

Georgia's Patriarch Baptizes 400 Babies

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One of 400 babies being baptized at a cathedral in Tbilisi on Sunday. **Shakh Aivazov**

TBILISI, Georgia — The patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church has presided over the baptism of hundreds of babies in a Tbilisi cathedral as part of an effort credited with helping raise his country's birthrate.

Patriarch Ilia II has promised to become the godfather of all babies born into Orthodox Christian families who already have two or more children. Since he began the mass baptisms in 2008, he has gained nearly 11,000 godchildren.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has said the patriarch deserves much of the credit for the rising birthrate, which in 2010 was 25 percent higher than in 2005. The number of abortions also declined by nearly 50 percent over the same five-year period.

Parents of the 400 babies baptized by an array of priests last Sunday said the patriarch was instrumental in their decision to have a third or fourth child.

"This is a wonderful day for my family," said Tamar Kapanadze, a 33-year-old father of four. "Our fourth son, Lashko, was baptized by the patriarch himself, and before this he baptized

our daughter Liziko. This is why we decided to have a fourth child."

Lamara Georgadze, whose fourth child was among those baptized this week, said she and her husband also answered the patriarch's call to have more children.

"The Holy Father reminded us all of the importance of increasing the birthrate," she said. "There are too few of us Georgians, and therefore this is very important."

Saakashvili has set a goal of increasing Georgia's population from 4.5 million to 5 million by 2015.

Since coming to power in 2004, Saakashvili has focused on modernizing and expanding the economy, attracting foreign investment and pushing for closer ties with the United States and Europe. With Georgia's population aging, he is eager to see a new generation born that could help secure the country's future.

In his annual address to parliament in February, he said the government would give parents a one-time payment the equivalent of about \$600 for a third child and double that amount for a fourth child.

"This will help raise the birthrate," Saakashvili said. "The patriarch has already taken steps in this direction. We should be thankful to him for continually reminding the Georgian people that we should multiply."

The president and his Dutch wife have two children.

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