სოციალურ ჯგუფებში, რომელთათვისაც მართლმადიდებლური ქრისტიანობა ეროვნული იდენტობის მნიშვნელოვან კომპონენტს წარმოადგენს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ევროპული ინტეგრაცია; საქართველო; ილია II; მართლმადიდებელი ეკლესია; ევროპული იდენტობა; ცივილიზაციური არჩევანი; ქრისტიანული ღირებულებები; ეროვნული იდენტობა; დემოკრატია.

Introduction

Georgia's European orientation represents one of the most enduring directions of the country's contemporary foreign policy. Although integration with the European Union is often examined from the perspectives of political institutions, economic modernization, and legal harmonization, in the Georgian context the European choice also carries important identity-based and civilizational dimensions. Georgian political discourse frequently portrays the relationship with Europe not as a new geopolitical choice, but rather as a return to a historical and cultural space (Ó Beacháin & Coene, 2014).

The institutionalization of Georgia's European choice became particularly visible with the Association Agreement between Georgia and the European Union, whose preamble explicitly recognizes "the European aspirations and European choice of Georgia" and links political association to the shared values of democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law (European Union & Georgia, 2014). Subsequently, European integration also became a constitutional commitment of Georgia: Article 78 of the Constitution requires constitutional bodies, within the scope of their competences, to take all necessary measures to ensure Georgia's full integration into the European Union (Constitution of Georgia, Article 78).

Christianity occupies a particularly important place in the formation of Georgia's European identity. Within the Georgian national narrative, Orthodox Christianity has historically developed as one of the principal components of national identity, cultural continuity, and collective state memory. Accordingly, the Georgian Orthodox Church is not merely a religious institution; it possesses substantial symbolic and social capital and may influence the interpretation of national identity and political choices (Demurishvili, 2016; Margvelashvili, 2018).

Against this background, the position of Ilia II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, toward Georgia’s European integration is of particular significance. Given his longstanding public authority, his statements concerning Europe extend beyond the expression of a personal view on foreign policy and may be regarded as an important source of religious and cultural legitimation of Georgia’s European choice.

At the same time, the issue is more complex than simply classifying the Church as either a “pro-European” or “anti-European” institution. Research indicates that the official discourse of the Georgian Orthodox Church does not always coincide with the positions of individual clergy. Within the Church, discourses supportive of European integration coexist with perspectives that are skeptical toward certain Western liberal values (Gordeziani, 2016; Khakhutaishvili, 2024; Margvelashvili, 2018).

Accordingly, the principal research question of this study is formulated as follows: How is Georgia’s European choice constructed in Ilia II’s public discourse, and what role does this discourse assign to Orthodox identity in the country’s European transformation?

The central argument of the study is that Ilia II legitimizes European integration through a framework of **civilizational continuity**: Georgia does not change its identity by moving toward Europe; rather, it reclaims its historical place within the European space. At the same time, support for integration in his discourse is linked to the preservation of national, religious, and cultural distinctiveness.

Methodology

This study constitutes a qualitative case analysis based on thematic discourse analysis. The period under examination is 2014–2023, during which Georgia progressed from the stage of association with the European Union to obtaining EU candidate status.

Public statements by Ilia II were purposively selected for analysis when they directly addressed Europe, the European Union, Georgia’s European choice, and European values. These included:

1. the 2014 Christmas Epistle;
2. the statement made during the March 2014 meeting with European Commissioner Štefan Füle;
3. public statements concerning European democracy made in 2015;
4. the statement made during a meeting with a representative of the European Union in December 2015; and
5. the statement of November 9, 2023 concerning the European Commission’s recommendation to grant Georgia EU candidate status.

The texts were coded according to five thematic categories: civilizational belonging; identity and diversity; democracy and peace; cultural reciprocity; and the institutional legitimation of European integration.

The primary sources were compared with the existing academic literature concerning the Georgian Orthodox Church, Georgian national identity, and European integration. The purpose of the study is not to determine the foreign-policy position of the Georgian Orthodox Church as a whole; rather, the unit of analysis is the official public discourse of Ilia II.

Georgia as a Historical Part of Christian Europe

One of the central elements of Ilia II’s European discourse is the historical and civilizational justification of Georgia’s European identity. In his 2014 Christmas Epistle, the Patriarch stated that “through its development and culture, Georgia is part of Christian Europe” (Ilia II, 2014a).

This formulation is significant because it frames European integration not merely as a project of political modernization, but also as an expression of historical belonging. Europe is presented as a shared Christian and cultural space from which Georgia was temporarily separated by historical circumstances, while culturally remaining an integral part of it.

This approach is consistent with the narrative of a “return to Europe” that has become established in Georgian political discourse. Ó Beacháin and Coene (2014) argue that the construction of Georgia’s European identity is significantly based on the idea of the country’s historical Europeaness. From this perspective, European integration can be understood not as a transformation of identity, but as the political institutionalization of an already existing identity.

