

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



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The views, opinions and statements expressed in the report are those of the project team and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Open Society Georgia Foundation.



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1. INTRODUCTION

This report was developed within the framework of the project Supporting Influence-Free Elections. The project aimed at supporting a free election environment for the 2021 local self-government election by identifying, analysing and making public the facts of manipulation of religion by political parties and participation of priests and religious organisations in election campaigns.

Under the legislation in force, an election campaign starts 60 days before elections.¹ Religious organisations are prohibited from participating in election campaigns from this very moment. The campaign for the 2021 local self-government election officially started on 3 August.

This report covers the final observations on the participation of clergymen in election processes from August 2021 to the period after the second round of the local self-government election. The first and second interim reports, based on the observation of the election, prepared by the DRI, addressed the participation of clergymen in the campaign and manipulation by political entities of religious issues, the influence of the Orthodox Church and clergymen.² This report analyses the rhetoric of clergymen and political entities that changed several weeks before the 2021 Election Day because of leaked allegedly illegal covert recordings and the former president Mikheil Saakashvili's return to Georgia. An emphasis is made on the issues that could potentially influence voters' free will and which, in the end, may negatively affect the development of democratic processes in the country.

During the monitoring, the DRI monitored members of the Holy Synod (based on their ranks and influences) and mainstream political parties, viz., Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia, United National Movement, Alliance of Patriots of Georgia and Gakharia for Georgia. Furthermore, our observation was extended to those clergymen who have influence over society and are capable of influencing voters.

The DRI monitoring made it clear that, on many occasions, certain clergymen, political parties and political figures use the authority and reputation of the Church for their personal purposes.

2. THE KEY FINDINGS OF THE MONITORING

Three significant findings were made in the process of observing the participation of religious organisations and clergymen in the election campaign.

¹ The Election Code of Georgia, Article 45.1.

² DRI, Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign, 2021, the first interim report, available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/760>, and DRI, Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign, 2021, the second interim report, available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/770>.



The first finding is that, during the election campaign, the ruling party and the Patriarch of Georgia, represented by the high-ranking clergy, closely cooperated with each other. It was manifested in the following:

- Clergymen attended all events held by the ruling party for the nominations of *Sakrebulo* members and mayoral candidates;
- During the election period, leaders of the ruling party, led by Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili, prayed at churches and monasteries, which is a different trend from the previous years; and
- Priests made statements on social media endorsing/opposing certain political parties.

The second finding is that the arrival of Mikheil Saakashvili, the former President of Georgia, in Georgia before the local self-government election and his detention/release caused a deep polarisation among clergymen reinforcing the previous opinions that some priests cooperate with political parties to maintain their power.

The third finding is that political parties attempt to manipulate moral and spiritual issues, which is directly linked to the practice of using the Church and religion. In the reporting period, allegedly illegal covert recordings were leaked, reinforcing the misgivings that clergymen are under surveillance and thus controlled, which is a means of manipulating clergymen by certain political forces.

3. METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK

For observing the pre-election environment, the DRI monitored social media. The target group of the observation were clergymen and religious organisations as well as political parties participating in the election campaign.

The research was focused on the political statements made by clergymen. The monitoring was extended only to those activities of religious organisations, bishops, other clergymen and political parties that were covered in social networks and media. Videos, images, reactions and texts made public by social media users served as an ample source for the monitoring.

The following were assessed during the monitoring:

- Political statements made by clergymen;
- Participation and involvement of clergymen in pre-election events;
- Attempts of clergymen to influence voters' choices;
- The attitudes of political parties towards the participation of clergymen in political processes; and
- Attempts of political parties to influence elections by manipulating religious issues.

4. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

In Georgia, only a religious denomination with a historical connection to Georgia or a denomination that is considered a religion by law in the Member States of the Council of Europe may be registered as a legal entity of public law.³ A church⁴ is a religious organisation that has close ties to the community and has completely different goals from the state.⁵ Article 8 of the Constitution recognises the special role of the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia, however, at the same time, it emphasises its independence from the state.

Elections are one of the most important means of achieving democracy, which is ought to take place in a free environment. The current legislation does not exclude the possibility of religious organisations influencing the decision of voters; it imposes restrictions to eliminate such a threat.

