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ELIZABETH II AS A PHENOMENON OF SUPRAPOLITICAL META-AUTHORITY IN A MEDIATIZED SOCIETY

Yevhen Nikolskiy,

*Doctor of Divinity, Professor, Professor at the Department of Theology,
Carpathian University named after Augustyn Voloshyn (Uzhhorod, Ukraine)*

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3585-4781

eugenius-09@ukr.net

Anna Lill-Bezak,

*Master of Theology, Master of Psychology, Master of East Slavic Philology, Senior Lecturer,
Augustyn Voloshyn Carpathian University;*

Uzhhorod Ukrainian Theological Academy (Uzhhorod, Ukraine)

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-8783-3276

anna.lillbezak@gmail.com

Abstract. The article analyzes the image of Queen Elizabeth II in global cultural memory and examines the phenomenon of her suprapolitical meta-authority. The aim of the study is to identify the mechanisms through which the symbolic legitimacy of the monarchy was formed under conditions of a mediatized society and historical turbulence. It is demonstrated that the Queen's long reign shaped a unique type of symbolic power grounded in repetition, ritual, and the moral authority of service. The paper substantiates the thesis of the symbolic conclusion of the "long twentieth century" and the transition to an era of accelerated historical time. Particular attention is devoted to the role of television and digital media in constructing the phenomenon of the "televisual monarchy." The study concludes that Elizabeth II's mode of rule serves as an indicator of emerging models of symbolic leadership in the twenty-first century and as their benchmark. Methodologically, the research relies on an interdisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, political anthropology, media studies, and cultural memory studies.

Key words: Elizabeth II, monarchy, meta-authority, symbolic power, suprapolitical leadership, media ritual, cultural memory, digital era, historical time.

Introduction. The death of the Queen provoked an unprecedented wave of global reaction that extended far beyond a political or national event. The scale and character of public mourning indicated that this was not merely the conclusion of a reign, but the loss of a particular form of symbolic presence that for decades had functioned as a stabilizer of historical time. This circumstance raised a broader scholarly question: how is suprapolitical authority formed in the contemporary world, and why did the figure of the British Queen become one of the most striking examples of such a phenomenon?

Despite the considerable number of historical and political studies devoted to the British monarchy, the phenomenon of collective memory surrounding Elizabeth II remains insufficiently conceptualized within an interdisciplinary framework. Particular attention should be given to the integration of historiographical, anthropological, and media-analytical approaches, which make it possible to consider the monarchy not merely as a political institution, but as a symbolic system capable of constructing perceptions of duration, stability, and moral legitimacy.

Thus, the research problem lies in identifying the mechanisms underlying the formation of global memory about Elizabeth II and clarifying the role of media, rituals, and cultural representations in shaping the phenomenon of suprapolitical leadership under conditions of transforming publicness (Clancy L., 2019).

The aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the image of Elizabeth II as a symbolic center of stability in global cultural memory and to determine the historical, media-related, and anthropological factors that ensured the formation of her suprapolitical authority, as well as its place in the transition from the “long twentieth century” to the digital age.

Main text. At the outset, it should be noted that the theoretical foundation of this study rests upon the concepts of collective memory developed by M. Halbwachs (1992), cultural memory as elaborated by J. Assmann (2011), as well as approaches to media rituals and media events proposed by D. Dayan and E. Katz (1992) and N. Couldry (2003). Reference to these theoretical frameworks makes it possible to interpret the figure of Elizabeth II not merely as a historical monarch, but as a symbolic node of cultural memory within a mediatized public sphere (Goldenshtein K. O., 2023).

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the British monarchy existed not only as a politico-legal construction but as a system of symbolic presence – an identifiable “form of order” that outlived changes in governments, ideologies, and media environments. However, it was precisely during the reign of Elizabeth II that this presence acquired a particular degree of personalization: “The Queen” ceased to function as a general title and became a proper name requiring no clarification.

In this phenomenon, the linguistic contraction itself is less significant than the fact that the title lost its multiplicity and came to denote a specific individual in public consciousness (Petrakov M. O., 2024).