Ilia II’s discourse adds a religious dimension to this narrative. Georgia’s Christian history becomes one of the arguments supporting the country’s European belonging. Orthodoxy is therefore not presented as

a basis for opposition to the West; on the contrary, it is invoked as a historical argument for Georgia's place within Europe.

European Integration and the Preservation of National Identity

The second major component of Ilia II's European vision concerns the compatibility of integration with the preservation of national identity. In the 2014 Christmas Epistle, while supporting Georgia's European orientation, the Patriarch emphasized that European institutions should take into consideration the "traditions and ways of thinking" of individual countries (Ilia II, 2014a).

This argument reflects a vision close to the principle of **"unity in diversity"**: European integration is acceptable insofar as it does not require the elimination of national, cultural, and religious particularities.

During his March 2014 meeting with European Commissioner Štefan Füle, Ilia II more explicitly rejected the perception that the Georgian Orthodox Church opposed the country's European integration. He stated that the Church would "do everything" to ensure that the idea of Georgia's integration into the European Union was realized (Ilia II, 2014b).

This statement carried significance at two levels. Internationally, it indicated to European partners that the head of one of Georgia's most influential social institutions did not oppose the country's European orientation. Domestically, it reduced the perceived contradiction between Orthodox identity and integration into the European Union.

For scholarly analysis, however, it is important to distinguish the Patriarch's official position from the broader internal discourse of the Church. Margvelashvili (2018) and Gordeziani (2016) demonstrate that different attitudes toward Europe coexist within the Georgian Orthodox Church. Some clergy regard European integration as offering prospects for national security and development, whereas others perceive Western secularism and liberal values as potential challenges to traditional identity.

It is therefore more accurate to state that Ilia II's position establishes an **official discursive framework supportive of Georgia's European choice**, while not necessarily implying complete value-based consensus within the Church.

Democracy, Freedom, and Peace

Ilia II's European discourse is not based solely on the argument of Christian heritage. Democratic institutions, freedom, and peace also occupy an important place within it.

Speaking about Europe in 2015, the Patriarch stated that Georgia was attracted by the values possessed by Europe and placed particular emphasis on the importance of democratic institutions. He also referred to Europe's historical experience, including the two world wars, thereby emphasizing the significance of contemporary democratic institutions for the maintenance of peace (Netgazeti, 2024).

From this perspective, Europe in Ilia II's discourse is not merely a symbol of a shared Christian past. It also represents a contemporary political order whose value is defined by democratic institutions and mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflict.

This perspective is also significant in the context of Georgia's Soviet experience. In 2014, the Patriarch contrasted Georgia's European trajectory with the experience of the oppressive communist regime (Ilia II, 2014b). European integration can therefore also be interpreted as a process of institutional and normative distancing from an authoritarian past.

At the same time, from a scholarly perspective, it would be excessive to claim that Ilia II regards democracy as the **only** possible path to peace. A more precise interpretation is that, in his public discourse, European democratic institutions are presented as important safeguards of peace, freedom, and stability.

European Integration as Mutual Exchange: Georgia's Contribution to the European Community

One of the most notable elements of Ilia II's European vision is his understanding of integration as a process of mutual exchange. In December 2015, he stated that Georgia should consider "not only what Europe will bring to us, but also what we will bring to Europe" (Ilia II, 2015).

Within this formulation, Georgia is no longer presented merely as a recipient of economic, political, or security benefits from the European Union. Instead, the country is regarded as a cultural subject capable of enriching Europe in its own right.

In this context, Ilia II refers to Georgia’s ancient Christian tradition, early Georgian literary culture, the history of translating the Gospel, and Georgian art. European integration is thus endowed with the meaning of a reciprocal cultural relationship.

This understanding of European integration as mutual exchange has several important implications. First, it challenges a hierarchical center–periphery model in which Georgia is perceived solely as a recipient of European norms and standards. Second, it connects integration with a narrative of national dignity: Georgia should enter the European space not by rejecting its history, but by drawing upon it.

Within the same context, Ilia II expresses the hope that Europe will also contribute to the preservation of Georgian culture (Ilia II, 2015). Accordingly, in his discourse the European Union is presented not as a mechanism for homogenizing national identities, but as a space in which diverse cultural traditions can be protected.

EU Candidate Status in 2023: A Symbolic and Institutional Milestone

The year 2023 marked an important turning point in Georgia’s European integration process. On November 8, 2023, the European Commission recommended that Georgia be granted candidate status for membership in the European Union. On November 9, Ilia II responded to the decision, noting that the Georgian Church had supported European integration “from the very beginning” and expressing the hope that Georgia would make a “valuable contribution” to the further development of the “great European family” (Ilia II, 2023).

An important chronological distinction should be made: in November 2023, Georgia had **not yet formally received candidate status**. The European Commission had only recommended that the status be granted. Georgia was formally granted candidate status by the European Council on **December 14, 2023** (European Council, 2023).