Under the Election Code of Georgia, a religious organisation has no right to run an election campaign and/or participate in it.⁶ Election campaigning is not limited to an active call to support or oppose candidates, but it also includes other actions.⁷ The presence of priests at election events can be considered campaigning. The fine for violating the rules of campaigning amounts to 2,000 GEL,⁸ although in practice this rule is not usually applied. The reason for this may be the difficulty of interpreting the relevant provision.

Formally, priests (regardless of their authority and degree of influence) enjoy freedom of expression and are not barred from campaigning. The statutory ban applies only to religious organisations and their official representatives. However, such an interpretation fails to ensure that the legislative goals are achieved and a free electoral environment is created. Therefore, the following factual circumstances must be taken into consideration:

- The speaker (the degree of authority and influence);
- The contents of an act (the act should constitute campaigning); and
- The context (it should be established whether a particular clergyman acts as a representative of a religious organisation or as a private person).⁹

³ The Civil Code of Georgia, Article 1509¹.

⁴ The following represent the Church without special authority: the Ecclesiastical Assembly, the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia, the Holy Synod and the Patriarchate of Georgia (a curator and a secretary). The Catholicos-Patriarch grants authorisation in legal relations. See the Constitutional Agreement of Georgia, Article 1.4.

⁵ D. Gegenava, *The Constitutional Agreement as a Legal Form of Church-State Relations and Its Enforcement in Georgia*, 2016, pp. 19-20, available at:

http://press.tsu.ge/data/image_db_innova/disertaciebi_samartali/dimitri_gegenava.pdf.

⁶ The Election Code of Georgia, Article 45.4.g).

⁷ *Ibid.* Article 2. Z^{7.1}.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Article 79.

⁹ B. Loladze, *Religious Organisations and Elections*, 2020, available at:

<http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/467>.

Tax Cuts

Under the Tax Code of Georgia, providing assistance to religious organisations is considered a charitable activity.¹⁰ At the same time, the profit received from the sale by the Georgian Patriarchate of crosses, candles, icons as well as books and calendars used for religious purposes is exempt from profit tax.¹¹

Under the Constitutional Agreement, the state exempts from taxes liturgical products produced by the Church, their production, import, supply and donation, as well as having property and land for non-economic purposes.¹² Despite the fact that the Constitution of Georgia recognises the special role of the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia, any discrimination on the grounds of religion is inadmissible.¹³ The above-mentioned constitutional provision puts the Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate in a privileged position, while other religious organisations are usually taxed with VAT, property and import taxes.¹⁴ The constitutionality of these provisions of the Tax Code has been challenged before the Constitutional Court of Georgia in relation to Articles 11 and 16 of the Constitution of Georgia.¹⁵

There is an assumption that the government needs to grant the Patriarchate privileges and accord it preferential treatment that are inaccessible to other religious denominations precisely because of the Patriarchate's authority and influence, which the government will exploit if needed. This assumption is reinforced by the monitoring of pre-election processes.

A Resolution by the Holy Synod

The Synod is the highest consultative body of the Orthodox Church, which is assembled based on a decision of the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia or his co-regent. The competence of the Synod includes the adoption of resolutions.

On 5 July 2012, the Holy Synod adopted a resolution¹⁶ regarding the participation of clergymen in the election campaign and their involvement in political activities in general. Under the resolution, the Church is a neutral power that unifies the country and, especially in the pre-election period, it is “categorically unacceptable” for clergymen to participate in political activities of any political party.

¹⁰ The Tax Code of Georgia, Article 10.1.a.d).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Article 99.1.d).

¹² The Constitutional Agreement, Article 6.5.

¹³ The Constitution of Georgia, Article 11.1.

¹⁴ The Tax Code of Georgia, Articles 159 and 195.

¹⁵ Evangelical Faith Church of Georgia (Legal Entity of Public Law), Georgian Muslims Union (Non-Commercial Legal Entity), Apostolic Administration of the Latin Catholics of Caucasus (Legal Entity of Public Law) and Others v. the Parliament of Georgia, no. 1422, 7 May 2019, <https://www.constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=1430>; Evangelical Faith Church of Georgia (Legal Entity of Public Law), Georgian Muslims Union and Others v. the Parliament of Georgia (Non-Commercial Legal Entity), no. 1593, 16 April 2021, <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=11126>.

