

## **Pope Makes Contentious Georgia Visit**

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Low turn-out and demonstrations mar landmark trip.

Protests by radical members of the Christian Orthodox church disrupted last week's visit by Pope Francis to Georgia.

Pope Francis, the spiritual leader of over 1.2 billion Catholics worldwide, came on the invitation of Georgian president Giorgi Margvelashvili and the leader of Georgia's Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ilia II.

Georgia is overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian, with only about 20,000 people or around 0.8 per cent of the population belonging to the Catholic faith.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has an extreme right wing that is strictly against any dialogue with the Catholic Church, from which they split in the 11th century.

Since coming to office in 2013, Pope Francis has made a point of reaching out to the Orthodox church to bridge the schism. One week ahead of parliamentary elections in the country of 3.7 million, the pope said he wanted to bring a message of peaceful coexistence to a post-Soviet state.

Nonetheless, a small radical Orthodox group, among them several priests, rallied outside Tbilisi's Vatican embassy ahead of the pope's September 30 visit. They said that Pope Francis was a threat to Orthodox Christians and aimed to spread Catholicism in the region.

The same group protested outside Tbilisi airport when the Pope arrived, and in front of in front of the Mikheil Meskhi stadium in Tbilisi where he celebrated Mass on the second day of his visit.

The stadium has a capacity of over 27,000, but only some 3,000 people, including government officials and the diplomatic corps, turned out for the Mass. This made for an unusual sight, as papal visits tend to attract throngs of crowds.

The protestors also gathered in Mtskheta, when Francis met the Georgian Patriarch Ilia II in the Svetitskhoveli cathedral, the seat of the Georgian Orthodox church.

In his speech at the president's palace in the capital Tbilisi, the Pontiff underlined the importance of respecting minorities and accepting those who are different.

"Far from being exploited as grounds for turning discord into conflict and conflict into interminable tragedy, distinctions along ethnic, linguistic, political or religious lines can and must be for everyone a source of mutual enrichment in favour of the common good," he said.

Despite the protests, the Pope said the trip had been a success.

"I had two surprises in Georgia," Pope Francis told reporters following his visit. "One, Georgia. I have never imagined so much culture, so much faith, so much Christianity...It is a believing people and an ancient Christian culture! A people of so many martyrs.

"I discovered something that I didn't know: the breadth of the Georgian faith. The second surprise was the patriarch: he is a man of God. This man has moved me. I many times have found that I left with the heart... moved and full of the sensitivity of having found a man of God, truly a man of God."

Early on October 2, Pope Francis left Georgia and headed to neighbouring Azerbaijan for a one-day visit.

**Location:** [Georgia](#)

**Topic:** [Life](#)

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