Ilia II’s 2023 statement incorporates nearly all the major elements of the European discourse developed in preceding years: Georgia’s European choice; the uniqueness of Georgian culture; the preservation of Christian and spiritual values; the Church’s support for integration; and Georgia’s capacity to make its own contribution to the European community.

The expression “from the very beginning” is particularly significant because the Patriarch thereby presents his position not as a response to a particular political conjuncture, but as part of a longstanding and consistent orientation.

The European Council’s decision to grant Georgia candidate status subsequently provided an institutional basis for this discourse. Georgia’s “European perspective,” which had been recognized in 2022, was transformed into formal candidate status in 2023 (European Council, 2023).

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Ilia II’s European discourse cannot be adequately explained through a simple **pro-European versus anti-European** dichotomy. His position toward European integration may instead be characterized as an **identity-based pro-European discourse**.

The Patriarch supports Georgia’s European choice, but conceptualizes integration into the European Union not as cultural assimilation, but as a process compatible with the preservation and development of national identity. This distinguishes his discourse from a conventional secular narrative of Europeanization.

The findings partly support Margvelashvili’s (2018) argument concerning the paradoxical relationship between Georgian European identity and Orthodox Christianity. On the one hand, Christianity is invoked to confirm Georgia’s European belonging; on the other hand, social and cultural developments in the West are perceived in some ecclesiastical discourses as potential threats to national and religious traditions.

Khakhutaishvili (2024) similarly points to the complex nature of the Georgian Orthodox Church’s involvement in European integration: official support coexists with skepticism toward certain aspects of Western values.

The significance of Ilia II’s discourse therefore lies partly in its potential to bridge this tension. His argument is not based on a choice between “Europe” and “Georgian identity,” but on the proposition that Georgia can integrate into the European space **while retaining its Georgian identity**.

Given the Church’s considerable public influence, such discourse may perform an important legitimating function. Where Orthodox Christianity constitutes a significant element of citizens’ national

self-identification, support for the European course by the Church's highest-ranking hierarchy may reduce perceptions of incompatibility between Europe and traditional identity.

Analytical caution is nevertheless required. Ilia II's support does not mean that the Georgian Orthodox Church as a whole maintains a uniform position toward Europeanization. Existing studies demonstrate the presence of different political and normative orientations within the Church (Gordeziani, 2016; Khakhutaishvili, 2024; Margvelashvili, 2018). It is therefore more appropriate to understand the Church's role as **complex and multilayered**, rather than to characterize it solely as a "guarantor" of Georgia's European choice.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a purposive selection of Ilia II's public statements and does not encompass all of the Patriarch's epistles and public addresses. Second, the object of analysis is the Patriarch's official discourse rather than the institutional position of the Georgian Orthodox Church as a whole.

Third, discursive support in itself does not allow an assessment of its causal impact on public attitudes toward the European Union. Establishing such an effect would require quantitative public-opinion research or experimental designs capable of assessing the extent to which Church messages influence the attitudes of different social groups toward European integration.

Future research should extend the analysis beyond 2023 and compare the Patriarch's official discourse with the views of members of the Holy Synod, clergy, parishioners, and different age groups. It would also be valuable to examine how narratives of Orthodox Europeanization evolve under conditions of political polarization.

Conclusion

The analysis of Ilia II's public discourse demonstrates that, in his understanding, Georgia's European choice extends beyond the sphere of foreign-policy orientation. Europe is represented as a historical and civilizational space to which Georgia is connected through Christian heritage, culture, and historical experience.

Three interrelated principles are particularly important in this vision. The first is **belonging**: Georgia is a historical part of Christian Europe. The second is **identity preservation**: European integration should not entail the loss of the Georgian language, faith, culture, and traditions. The third is **mutual exchange (reciprocity)**: in its relationship with Europe, Georgia should not merely be a recipient, but also a contributor carrying its own historical and cultural values.

The explicit support for integration into the European Union expressed in 2014, the emphasis on democracy and cultural reciprocity in 2015, and the support for the recommendation to grant candidate status in 2023 together form a relatively consistent public discourse in which Georgia's European choice is presented as compatible with Georgian Orthodox and national identity.

Accordingly, Ilia II's discourse may be regarded as an important source of the **cultural and symbolic legitimization of Georgia's European choice**. Given the Georgian Orthodox Church's considerable social significance, such a religious and civilizational framing may contribute to the perception of European integration not as a rejection of national identity, but as one possible means of protecting and developing it.

At the same time, scholarly accuracy requires distinguishing the Patriarch's official position from the diverse discourses present within the Georgian Orthodox Church. Taking this distinction into account allows the Church's role in Georgia's European transformation to be understood not in one-dimensional terms, but as a complex interaction among religious identity, national self-understanding, democratic modernization, and European integration.

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