¹⁶ Svetitskhoveli, Scientific and Historic Journal, available at: https://gtu.ge/Library/Pdf/sveticxoveli_2_2012.pdf, 2012 no. 2, 11.

Consequently, the canon law explicitly restricts clergymen from interfering in political processes, while secular law imposes restrictions on religious organisations. This regulation recognises the potential repercussions that may result from violating these rules.

Nevertheless, the benefits provided in the current tax legislation in favour of one religious institution only can be assessed as a good tool for the exploitation of the Church's influence by political powers.

5. PARTICIPATION OF PRIESTS IN ELECTION PROCESSES OVER THE YEARS

The active involvement of clergymen in election campaigns through attending various events and making statements is not new. From the day the country gained independence, the authorities have been actively seeking the goodwill of the Church, as evidenced by the 2002 Constitutional Agreement.

According to researchers, church representatives have been particularly active since the 1990s, which was manifested in their involvement in the politics, despite the fact that, in 1991, the Synod made a decision similar to the resolution of 2012 to distance the Church from the politics.¹⁷

For instance, during the 2012 election campaign, the flag of the political party Georgian Dream was erected on the fence of the St. Ilia Martali Church in Saguramo. This is confirmed by photographs and clergymen's statements. In 2014, an election campaign event was held by Iakob, the then diocesan bishop of the Catholicos-Patriarch. Under the legislation in force, the diocesan bishop represents the Church, and the Election Code of Georgia prohibits religious organisations from conducting and participating in election campaigns. The former diocesan bishop also made political statements in the run-up to the 2020 parliamentary elections. For example, in a sermon held on 19 August 2020, he called upon the parishioners to make the "right choice" in the election.¹⁸ Similarly, in 2018, Reverend Peter openly called upon parishioners not to support Salome Zourabichvili in the presidential election, proclaiming that supporting her would "amount to sin".

Political Interests of Clergymen and Political Parties

When it comes to the nefarious practice, established over the years, of the involvement of clergymen in political processes, the reason for their interest in politics should be identified. It can be assumed that the government's interest in the Church as an institution with indefinite social capital is aimed at exploiting the goodwill of a large part of the society. At the same time, the involvement of clergymen in politics and election processes may stem from their "economic interest".¹⁹ This assumption is supported by several factors:

¹⁷ Batumelebi.netgazeti.ge (website), Bishops' Role in Elections - An Interview with Beka Mindiashvili, <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/160319/>.

¹⁸ See <https://netgazeti.ge/news/480304/>.

¹⁹ Batumelebi.netgazeti.ge (website), Bishops' Role in Elections - An Interview with Beka Mindiashvili, <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/160319/>.

The 2002 Constitutional Agreement provides for a number of privileges for the Church as a religious organisation. Under this agreement, the state undertook to compensate the Church partially for pecuniary and non-pecuniary damages incurred during the period of the lost independence. After the Rose Revolution, the government funding for the Patriarchate has been increasing expressly.²⁰ According to Transparency International, in 2002–2013, the amount of funding allocated by the Georgian government to the Georgian Patriarchate is about 200 million GEL, and about 16 million GEL was allocated to the Patriarchate from the budget of the local self-government in the same period.²¹ The 2022 draft state budget, similar to the previous years, provides 25 million GEL of funding to the Patriarchate.²²

During a meeting with a DRI team, experts of the field noted that, in addition to the above funding, local dioceses receive additional financial benefits from municipalities. The requested public information confirms that the local self-government budget allocates additional funds for religious activities, both in the form of transfers from state budget funds and their own revenues.²³

Financial support motivates the Patriarchate to maintain close cooperation with the ruling political force. In its turn, based on the authority of the Church and its social capital, the government seeks to gain the support of representatives of the religious organisation through providing funding to the latter. Mutually beneficial pragmatic interdependence nurtures the nefarious symbiosis of the Church and the State.



²⁰ Transparency International, A Brief Review of Funding the Georgian Patriarchate, 04.07.2013, <https://transparency.ge/ge/blog/mokle-mimokhilva-sakartvelos-sapatriarkos-dapinansebis-shesakheb>.

