

MONITORING
THE PARTICIPATION OF
RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS
AND
CLERGYMEN
IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN



INTERIM REPORT
SHORT VERSION



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INTRODUCTION

This is an interim report based on the monitoring conducted by the Democracy Research Institute (DRI). The report reflects the facts and events that took place from 1 August 2021 to 4 October 2021.

CLERGYMEN AND ELECTION CAMPAIGN

It is not uncommon for clergymen to participate in election campaigns in some form or fashion. They were active during the 2020 parliamentary elections as well. This established practice also continued during the 2021 local self-government election campaign. In the reporting period, clergymen attended **twelve** election events of political parties and made numerous statements in support of or against a particular political party or its candidate.

Clergymen also made political statements about the release of recordings allegedly obtained from illegal wiretaps by the State Security Service.

During the ongoing monitoring, DRI observed numerous cases of the use of the authority and influence of clergymen and religious organisations by political parties for electoral benefits. In this regard, the ruling political party was particularly active. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili together with his teammates prayed at ten churches and monasteries¹ and met with high-ranking clergymen on many occasions. It is a new trend that Prime Minister prays at the churches and monasteries (mainly financed or in the process of restoration with the funding of the Cartu Foundation), which was not observed during the campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Another feature that distinguishes the 2021 local self-government election campaign from the 2020 parliamentary elections is the altered and rigid rhetoric of clergymen. During the parliamentary elections, the clergymen maintained that they spoke as laymen.² However, until the day of the local self-government elections, Head of the Public Relations Unit of the Patriarchate, Andria Jaghmaidze, openly stated that they might call upon the parishioners about how to act in the elections.³ Such a call is an attempt to manipulate some members of the society with the church's power and authority and, in general, disregard the autonomy of the will of an individual, which may lead to the violation of the constitutionally guaranteed right (freedom of choice).

The following clergymen were particularly active during the election campaign for local self-government: Bishop Iacob of Bodbe, Archpriest Eliozi Jincharadze, Archpriest Andria Jaghmaidze, Metropolitan Anthony of Vani and Baghdati, Archimandrite Bartholomew Pirtskhalashvili, and Metropolitan Dimitri Shiolashvili.

¹ This term is used on the Prime Minister's official Facebook page.

² Tabula.ge, "Reverend Anthon: When the Opposition Becomes Position, We Will Stand by It Too", 21.09.2020, available at: <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/653533-meupe-antoni-rodesats-opozitsia-mova-pozitsiashi>.

³ Saturday Formula (Facebook page), <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=352333906620925&ref=sharing>.

CLERGYMEN ON THE NOMINATIONS OF SAKREBULO AND MAYORAL CANDIDATES

DRI observed the presence of high-ranking clergymen at the events of nominating candidates. Clergymen attended the nomination of mayoral candidates in the case of two political parties - Georgian Dream and Gakharia for Georgia.

Georgian Dream

From 11 August to 14 September, clergymen attended all ceremonies of the nomination of candidates by Georgian Dream in various municipalities. Photos of clergymen attending nominations were posted on the official Facebook pages of Irakli Gharibashvili and the Government of Georgia. The release of covert recordings on 13 September that involved clergymen and was obtained from wiretaps carried out by the State Security Service, marked a significant turning point in the election environment. It is difficult to conclude whether this would have affected the participation of clergymen in Georgian Dream's election campaign, as the ruling party completed its nomination of mayoral candidates on 14 September. Clergymen attended the nominations as per tradition.

- 11 August. Nomination of Georgian Dream's mayoral candidates in the municipalities of Tsalka, Tetrtskaro and Gardabani;
- 13 August. Nomination of mayoral candidates in Lagodekhi, Kvareli, Akhmeta and Telavi;
- 14 August. Nomination of mayoral candidates for Gurjaani, Sighnaghi, Dedoplistskaro and Sagarejo;
- 26 August. Nomination of mayoral candidates in Samegrelo;
- 4 September. Nomination of mayoral candidates in Imereti;
- 5 September. Nomination of mayoral candidates in Racha;
- 10 September. Nomination of mayoral candidates in Mtskheta-Mtianeti;
- 11 September. Nomination of mayoral candidates in Samtskhe-Javakheti - Borjomi, Adigheni and Akhaltsikhe;
- 12 September. Nomination of mayoral candidates for Aspindza, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda in Vardzia. In his address, the Prime Minister spoke about the future plans and stressed that the rehabilitation of Vardzia was fully funded by the Cartu Foundation and Bidzina Ivanishvili and that this process was ongoing; and
- 14 September. Nomination of mayoral candidates in Shida Kartli. The ceremony of the nomination was held in the yard of the **Gori Cathedral**, where the mayoral candidates for Gori, Kareli, Kaspi and Khashuri were named.