This effect was not the result of demonstrative exceptionalism or charismatic pressure, since throughout her reign Elizabeth II consistently emphasized not her “specialness,” but the very form of service (The Royal Family, 1952). The effect of uniqueness was formed gradually, through the repetition of the experience of encountering the same stable figure at key points of historical time – that is, through the accumulation of mediatized ritual “testimonies of presence,” rather than through political articulation. (Couldry N., 2003).

“The second half of the twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty-first century in the history of Great Britain may be characterized as the era of Queen Elizabeth II (or the ‘Second Elizabethan’ era). Her record-breaking reign was marked by the transformation of the British monarchy toward modernization, comprehensive changes in the political system of the state, and shifts in its international position after the Second World War” (Hrubinko, Buhlai, 2022:136).

It is important to delineate the historical and territorial framework of her reign. It lasted from 1952 to 2022 and was the longest in the history of the British monarchy. During this period, fifteen prime ministers served in the United Kingdom – from Winston Churchill to Liz Truss – an indicator in itself of an extraordinary degree of institutional continuity personified in the figure of the monarch (Dayan & Katz, 1992).

Equally significant is the fact that at the moment of Elizabeth II’s accession to the throne, the British Empire still retained substantial colonial possessions, whereas at the time of her death the United Kingdom functioned as a post-imperial state within the context of mature globalization. The biographical arc of the monarch almost mirrors the key transformations of the global political order in the second half of the twentieth and the first quarter of the twenty-first centuries (Markovich S. G., 2022).

Let us also provide several important biographical details. Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor was born on 21 April 1926 in London. Her accession to the throne on 6 February 1952 was not originally anticipated in historical terms: as the daughter of the second son of King George V, she was not considered a direct heir.

“The reign of Queen Elizabeth II (full birth name – Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor) formally and legally began in 1953 following her coronation at the age of 27, although *de facto* she ascended the throne immediately upon the death of her father in February 1952. From birth, the princess appeared to have no real prospect of becoming head of state, as clear favorites – her uncle and her father – stood ahead of her in the line of succession. Elizabeth’s early accession resulted from the abdication of her uncle Edward VIII (who reigned for only eleven months) and the premature death

of her father, George VI. At the same time, Elizabeth's rapid assumption of power signified for British society an additional impulse for post-war recovery" (Hrubinko, Buhlai, 2022: 138).

In this context, it is symbolically significant that the moment of her transition from private life to the role of monarch occurred without special effects or spectacle – on 6 February 1952 she learned of the death of her father, George VI, and of her own accession while on an official visit to Kenya: "in an instant" she ceased to be a princess and became Queen. This situation, in which the accession took place "outside the palace," on a journey, that is, under circumstances where even the staging of a public gesture was impossible, proved to be a meaningful metaphor for her understanding of rule: the transition to the archetype of the Ruler begins not with triumph, but with the awareness of service (The Royal Family, 1992).

It is noteworthy that several years prior to this event, during a visit to South Africa in 1947, Elizabeth publicly articulated her vow of service, declaring that "her whole life – whether it be long or short – shall be devoted to your service" (The Royal Family. "Annus horribilis" speech, 24 November 1992). In retrospect, this early formulation became one of the key elements of her subsequent symbolic image: the promise, which later "coincided" with the fact of longevity, began to function as a source of legitimation through consistency (ABC Australia, 2015).

"By her personal example, Elizabeth II demonstrated the possibility of combining monarchical traditions with innovative forms of court and royal family activity, in such a way that Britons and the entire world, even after the ruler's death, continue with fascination to follow the 'series' about the life and passions of the royal court in the British manner" (Hrubinko, Buhlai, 2022:137).

The transition of an ordinary monarchy into a "televisual" one was likewise emblematic: it is recorded that approximately 27 million viewers in Great Britain watched the broadcast of the coronation on 2 June 1953, while the global audience may have reached around 200 million people (Thompson, 1995).