²¹ *Idem*.

²² Mof.ge (website), the Draft State Budget of Georgia for 2022, <https://www.mof.ge/5477>.

²³ See, for instance, Approval of Sighnaghi Municipality Budget for 2021, <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5225961?publication=0>.



Prior to the revolution of 23 November 2003, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia openly supported Eduard Shevardnadze. Coincidentally, he did not attend the first session of the Parliament of the fifth convocation, on 22 November 2002, which was an exception to the established practice.²⁴ This may be another proof that the Patriarchate has been trying to gain the favour of those that hold the reins of power. It can be assumed that, on the same grounds, the Patriarchate did not congratulate the ruling party on winning after the end of the 2020 parliamentary elections and the official announcement of the final results by the Central Election Commission (the Patriarchate always congratulates the winning party²⁵).²⁶ Given the political tensions and the contested legitimacy of the parliamentary elections, it was not known how the events would unfold.

In its turn, due to the authority of the Church, the government has been trying to gain the support of the representatives of the religious organisation through financial support. According to a 2021 survey, the Orthodox Church remains one of the most influential institutions, and the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, Ilia-II, ranks first among the most trusted and respected people.²⁷

6. PRE-ELECTION POLITICAL CONTEXT

The political processes taking place in the country may influence the behaviour of any group or individual. It is evident from our observations that, during the election campaign, the involvement of certain priests in politics and the statements made by them, as well as the attitudes of political actors towards clergymen, varied according to the general situation in the country.

In August, certain clergymen and political parties continued the established practice of the past years. Numerous cases of manipulation of clergymen and religious topics by political parties or individual candidates to gain the goodwill of voters have been identified. The ruling political party stood out in this respect.

Leaking Covert Recordings of Clergymen

The usual rhetoric of clergymen and political parties changed significantly in the second half of September 2021. This was mainly due to the leaked covert recordings that had been allegedly illegally obtained and circulated in the weeks leading up to the election. As the leaked files demonstrate, alleged illegal surveillance is carried out on clergymen of almost all ranks. The illegal wiretapping and

²⁴ Radiotavisupleba.ge (website), Right of the First Day, 09.12.2020, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/>.

²⁵ For instance, in November 2018, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, Ilia-II, congratulated Salome Zourabichvili on her victory in the second round of the presidential election on the next day. At that time, election results had not yet been officially summarised. The Patriarch congratulated Bidzina Ivanishvili on his victory on 5 October 2012, the 4th day after the elections, despite the fact that the final results of the elections had not yet been published by the Central Election Commission.

²⁶ Democracyresearch.org (website), Supporting Free and Fair Elections, the second interim monitoring report, 2020, p. 6 <http://www.democracyresearch.org/>.

²⁷ Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia, February 2021, pp. 56 – 57, available at: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_february_2021_1.pdf.

surveillance of clergymen of all ranks by the authorities are probably due to the authority and high degree of influence of the former. The practice of the past years proves that the Church, as an influential public institution, often plays a crucial role in politics. Therefore, gathering information about clergymen (especially about their personal and intimate life) would be an important tool for manipulating clergymen in the run-up to the election.

Contrary to initial expectations, after the wiretaps were made public, the rhetoric of the clergymen became more strident and threatening, however, not against the authorities. A clear example of this is the statement made by the Head of the Public Relations Department of the Patriarchate, Andria Jaghmaidze, when he addressed the opposition media:

*“Do you really want the Church to talk about everything and in the run-up to the elections do you really want the Church to spit everything out to its parishioners and tell them what we think about you?” “Look, we will look at it for a few days, we will see what the rhetoric will be, what the pathos will be, and after this no one should be surprised if the Church tells its parishioners in express terms what to do in the election.”*²⁸



This statement confirms the attitude of clergymen that they have the mechanisms to influence their parishioners (hence the voters).