Gakharia for Georgia

The monitoring of the election campaign showed that clergymen and religious issues featured in the election campaign of former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia as well. It started with Gakharia - for Georgia nominating its candidates in the yard of the Metekhi Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, clergymen attended Gakharia's meetings with voters.

- 9 September, a meeting with voters of the village of Ghebi; and
- 9 September, nomination of mayoral candidates in Oni and Ambrolauri.

MANIPULATION BY RELIGION, RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS AND CLERGYMEN

Georgian Dream

Since the day the 2021 local self-government elections were scheduled, the visits of the members of the ruling party to the temples and chapels of the Georgian Orthodox Church have especially intensified. From this day on, Irakli Gharibashvili, together with his party members, mainly visited the churches and monasteries, the construction and rehabilitation of which had been funded by the Cartu Foundation.

The media covered ten cases of Irakli Gharibashvili visiting churches and monasteries:

- 19 August- The Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili visited the Church of St. Nicholas in Ozurgeti and wished a Happy Feast of Transfiguration to Metropolitan Ioseb of Shemokmedi. The Prime Minister was accompanied by President of Parliament Kakha Kuchava, Vice President of Parliament Archil Talakvadze, and Guria State Representative Giorgi Urushadze;
- 26 August- The Prime Minister was in Chkhorotsku and visited the Church of St. Davit Aghmashenebeli under construction;
- 27 August- Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili, together with local clergymen, visited the Memorial House of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and St. Lazarus Restoration Monastery in the village of Dzveli Khibula in Khobi district;
- 27 August- The Prime Minister visited the Metropolitan of Poti and Khobi, Grigol Berbichashvili;
- 1 September- The Prime Minister was at the Diocesan Residence of the Diocese of Khoni and Samtredia in the Cathedral of Davit Aghmashenebeli in Samtredia;
- 1 September- The Head of Government prayed with Metropolitan Anthony of Vani and Baghdati at Vani Cathedral;
- 10 September- Irakli Gharibashvili was with the Archbishop of Stepantsminda and Khevi Yegudiel in the Trinity Church in Gergeti. The Prime Minister was accompanied by President of the Parliament Kakha Kuchava, and MPs - Dimitri Khundadze, Aluda Ghudushauri, Levan Mgaloblishvili and others;
- 11 September- Irakli Gharibashvili, together with President of the Parliament Kakha Kuchava, visited the site of rehabilitation works at the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary in Atskuri. According to the information published on the Facebook page of the Government of Georgia, the project is implemented by the Cartu Foundation. Representatives of Georgian Dream in Atskuri were hosted by the Metropolitan of Akhaltsikhe and Tao-Klarjeti Theodore;
- 11 September- Head of the Government Irakli Gharibashvili, visited Akhaltsikhe University together with Metropolitan Theodore of Akhaltsikhe and Tao-Klarjeti. The Prime Minister met with the academic staff and students together with President of the Parliament Kakha Kuchava, and Minister of Education and Science Mikheil Chkhenkeli;
- 12 September- Head of the Government prayed at the St. Panteleimon the Healer Convent in Abastumani together with the Metropolitan of Akhaltsikhe and Tao-Klarjeti Reverend Theodore, and the Superior of the Convent Hegumene Barbara. According to the Government of Georgia, the process of restoring the monastery began with the initiative and financial support of Bidzina Ivanishvili;

- 14 September- The Prime Minister met with Bishop Svimeon of Surami and Khashuri at the St. Nicholas Cathedral under construction. During the visit, President of the Parliament Kakha Kuchava and other political officials were also present; and
- 14 September- Irakli Gharibashvili met with Metropolitan Andria of Ateni at the Easter Church, which is under construction in Gori. According to the official information of the Government of Georgia, the dome of the church and the central arch were built with the financial support of the Cartu Foundation. Part of the work was done with the help of the local municipality and donations given to the church.