For many British families, this event became the impetus for acquiring their first television set – symbolically uniting traditional monarchical ritual with the new era of mass media (Nora, 1989).

Subsequently, the obligatory "maintenance of form" by the Queen continued for such a long period that it ceased to be perceived merely as a strategy and began to be experienced as a natural state. It was precisely inner discipline, multiplied by temporal duration, that created the sense of a natural correspondence between title and person: in all events one could observe that the personal never outweighed the official, while the official did not require theatrical self-denial. In this sense, the media world captured not a "persona," but rather the palette and rhythm of an assumed role: sincerity in service and reliability in the repetition of meanings, the predictability of gestures, dignity, and restraint in conduct (Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 1989; Dayan & Katz, 1992).

Throughout her long service one can observe a gradual transformation: the Queen ceased to embody monarchy in the traditional sense of the word – as merely an institution of governing power. Monarchy then began to exist through her in a meta-role – as a way of being present in a world that increasingly lost trust in institutions and sought more comprehensible human forms of authority (Halbwachs, 1992).

Against the historical background of her reign – with wars, ideological ruptures, the dissolution of the imperial structure, waves of terrorism, and shifts in the global balance – the image of Elizabeth II acquired the significance of a kind of historical constant (The Royal Family, 1992). This is particularly important for societies in which modern experience is often lived as a critical experience of rupture: when each new event claims to mark the "end of an era," destroys previous semantic supports, and compels a near-total redefinition of reality (Sky News, 2022).

Certainly, her constant presence did not so much halt change as provide it with boundaries. The very fact that within the space of state symbolism there existed such a figure – one who did not alter her tonality in accordance with the news cycle – created a sense of continuity: even radical events did not

appear as definitive breaks with the past. Here the profound social need for existential, rather than merely administrative, order becomes apparent: people seek not only regulations and procedures, but the feeling that history possesses “form” and “meaning,” that it does not disintegrate into chaotic fragments (Halbwachs, 1992; Connerton, 1989).

Against this background, the almost complete absence in collective memory of references to her concrete political decisions or positions becomes indicative. Such absence does not testify to indifference or weakness. Let us note the factual dimension of monarchical service: according to officially disseminated calculations, by the end of her reign Elizabeth II had undertaken more than 21,000 official public engagements within the United Kingdom, conducted over 1,100 weekly audiences with prime ministers, and received the credentials of more than a thousand diplomats (The Royal Family. “Annus horribilis” speech, 24 November 1992). These figures underscore the scale of the routine component of monarchical presence, which often remains beyond the limits of public perception. The shift of emphasis in the collective perception of the Queen’s image therefore points to a different type of authority, one that does not require political articulation: routine activity remains in the background, while the “tone” and “measure” of presence move to the foreground (Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992).

It is well known that Elizabeth II maintained distance from ongoing conflicts – and it was precisely this distance that enabled the preservation of trust under conditions of constant political polarization. Her “power” in mass perception appears not as an instrument of influence, but as a form of responsibility for the tone and boundaries of public life (Halbwachs, 1992).

This becomes particularly evident in those moments when the Queen did speak – yet spoke rarely, deliberately, and with a precise sense of limit. Instead of daily participation in political commentary, she chose strategically significant points within ritual time. Thus, in 1992, in a speech marking the fortieth anniversary of her Accession, she described that year as an “annus horribilis.” What is important is that this sounded neither as an affective reaction nor as a “justification,” but as a maximally restrained acknowledgment of crisis – a brief phrase that paradoxically restored a sense of reality and proportion. This gesture demonstrates that even within public discourse a monarch may and should function not as a “commentator,” but as a marker of limit – one who does not amplify drama, but attests to its existence.

A similar approach was manifested in her reaction to the death of Diana in 1997: the Queen delivered an address remembered not for its political content, but for the organic manner in which the roles of sovereign, mother, and grandmother were combined. (The Royal Family, 1997). She did not appropriate collective grief, nor did she transform it into a stage for self-presentation; rather, she marked presence and acknowledged loss. In this way, “silent strength” becomes a socio-psychological resource: society is not instructed how to experience the event, yet it is given a sign of sharedness, a minimal framework of solidarity (Assmann, 2011).

