

DEMOCRACY RESEARCH CENTRE

# PSEUDO-RELIGIOUS VALUES AT THE CENTRE OF THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN OF POLITICAL PARTIES

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT

1 August 2024 – 31 December 2024

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## INTRODUCTION

Ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream began to fight for the votes of conservative voters. Accordingly, the pre-election campaign of the government was saturated with ultra-conservative topics focusing on the protection of pseudo-religious and pseudo-family values. In April 2024, a few months prior to the start of the election campaign, the parliamentary majority of Georgian Dream initiated the Draft Law on the Protection of Family Values and Minors. The parliamentary majority passed the law on 17 September 2024 in the third reading. Despite the strong international backlash, the initiative of the ruling party was positively evaluated by the Patriarchate of Georgia:

*“The Law on the Protection of Family Values and Minors adopted by the incumbent authorities of Georgia is a positive step forward. We hope that this law will bring fruitful results for the well-being of our society, as it is an important and decisive step to respect the traditional values defining the identity of the Georgian nation.”<sup>1</sup>*

The close cooperation of the ruling party and the Patriarchate of Georgia is not new to the Georgian reality. However, the drastic increase in the scale of manipulation by the authorities with religious topics, which ultimately culminated in the proposal to declare Georgian Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, made the parliamentary elections of 2024 fundamentally different from other elections held in Georgia since 2000.

In the past two years, the pseudo-religious-national sentiments have been entrenched in the rhetoric of Georgian Dream so much that the ruling party has completely occupied the niche previously held by strongly pro-Russian far-right actors. Similar to the far-right groups, in the parliamentary elections of 2024, the government made pseudo-religious values, “the institution of family”, gender identity and sexual orientation as the focal points for its politics, which was likely to divert the society’s attention from important issues.

Considering that the election campaign of Georgian Dream was unprecedentedly saturated with religious topics, which was welcomed and reciprocated in equal measure by the Patriarchate of

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of the Public Relations Office of the Patriarchate of Georgia, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/sazupatriarchate/posts/pfbid0Z2SvdAtx3dNc7r7ub3YnQsu5H2iki6wCCznQVX1qvwRkCF3bcvGDJJ37t4iduHu6l>

Georgia, the threat of interference by religious organisations in the election campaign, which is prohibited by the Election Code of Georgia, has increased significantly.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, the purpose of the monitoring was to identify and analyse the facts of the manipulation of religious topics by political parties and the participation of clergy and religious organisations in the pre-election campaign. The report analyses, on the one hand, the manipulation with religious topics in the pre-election campaign by political parties and, on the other hand, the incidents of clergy endorsing a particular political party, participating in the campaign of political parties or becoming otherwise involved, which could have influenced the election processes.

The report covers the period from 1 August 2024 to 30 October 2024. The research is not comprehensive in the sense that it does not include the facts that were not published on social media accounts of political parties and/or clergymen and/or were not covered in the media.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The drastic increase in the scale of manipulation by the authorities with religious topics, which ultimately culminated in the proposal to declare Georgian Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, made the parliamentary elections of 2024 fundamentally different from previous elections
- In the past two years, the pseudo-religious-national sentiments have been entrenched in the rhetoric of Georgian Dream so much that the ruling party has completely occupied the niche previously held by strongly pro-Russian far-right actors
- The ruling team tried to gain the favour of the Orthodox Church and its parishioners by transferring state property and budget funds to the Patriarchate. In 2024, the financing of the Patriarchate from the state budget amounted to 64 million GEL
- In 2024, the Patriarchate received at a symbolic price hundreds of thousands of square meters of land plots with attached buildings in Gori, Manglisi, Khobi, Kutaisi, Mtskheta and Tbilisi

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<sup>2</sup> Election Code of Georgia, Article 45.4.g).

- As soon as the election campaign began, the visits of Georgian Dream leaders to Orthodox churches and chapels intensified. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze was particularly active in this regard, even addressing the congregation gathered in Svetitskhoveli from the pulpit
- The monitoring revealed the ample support the clergy showed the ruling party by addressing those topics with parishioners that were the main messages of Georgian Dream's pre-election campaign: discrediting the civil sector and the opposition, the threat of being dragged into war, anti-American and anti-European messages, respect for pseudo-family values and anti-LGBT propaganda
- In the days before the voting, the Patriarchate endorsed the government with hidden messages by stating that without a doubt it was supporting the choice that would "contribute to long-term peace and the consolidation of Christian and family traditions"
- In addition to pro-government messages, several clergymen accused the opposition of conspiring with the West, the US and the civil sector to drag the country into war.
- By posting an announcement on the official Facebook page of the Patriarchate, immediately after the Central Election Commission had summarised the results, the Patriarch congratulated Georgian Dream on the victory in the elections.
- Another political force openly endorsed by relatively less influential clergymen was the openly pro-Russian far-right political party Alliance of Patriots.