United National Movement

The next day, the leaders of United National Movement, former President Mikheil Saakashvili and party chairman Nika Melia posted their comments regarding illegal wiretaps on Facebook. Both politicians blamed Bidzina Ivanishvili for his attempts to discredit the church. According to them, from the day Ivanishvili came to power, he sought "to destroy all sorts of authorities that would compete with his own power".⁴ According to Saakashvili, Ivanishvili "was always most annoyed" with the Georgian church and "always acted as the arch-enemy of the Patriarch".⁵ Nika Melia held a briefing where he stated that Ivanishvili maintained a particularly aggressive attitude towards the Georgian Orthodox Church, which "had been the most trusted institution in the country for years and had enjoyed the highest authority." The intention to protect the victims (the church and clergymen) from Bidzina Ivanishvili was made clear at the briefing. It must have been aimed at winning over the Orthodox parishioners. According to the chairman of United National Movement, Ivanishvili's regime should be severely punished for "exposing millions of believers to danger and trying to undermine their faith."

Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, Irma Inashvili – Alliance of Georgian Patriots

The Alliance of Patriots responded to the wiretap files released a few weeks before the election by criticising the ruling party and non-governmental organisations. At the same time, through the media outlet Obiektivi and social networks, the party expressed its support for the church and clergymen.

Lelo for Georgia

On 2 September, Badri Japaridze, one of the leaders of Lelo for Georgia and a candidate for the presidency of Tbilisi Sakrebulo, released an election campaign video, which begins with words from the Old Testament and panoramas of Mtskheta and the Jvari Monastery. Mamuka Khazaradze, Leader of Lelo for Georgia, commented on wiretapping by the State Security Service, confirming the authenticity of a conversation between him and Reverend Theodore, which was among the wiretap files and requested the institution of investigation in this regard. Mamuka Khazaradze expressed his support for clergymen. According to Khazaradze, Georgian Dream projects itself as the defender of the church but it is in fact blackmailing and fighting the church and its representatives.⁶

⁴ Nika Melia's official Facebook page, 14.09.2021, <https://www.facebook.com/Nika.Melia5/videos/4451913794876395>

⁵ Mikheil Saakashvili's Address, 14.09.2021, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=871160780432813>, [accessed 23.09.2021].

⁶ Available at: [interpressnews.ge](https://www.interpressnews.ge), date of publication 14.09.2021 <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/673952-mamuka-xazaraze-kartuli-ocneba-romelic-vitom-eklesiis-damcvelad-gvevlineba-realurad-ashantazhebs-da-ebzvis-chvens-eklesias>, [accessed 18.09.2021].

STATEMENTS IN SUPPORT OF/AGAINST POLITICAL ENTITIES

Since 15 August, DRI had observed statements made by clergymen on social media. While until 13 September, the clergymen had been reluctant to make political statements, their position altered since the covert recordings were leaked.

Bishop Iacob of Bodbe

Bishop Iacob of Bodbe is a member of the Holy Synod. His name is associated with a number of controversial political statements. In the pre-election period, the bishop criticised United National Movement and former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia. According to him, the latter is "the Moscow's man who fought the church."⁷ At the same time, Iacob stated that he considers Irakli Gharibashvili to be a successful politician.⁸ "In the current situation, a Georgian man, whether he likes the ruling party or not, will not allow the return of the National Movement, especially Misha. I know the sentiments; they will even take up arms."

Archpriest ElioZ Jincharadze

On 17 September, Archpriest ElioZ shared a video from the Facebook page, Dream Wins, in which philologist Guram Sharadze criticises Georgia's third president Mikheil Saakashvili and says that if Saakashvili becomes the president, it will be the end of "Georgian Christianity."⁹

Archpriest Andria Jaghmaidze

Archpriest Andria Jaghmaidze is the Head of the Public Relations Unit of the Patriarchate of Georgia. On 13 August, the Archpriest shared Irakli Gharibashvili's post, where the Head of the Government says that vaccination is voluntary and each person has to decide for himself whether to get involved in this process. It should be noted that Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Gharibashvili made this statement when nominating Akhmeta mayoral candidate Alex Pitskhelauri.¹⁰

Metropolitan Anthony of Vani and Baghdati

Metropolitan Anthony of Vani and Baghdati is a member of the Holy Synod. On 5 September, the official Facebook page of the Diocese of Vani and Baghdati posted a homophobic political statement signed by Metropolitan Anthony accusing the opposition spectrum of pushing the LGBT propaganda.