Hence the perception that her presence possessed an almost therapeutic significance. The Queen did not offer doctrines nor formulate final solutions, but provided something different – stability of conduct, predictability of gestures, restrained fidelity to form. For societies fatigued by political noise, precisely this absence of demonstrativeness proved especially persuasive: service appeared not as sacrifice or heroism, but as a natural condition – duty accepted once and for all. (Khitrova T. V., 2015).

It is equally important that this stability was not “cold.” Elizabeth II’s mode of service contained a human dimension, yet without crossing into public confession. Her restraint became a political virtue in an age of informational overload, when emotion is frequently deployed as a technology of influence. She was able to be present at moments of collective shock without appropriating them, and for this reason her individual gestures, brief addresses, and ritual appearances often proved more effective than lengthy speeches: they left space for shared experience without foreclosing it through interpretation (Nora, 1989).

Such a form of presence became possible not only because of personal character, but also due to a unique historical convergence of media epochs. The coronation of 2 June 1953 marked the moment when the monarchy effectively entered the era of mass visual experience: ritual ceased to belong solely to a limited circle of those physically present and was transformed into an event that could be “seen from the living room” (Thompson, 1995).

This opened a new space – one of daily observation, in which grandeur was combined with proximity, and symbol with domestic habit. Subsequently, this “domestic” presence was reinforced by regular rituals of address. It is indicative that Elizabeth II delivered her first Christmas Broadcast already in 1952 – by radio from Sandringham – continuing the tradition of her father (The Royal Family, 1952). In 1957, the Christmas format was televised for the first time, and this very change of channel became part of the image: the monarchy did not destroy form, but “relocated” it into new media – from radio to television, from television to the Internet and social platforms (The Royal Family, 1957). Over the decades, channels changed, yet the principle of ritual predictability remained unbroken.

In this manner, a long-term media narrative was formed, within which the Queen became a background figure in the everyday life of several generations. People state that they “grew up with her,” and this is not merely an emotional metaphor: in many biographies Elizabeth II indeed functioned as a stable “background sign” almost everywhere – on stamps, in news reports, in annual addresses, on coins and banknotes, at state ceremonies (ABC Australia, 2015).

Thus emerged a particular type of emotional connection, combining distance and proximity without internal contradiction. The gratitude expressed after her passing was therefore gratitude not so much “for achievements” as for endurance and constancy – as a form of ethical recognition. It reflects an awareness that stability does not arise spontaneously; it requires daily – often invisible – labor to sustain meaning and form (The Royal Family, 2022). In this sense, the Queen’s death became for many a symbolic end of the twentieth century – not chronologically, but existentially: the conclusion of a type of historical time in which pauses, silence, and long-formed reputations were still possible.

An additional dimension of this phenomenon concerns the sacralization of her image. Elizabeth II was known for not concealing the Christian dimension of her self-identification and for regularly speaking of faith in her Christmas messages, where Christ appeared not as a cultural marker but as a source of hope and meaning (The Royal Family, 1957).

In the secular discourse of mourning following her death, respect for her memory was often articulated in religious vocabulary, and interconfessional – even interreligious – solidarity expressed through references to the Queen’s “righteousness” became a noticeable socio-cultural fact (albeit without any formal ecclesiastical procedure of canonization, particularly within the Anglican tradition).

It is also necessary to emphasize the gender dimension of the perception of the Queen’s image. In mass consciousness, female rule in the British tradition is frequently associated not with expansion or the demonstration of force, but with endurance, continuity, and the capacity to sustain constancy over time. Comparisons with Queen Victoria arise almost naturally: in both cases, “greatness” is conceived as the prolonged maintenance of the integrity of the state framework. In the case of Elizabeth II, this “measure of greatness” even acquired a precise calendrical symbol: on 9 September 2015 she became the longest-reigning monarch in British history, surpassing Queen Victoria. Significantly, according to the official position, this record was to pass without celebration – once again underscoring the dominance of the principle of service over that of triumph (GOV.UK, HM, 2015).