The Patriarch of Georgia commented on the files of the State Security Service two weeks later. The rhetoric of clergymen was repeated in the main part of the statement. The Patriarch, like other priests, saw the work of the media as one of the main problems in the "files of the State Security Service" and accused some TV stations of using double standards in their coverage. According to the Patriarch, "if there was indeed illegal surveillance and eavesdropping on priests", this action would endanger the communication between the priest and his parishioners. Those responsible should be severely punished not only for illegal surveillance but also for spreading the material.²⁹

²⁸ Saturday Formula (Facebook page) <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=352333906620925&ref=sharing>.

²⁹ Statement of the Patriarchate of Georgia, 29.09.2021, available at: <https://patriarchate.ge/news/2837> [accessed 10.11.2021].

The Return of Mikheil Saakashvili

The second important factor that led to the even greater involvement of clergymen in politics was the return of the former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, the day before the election and his subsequent arrest. This factor has also increased the instances of demonstration of devotion to the Church by political leaders. At the same time, the change of politicians' positions in favour of the Church became more evident.

The active endeavours of the leaders of political parties to prove their allegiance to the Church were most likely motivated by a desire to obtain the support of the Patriarchate. The return of the third president of Georgia to the country, against the background of political tensions, has made the existence of a "strong ally" even more important for political actors. It is important to note that political actors often expressed a positive attitude towards the Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia-II,³⁰ who, according to numerous studies, ranks first among the most trustworthy and respected people.³¹

7. PARTICIPATION OF CLERGYMEN IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Religious affiliation of political parties influences elections and popular mobilisation. Therefore, the Church has become a strong institutional player that has a significant impact on the politics in the country. Consequently, the Church's power has emerged as a natural religious monopoly in the political context.

The 2021 *Sakrebulo* and mayoral elections made the central role played by the Church in polarising political parties in the election period even clearer. Thus, the relationship is twofold: religion influences political attitudes and institutions, while political processes influence religious practices and political activities. The idea of common well-being, through which specific institutions and individuals themselves obtain control over people's sentiments, gains significant weight. Authorities give specific rights to religious organisations and, at the same time, impose certain obligations. They create state unity and, consequently, exercise and distribute power at the individual level. Political statements of clergymen directly or indirectly indicate to the public how and in what form to act.

7.1 ATTENDING ELECTION EVENTS

The DRI observed attendance of high-ranking clergymen at the political parties' nomination events. Clergymen attended the nomination of mayoral candidates of two political parties – Georgian Dream and Gakharia for Georgia.

³⁰ Mikheil Saakashvili's official Facebook page, 20.10.2021, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/SaakashviliMikheil/posts/413811506781119>.

³¹ Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia, February 2021, pp. 56 – 57, available at: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_february_2021_1.pdf.

Georgian Dream

Clergymen's attendance at events held for the nomination of *Sakrebulo* and mayoral candidates was particularly high in 2021. 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 the nominations were posted on the official Facebook pages of Irakli Gharibashvili and the Government of Georgia.³²

The ruling party completed the nomination of mayoral candidates on 14 September 2021, a day after the so-called wiretaps had been made public. Contrary to initial expectations, the nomination was traditionally attended by clergymen as well.



Gakharia for Georgia

Clergymen also attended the election events held by the former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia in Oni, Ghebi and Ambrolauri.³³

There was no information about clergymen attending the election events of other political parties.

³² DRI, Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign, an interim report, 2021 available at: [available at: 130სასულიერო პირების წინასაარჩევნო აგიტაციაში მონაწილეობა.pdf](https://democracyresearch.org/130სასულიერო პირების წინასაარჩევნო აგიტაციაში მონაწილეობა.pdf) (democracyresearch.org).

³³ *Idem*.

7.2 STATEMENTS SUPPORTING AND OPPOSING POLITICAL PARTIES

Since 15 August 2021, the DRI had been observing the statements made by clergymen and their active involvement on social media. The first and second interim reports prepared by the DRI on Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign give detailed information about the statements, comments and behaviour of clergymen regarding political parties.³⁴

Bishop Iacob of Bodbe was one of the first clergyman who started making a slew of political statements. He is a member of the Holy Synod. He reportedly expressed his distrust of the political spectrum and said he would form a political party himself after having "sorted out" matters in the Church.