⁷ Report.ge, 17.09.2021, <https://report.ge/society/gakria-moda-meue-iakobi/?fbclid=IwAR2Klz9QdRvRIUVZ2zIqNBD9ck4kKsohtvN7TBPIBuRuCgIefGsrSln1E>, [accessed 18.09.2021].

⁸ Tabula, 28.02.2021, <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/663057-meupe-iakobi-gharibashvilze-me-vtlidi-rom>, [accessed 18.09.2021].

⁹ Facebook Page Dream Wins, 23.08.2021, <https://www.facebook.com/ocnebaigebs/videos/130561675872975>, [accessed 18.09.2021].

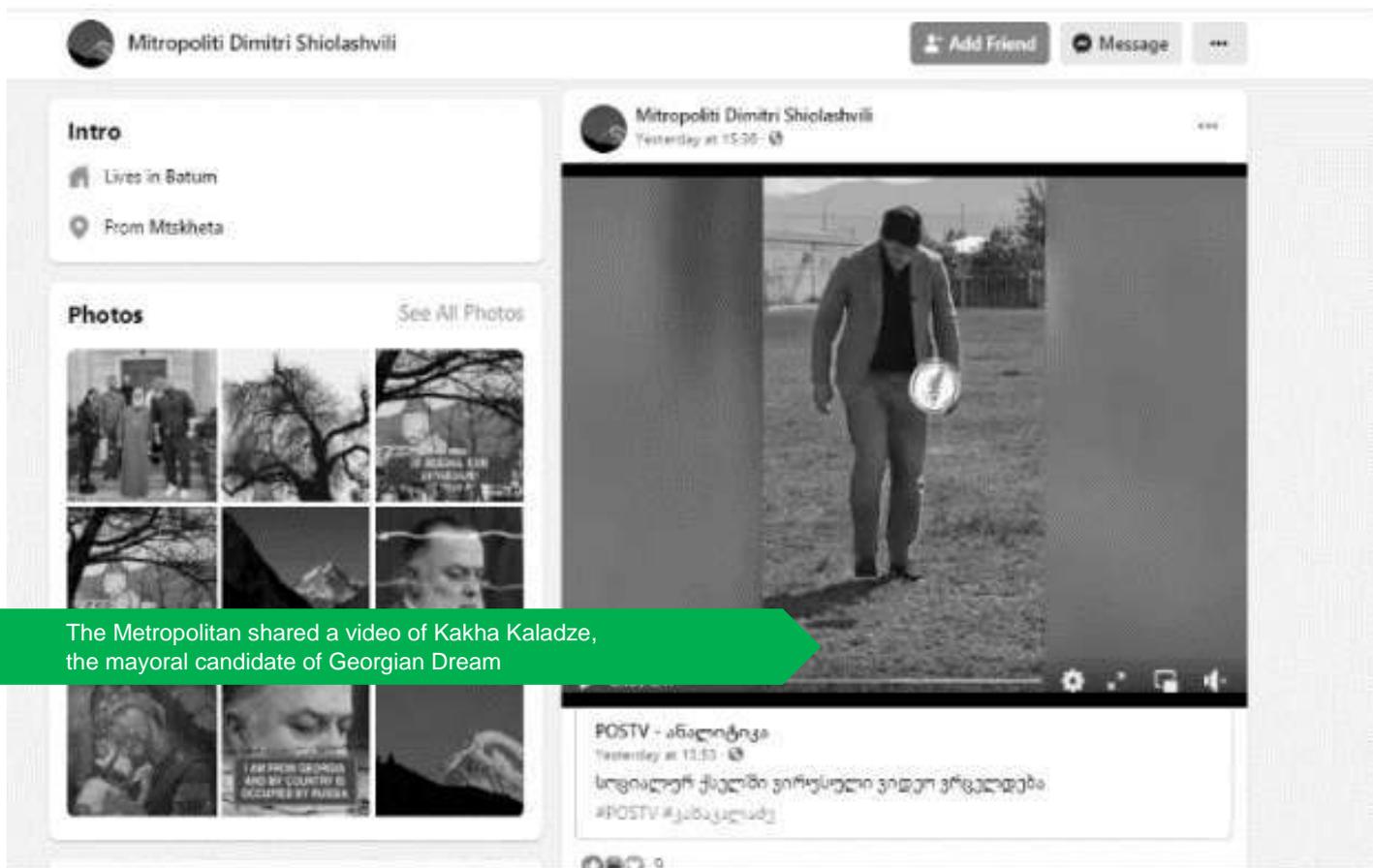
¹⁰ The First Channel, 13.08.2021, https://1tv.ge/news/irakli-gharibashvili-dghes-vaqcinaciastan-dakavshirebit-gaketebuli-chemi-natqvami-arasworad-iqna-gagebuli-ra-tqma-unda-vaqcinacia-aris-nebayoflobiti-es-aris-adamianis-archevani/?fbclid=IwAR3Fd6TzIMhrVgj3QVZKWYilFQyFZYkT9f1ThVDyDb1ic1ga8_52ilZdX9M, [accessed 18.09.2021].