## METHODOLOGY

Through monitoring social networks and media, the Democracy Research Centre observed the incidents of the participation of clergy in the pre-election campaign and the manipulation of religious topics by political parties.

From 27 August 2024 to 31 December 2024, the organisation's monitors observed the accounts of high-ranking clergymen on social networks as well as Facebook pages of various media outlets (government and opposition media channels and their social networks), the Prime Minister of Georgia, the President of the Parliament, and heads and delegates of political parties (especially the ruling party).

During the monitoring, the following issues were assessed:

- Did the clergymen make political statements?
- Did the clergymen participate in the pre-election events?
- Was it possible for the clergymen to influence the will of the voters?
- What were the attitudes of political parties regarding the participation of clergy in the electoral processes? and
- Did the political parties use religious topics in the pre-election campaign?

Based on the objectives of the report, we also studied the activity of far-right political groups, both on social networks and in various media. Special emphasis was placed on the messages that could possibly influence the pre-election environment.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK

According to the Election Code of Georgia, religious organisations are not allowed to conduct or engage in election campaigning. Election campaigning implies not only an active appeal made in support of or against a political party but also certain actions, including participation in the organisation/holding of pre-election events.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the attendance of priests at election events is to be considered as election campaigning.

From a formal point of view, priests (regardless of their authority and degree of influence) enjoy freedom of expression and are not prohibited from participating in pre-election campaigns. The legislative ban only applies to religious organisations and their official representatives. Such interpretation, however, does not ensure achieving the statutory objective or a free electoral environment.

A fine of 2000 GEL is determined for the breach of the rules of campaigning.<sup>4</sup> However, this legislative provision is usually not enforced in practice. This is perhaps because of the difficulty of the interpretation of the legal provision concerned.

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<sup>3</sup> Election Code of Georgia, Article 2.27<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 79.1.

## 1. PSEUDO RELIGIOUS-FAMILY VALUES AND RELIGION AS A CENTREPIECE OF GEORGIAN DREAM’S ELECTION STRATEGY

On 2 September 2024, Deacon Andria Jaghmaidze responded in favour of the legislative initiative of Georgian Dream, on the Protection of Family Values and Minors, on an Imedi TV broadcast. According to him, the main reason for the legislative initiative was that certain **non-governmental organisations and opposition forces engage in LGBT propaganda**.<sup>5</sup>

A similar statement was made by Irakli Kobakhidze, the Prime Minister of Georgia. According to him, Salome Zourabichvili, the President of Georgia, and **opposition parties** were behind the **LGBT propaganda**.<sup>6</sup>

“Salome Zourabichvili, *just like the entire radical opposition, is on the side of LGBT propaganda. This is their choice or rather their assignment. To think of it, now it is the election period and everyone knows very well that 90% of the society supports this law.*”

In the pre-election context, the attempt to use religion and the Patriarchate as political tools acquired an even wider scale with the proposal to declare Georgian Orthodox Christianity as the state religion. This initiative was **evaluated** by one of the clergymen, Nikoloz Pachuashvili, Metropolitan of Akhalkalaki and Kumurdo and Kari, as a pre-election proposal of the government.

On 20 August 2024, the following three promises were made public that Georgian Dream pledged to voters to fulfil in case of obtaining the constitutional majority:<sup>7</sup>

1. Collective Removal of National Movement from politics;
2. Enacting anti-LGBT constitutional legislation; and
3. Restoring the territorial integrity of Georgia peacefully.

On 25 August 2024, during a meeting with supporters in Ambrolauri, Bidzina Ivanishvili stated that, along with the three promises of Georgian Dream, there was also a fourth clause: “It is an existentially important issue for our country and faith, and we are actively working on it.”<sup>8</sup> The Protopresbyter of the Patriarchate, Giorgi Zviadadze, indirectly confirmed that Bidzina Ivanishvili’s statement concerned declaring Georgian Orthodox Christianity as the state

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<sup>5</sup> Statement of Deacon Andria Jaghmaidze, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=836526321571641>.

<sup>6</sup> 1tv.ge, “Irakli Kobakhidze – Zourabichvili and Radical Opposition, Stood on the Side of LGBT Propaganda. When You Can’t Stand Where the Majority of the Society Is, It Means That You Are Acting Only Under Instructions”, 3 October 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/GzJIK>.