The following clergymen were particularly active on social media, posting political comments and endorsing Georgian Dream: Archpriest Elio Jintcharadze, Archpriest Andria Jaghmaidze, Metropolitan Anthony of Vani and Baghdati, Archpriest Archil Dateshidze, Archimandrite Bartholomew Pirtskhalashvili and Metropolitan Dimitri Shiolashvili.

Information about covert surveillance of clergymen by the State Security Service disseminated in media several weeks before the elections changed the pre-election environment and the behaviour of clergymen and gave rise to different opinions among them. It further intensified the campaigning for and against political parties. However, in terms of escalating the confrontation between clergymen, the role of a real catalyst was the appearance of Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia, one day before the local self-government election and the issue of his remand custody. Furthermore, this process made it clearer and reinforced the previous opinions that priests cooperate with political parties to maintain their power. There were open statements by clergymen both supporting Mikheil Saakashvili and the propaganda against him.

The following announced their support for Mikheil Saakashvili: Bishop Melchizedek of Margveti and Ubisi, Metropolitan Nikoloz of Akhalkalaki, Kumurdo and Kari, Metropolitan Ioseb of Shemokmedi, Metropolitan Anania and Metropolitan Grigol of Poti and Khobi.

The following announced that they would not support the release of the former president: Metropolitan Ioane Gamrekeli, Metropolitan Stepane, Archimandrite Ioane Mchedlishvili and Bishop Giorgi Jandeliani of Marneuli and Hujabi. The Patriarch's nephew, Dimitri Shiolashvili, a member of the Holy Synod, criticised those clergymen who signed a petition for the release of the former president. His comment was shared with enthusiasm by representatives of Georgian Dream.

³⁴ DRI, Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign, 2021, the first interim report, available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/760>; DRI, Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign, 2021, the second interim report, available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/770>.



Dimitri Shiolashvili, a member of the Holy Synod

8. INCIDENTS OF USING RELIGIOUS ISSUES, RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS AND CLERGYMEN BY POLITICAL ENTITIES

During the election campaign, support for the Church by politicians was central to public speeches and the election campaign. The particular intensity of the demonstration of allegiance to the Church by political leaders is an element that distinguishes the 2021 election campaign from the previous elections. The idea of the Church as the foundation of the State and the special emphasis of state-political officials on the unity of the State and the Church has never been so relevant during previous election campaigns.

The first and the second interim reports of the DRI on Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign give detailed information on political parties' statements, comments and actions concerning the Church.³⁵

³⁵ DRI, Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign, 2021, the first available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/760>; DRI, Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign, 2021, the second interim report, available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/770>.

WHO HAS “SERVED” THE GEORGIAN CHURCH THE MOST?

The Perspective of Georgian Dream

On 28 October 2021, two days before the second round of elections, Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili spoke on Imedi Live³⁶ about pre-election statements made against the Church and accused Nika Gvaramia of launching a political campaign against the Church.

"Now we are watching Gvaramia's perverted campaign, filthy propaganda against the Church, Reverend Shio and other priests. This is an express hostility and an anti-state, anti-church activity. What they have done against the Patriarch. . . and Saakashvili comes out and tries to present himself as a great defender of the Church, the Patriarch, etc. This also shows his insidious, evil face ... "

The Prime Minister compared Mikheil Saakashvili's attitude towards the Church to Bidzina Ivanishvili's activities: *"There is a man who fought directly against the Church, while the founder of our party, Mr Bidzina Ivanishvili, was restoring churches and monasteries, and he has restored more than 800 churches and monasteries and built many churches. That's the difference if we compare once again."*³⁷

The Perspective of United National Movement

Some leaders of United National Movement see the things differently. On 28 October 2001, Giorgi Chaladze, a member of United National Movement, posted an extensive post on social media, according to which more than 100 new churches were built and more than 600 churches were restored during Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency and that Ilia-II recognised his service to the Orthodox Church. A video collage where clergymen thank the former president was attached to the post.

"His Holiness – Ilia-II has repeatedly mentioned Mikheil Saakashvili's services to the Georgian Orthodox Church!

During Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency:

- *More than 600 churches were restored, and more than 100 new churches were built.*
- *At the initiative of Mikheil Saakashvili, the Bagrati Church in Kutaisi was also restored.*
- *The former Poti Theatre building was handed over to the Church and a church was restored there - while a new building was built for the theatre.*
- *Mikheil Saakashvili initiated the construction of an educational centre of the Georgian Patriarchate, a university in mountainous Adjara, which helped raise the level of education in the mountainous region.*

³⁶ Irakli Gharibashvili on Imedi LIVE, 29.10.2021, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=223485939872726>.

³⁷ *Idem.*

- *Under the decision of Mikheil Saakashvili, the Georgian Patriarchate was awarded an annual compensation of 25 million GEL to compensate for the damage caused in the past. In addition, projects initiated by the Georgian Patriarchate were funded.*³⁸

Georgian Dream

On 27 October 2021, state-political officials addressed a large rally in support of the ruling Georgian Dream party. Irakli Gharibashvili, Irakli Kobakhidze, Tea Tsulukiani and Kakhi Kaladze in their speeches emphasised the idea of the unity of the Church and the State.

Addressing the gathering, Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili said, "We will not forgive anyone for cursing and insulting our Patriarch, clergymen and the founder of the Georgian State – the Orthodox Church." United National Movement was accused of fighting the Patriarchate and the Patriarch by the Vice-Prime Minister, Thea Tsulukiani, "It is the duty of our government to hand over power not to scavengers, not to haters of Georgians, not to those who are apostles of the dark past and are now peeping from cells, not to those who fight Ilia-II, not to those who fight the icon and the cross."³⁹

Praying at Churches and Monasteries

From the day the 2021 local self-government election was scheduled, members of the ruling party started prying at numerous churches and monasteries. From this day on, Irakli Gharibashvili, together with his party members, visited churches and monasteries, the construction and rehabilitation of which had been funded by the Cartu Foundation. The media reported that, during the election campaign, the Prime Minister visited 10 churches and monasteries and prayed there.⁴⁰ The special role of Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Cartu foundation in the rehabilitation of churches and monasteries was mentioned almost always.

United National Movement

Demonstrating a positive attitude towards the Orthodox Church is one of the ways of manipulation and, in the opinion of most Georgian politicians, the "best" way to gain the approval of the voters. An example of this is Mikheil Saakashvili's attempt to prove his loyalty to the Patriarch.

On 20 October 2021, Mikheil Saakashvili posted a comment on his official Facebook page expressing his support and personal respect for the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia-II. He also stated that he has always been a follower of the main decisions of the Holy Synod. "Since the time of the communists, since 1979, when I was still a child, along with my teacher Mara Chavchavadze, I attended

³⁸ Giorgi Chaladze's official Facebook page, 28.10.21, <https://fb.watch/9VDpgdIy--/> [accessed 15.12.21].

³⁹ DRI, Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign, 2021, the second interim report, p. 2, available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/770>.

⁴⁰ DRI, Monitoring the Participation of Religious Organisations and Clergymen in the Election Campaign, 2021, the first interim report, pp. 10-13, available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/760>.

the service of His Holiness. I remain his spiritual son and I support all his decisions on main ecclesiastical issues."⁴¹

Along with the former president, other leaders of United National Movement, including Nika Melia and Levan Khabeishvili, resorted to such manipulations. However, it should be noted that Nika Melia's activity in this regard became less noticeable after the first round of elections when Mikheil Saakashvili took over the strategy of "smoothing out" relations with the Patriarchate. Before the first round of the election, on 14 September 2021, when covert recordings were leaked, 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."

One of the findings of the research was the changed rhetoric of a UNM mayoral candidate in Poti, Gigi Ugulava, towards the Patriarch. Gigi Ugulava had blamed Ilia II along with Bidzina Ivanishvili for the violence of 5 July.⁴² During the election period, Ugulava changed his rhetoric. Speaking about the Patriarch's health condition, he expressed fears about how the Church could be brought under Russian rule if Georgian Patriarch Ilia-II were there no more. "In this situation, I sincerely wish the Patriarch good health, because the freedom of the Church today depends on his health...The Autocephalous Church of Georgia is one of the most important institutions in our country, which has a path to the West, to freedom, to democracy, to the Western security system and prosperity, and the Church is written in this architecture."⁴³



⁴¹ Mikheil Saakashvili's official Facebook page, 20.10.2021, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/SaakashviliMikheil/posts/413811506781119>.