Archimandrite Bartholomew Pirtskhalashvili

On 15 September, Archimandrite Bartholomew commented on the information that the State Security Service had been conducting wiretapping. According to him, wiretapping is a matter of state security to protect citizens and he will vote for Georgian Dream in the elections.¹¹

Metropolitan Dimitri Shiolashvili

Metropolitan Dimitri Shiolashvili is a member of the Holy Synod and a nephew of the Patriarch. On 22 September, 10 days prior elections, the Metropolitan shared a video of Kakha Kaladze, the mayoral candidate of Georgian Dream. In the video, Kakha Kaladze plays with a ball, which is substituted with the logos of opposition parties. The video is no more accessible.



The Metropolitan shared a video of Kakha Kaladze, the mayoral candidate of Georgian Dream

¹¹ Tabula, 15.09.2021, https://tabula.ge/ge/news/673023-arkimandriti-bartlome-susis-movaleobaa-usminis?fbclid=IwAR3iY8xx-pA9k-m-Ae5or0L6PMAYGxH8XTY6dnMDnQCRoxhqsjicv5Tn_TI, [accessed 18.09.2021].

THE KEY FINDINGS OF THE MONITORING

During the election campaign, the ruling political party and the Patriarchate of Georgia, represented by high-ranking clergymen, maintain close cooperation, which is manifested in several forms:

- Clergymen attending election campaign events - from 11 August to 14 September 2021, high-ranking clergymen attended all events held by the ruling party for the nominations of Sakrebulo candidates and candidates for self-governing cities/self-governing mayors;
- High-ranking clergymen attended all events concerning the nominations by the ruling party's candidates for Sakrebulo and self-governing cities/self-governing mayors;
- The tradition of high-ranking political officials praying with clergymen at churches and monasteries intensifies particularly. During the election campaign, the Prime Minister, together with the President of the Parliament, visited 10 temples and monasteries and prayed. Some of them are funded by the Cartu Foundation, which was mentioned in all cases;
- High-ranking clergymen try to discredit the opposition and/or support openly and publicly the ruling party and its candidates;
- Similar to the ruling party, the leaders of United National Movement, Alliance of Georgian Patriots, Lelo and Gakharia for Georgia try to manipulate religious issues. However, except on rare occasions, clergymen do not attend election events of these political entities; and
- The Patriarchate of Georgia never openly criticised the Georgian Dream Government for the wiretap files of the State Security Service. Their attack was aimed not at those who ordered covert operations but those who "disseminated the files", including the disapproving media outlets and their owners.

DRI believes that the attempt by political actors to use the influence of religious organisations and particular clergymen is a vicious practice that negatively affects election results.

The above facts prove that, by using the authority of the dominant church and particular clergymen as an instrument, Georgian Dream is trying to win over a part of the electorate. This hinders healthy competition and threatens the objective of conducting elections based on respect for electoral principles enshrined by the Constitution.