At the same time, the phenomenon of global memory surrounding Elizabeth II cannot be explained without analyzing the rituals of collective solidarity at the end of her life. Her funeral and the preceding events fulfilled the function of a global “rite of passage”: millions of people synchronously experienced loss, and disciplined, voluntary participation in ritual constitutes a social fact (Assmann, 2011).

A symbol of this was the queue to Westminster Hall during the lying-in-state: official estimates announced by government representatives indicated approximately 250,000 individuals who attended the farewell ceremony (Reuters, 2022).

Even if, in twenty-first-century culture, rituals are often perceived as “form without content,” this example demonstrated the opposite: ritual can function as an emotional bond of community (Assmann, 2011) when at its center stands a figure capable of embodying a meta-role (Blain N., O'Donnell H. 2013).

Ultimately, the digital age has set limits to the type of power-as-presence embodied by Elizabeth II. The contemporary media cycle demands constant reaction, and silence is frequently interpreted as the absence of position. Scandalization, digital archives, and continuous commentary in media and online transform any public figure into an object of daily evaluation: reputation in such a discourse is shaped not over decades, but by news cycles. In this sense, the Queen was “incompatible” with the logic of immediacy – and precisely for this reason her image acquires the features of a completed historical type.

It is indicative that even in the twenty-first century, when media demanded emotional demonstrativeness, the Queen preserved her manner of “restrained speech” at exceptional moments. Thus, on 5 April 2020, she delivered a rare special address to the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, concluding with the phrase “we will meet again” – a promise of the return of “better days” within a shared horizon of experience (The Royal Family, 2020).

Here once again the same logic is evident: what dominates is not doctrine nor management, but the maintenance of a framework of hope and endurance.

For a deeper understanding of the symbolic scale of Elizabeth II's figure, it is also appropriate to consider her within a broader context of long-term moral authority formed beyond the boundaries of ordinary political activity. This does not imply direct parallels, but rather a comparison of types of leadership that influence society through ethical presence and duration of service. In this sense, the example of Pope John Paul II is illustrative as a figure whose moral authority far exceeded confessional boundaries; in the political dimension, Nelson Mandela stands as a symbol of reconciliation; in the spiritual dimension, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama represents a leader whose influence is primarily ethical. Alongside them, Elizabeth II delineates a distinct type of suprapolitical meta-authority: not reformist, not prophetic, but “framework-oriented” – one that sustains the possibility of dignified movement without the loss of measure.

Conclusions. In public discourse, the Queen increasingly appears not as a monarch with defined functions, but as a benchmark of what power preserving dignity over time may look like. After her death, the monarchy retained formal rituals and procedural correctness, yet lost the gravitational center of presence. For this reason, memory of Elizabeth II belongs not only to history in a narrow sense, but also to the sphere of symbolic anthropology and memory studies: she becomes an image of dignified old age, of dignified completion, a type of presence that helps explain why societies are capable of enduring turbulence without internal disintegration.

At the same time, the proposed interpretation does not claim to provide an exhaustive explanation of the phenomenon; rather, it outlines an analytical perspective for further interdisciplinary research into symbolic leadership under conditions of a mediatised society (The Royal Family, 2022).

The prospects for further research logically follow from this conclusion. First, a comparative analysis of symbolic leadership in different political and cultural contexts appears promising. Second, particular attention should be devoted to the transformation of monarchy under conditions of digital media and new forms of public communication, where symbolic distance has little space to exist. Third, an important direction concerns the study of generational memory: differences in the perception of the Queen among various age groups and media generations. No less promising is the analysis of contemporary state rituals and their role in constructing political community.

Thus, memory of Elizabeth II emerges not merely as an object of historical reflection, but as a key to understanding the transformations of power, authority, and historical time in the twenty-first century. It is precisely in this that its enduring scholarly relevance resides.

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