⁴² TV Pirveli, Those Responsible are Ivanishvili and Ilia-II – Ugulava (video), 06.07.2021, available at: https://tvpirveli.ge/ka/siaxleebi/politika/6449-pasukhismgebeli-aris-ivanishvili-da-ilia-meoreugulava-video?fbclid=IwAR1xb3V_K8P15cr8lQ2sJtCuOHqI8YoC_EpcgXJPf_m5el4pYhPhbOcy2Ik.

⁴³ Tabula.ge, Gigi Ugulava – It depends on the Patriarch's Health that the Church should not end up in Russia's Jaws, 19.10.2021, available at: <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/674737-ugulava-patriarkis-janmrteblobazea-damokidebuli?redir>.

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

The Alliance of Patriots has traditionally supported the Church and clergymen. The Alliance of Patriots made a comment regarding leaked wiretap criticising the ruling party and non-governmental organisations. At the same time, the party expressed its support for the Church and clergymen, through the media outlet Obiektivi and social networks.

Lelo for Georgia

Prior to the elections, 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, expressed his support for clergymen after the information on alleged illegal wiretapping of clergymen by the State Security Service had been leaked. He 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.

9. CONCLUSION

The active participation of clergymen in the election campaign, their presence at the ruling party election events and the statements supporting/opposing specific candidates characterised the 2021 local self-government election as well. The monitoring demonstrated that to win over voters during elections, political parties manipulate clergymen's support and religious issues. Priests and political parties behind the authority of the Church "feed" each other. The behaviour of clergymen is probably due to their "economic interest". Political parties, on the other hand, need to work closely with the Church and they need to demonstrate their loyalty to the Church to get the support of the electorate.

The nefarious practice, which had been established over the years, was significantly affected by covert recordings leaked a few weeks before the 2021 elections. Clergymen become more active. Priests expressed their position more openly and clearly regarding the political process and the political candidates. Furthermore, their rhetoric, in some cases, was threatening, but not directed against the government. The Georgian Dream government was not openly criticised by the Georgian Patriarchate for the wiretaps of the State Security Service. The target of the attack was not the perpetrators, but the "distributors of the files", including the media outlets criticising the authorities and their owners.

The main political players tried to capitalise on the effect caused by the leaked wiretaps. Politicians became more active in their attempts to demonstrate loyalty to the Church, in accusing the opponents of obtaining illegal secret recordings and thus gaining the support of religious organisations.

At the same time, special attention was paid to the statements made by the leaders of Georgian Dream and United National Movement trying to prove their loyalty to the Patriarch and the Church. It is also noteworthy that the special demonstration of loyalty by the political leaders to the Church makes the

2021 election very different from the previous elections. This trend in the election rhetoric emerged after the wiretaps were leaked.

By pushing the idea of the unity of the Church and the State, Georgian Dream tried to neutralise the negative possible consequences of the illegal wiretapping and surveillance of clerics by the State Security Service.

United National Movement sought to capitalise on the leaked files by appealing to insulted religious feelings of believers and emphasising the "hostile" attitude of Bidzina Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream towards the Church.

Regardless of the political context in which the statements were made by members of the ruling party about the unity of the Church and the State, the rhetoric contradicts the idea of independence of the Church as a religious organisation from the state and rejects the principle of secularism.

Another turning point during the period of the local self-government election was the return of former President Mikheil Saakashvili to Georgia and his arrest. This made clergymen even more active. Their open discussion about the political events worsened the polarisation among the clergymen. In the end, the clergymen failed to agree on the idea of universal reconciliation.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of observation and analysis of the election processes, in the opinion of the DRI, it is advisable to do the following to improve the political processes:

- Political parties should refrain from manipulating the Church and religious issues for electoral gains;
- Clergymen should be particularly cautious with making political statements during elections; their statements are usually perceived by their parishioners as the Church's official position;
- Clergymen should refrain from attending election events and making statements endorsing/opposing a particular political party;
- The Patriarchate of Georgia should ensure control over the synod's decree prohibiting clergymen from getting involved in politics and election campaigns; and
- The funding of the Patriarchate by the state and local municipal budgets should be reviewed.