<sup>7</sup> Statement of the Political Council of Georgian Dream, available at: <https://shorturl.at/wsLmV>.

<sup>8</sup> Bidzina Ivanishvili’s speech in Ambrolauri, available at: <https://shorturl.at/gpoy1>.



religion:<sup>9</sup> “This is a very correct, very calm and reasoned conversation related to the legal models between the church and the state.” On 28 August 2024, Andria Jaghmaidze, Head of the Public Relations Office of the Patriarchate, referred to the authorities’ initiative to declare Georgian Orthodox Christianity as the state religion as an “act of courtesy” and confirmed that active discussions were pending regarding the exact wording of the initiative.<sup>10</sup>

On 1 September 2024, Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze told the community: *“On 30 August a meeting was held between the representatives of the Patriarchate and the leaders of Georgian Dream, where an agreement was reached that the following provision would be introduced in the first subparagraph of Article 8 of the Constitution of Georgia: “Orthodox Christianity is the pillar of the identity of the Georgian state.”* Giorgi Zviadadze also confirmed that the government's initial proposal was to declare Georgian Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, but this issue was “unacceptable” for the church.<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to the expectations of Georgian Dream, the government's initiative to declare Georgian Orthodox Christianity as the state religion was not welcomed in the religious circles. According to Metropolitan Nikoloz Pachuashvili of Akhalkalaki, Kumurdo and Kari, *“Declaring the state religion means that the church is not independent of the state and, therefore, the state is not independent of the church.”*<sup>12</sup>

Archbishop Zenon of Dmanisi and Agarak-Tashiri saw the danger of the politicised instrumentalisation of religion in the Georgian Dream initiative: *“This initiative essentially implies the institutional subordination of the church to the state government.”*<sup>13</sup> According to the statement of Metropolitan Malkhaz Songhulashvili of the Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia, *“It is impossible for a person to imagine a more crude and perverse form of relationship between religion and the state, such as declaring a particular religion as the state religion.”*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> interpressnews.ge, “Giorgi Zviadadze – Declaration as a State Church Implies a Certain Subordination to the State, Which Entails Risks – The Position of the Church Is to Maintain the Existing Legal Model”, 28 August 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/NbNlS>.

<sup>10</sup> rustavi2.ge, “Andria Jaghmaidze – On the Part of the State, This Is an Offer, an Act of Courtesy, Implying Strengthening the Status of the Church Through the Constitutional Provision”, 28 August 2024, available at: <https://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/290163>.

<sup>11</sup> expressnews.ge, “It Became Known on What Georgian Dream and the Patriarchate Agreed”, 1 September 2024, available at: <https://expressnews.ge/index.php?id=186617&lang=undefined>.

<sup>12</sup> netgazeti.ge, “Formula – Dream Proposes to the Patriarchate the Declaration of Georgian Orthodox Christianity as the State Religion”, 27 August 2024, available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/life/739437/>.

<sup>13</sup> interpressnews.ge, “Archbishop Zenon – The Proposal to Declare the Georgian Orthodox Church as the State Religion in Georgia Is a Mistake”, 28 August 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/7lAOof>.

<sup>14</sup> radiotavisupleba.ge, “This Will Be a Step Taken Against the Church” – Pre-election Talks About the State Religion”, 28 August 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/PdjWR>.



## 2. IDENTICAL PRE-ELECTION RHETORIC OF THE CLERGY AND THE RULING PARTY

The monitoring revealed the support of the clergy to the government. This support was made obvious by appealing to the parishioners on the topics that were the main messages of the Georgian Dream pre-election campaign:

1. Discrediting the civil sector and the opposition;
2. The danger of being dragged into war;
3. Anti-American and anti-European messages; and
4. Protection of pseudo-family values and anti-LGBT propaganda.

The myth that opposition parties were trying to drag Georgia into war is one of the main messages that the ruling party had been using during the 2024 parliamentary elections. The founder of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili, emphasised at every meeting that, on 26 October 2024, people had to choose between peace and war: *“On 26 October, we choose between **war and peace**, pseudo-liberal values and values based on nationalism, family, **faith and independence**. We are making a choice between the worthy European future of our country and the unacceptable situation that the radical opposition and foreign actors want to see as European.”*<sup>15</sup>

Archbishop Yakob of Bodbe has had similar messages. He emphasised in all his sermons that the civil sector, the opposition, the US and Europe were trying to involve Georgia in war. For instance, in his sermon on 21 July 2024, Archbishop Yakob stressed that if the West, the US, the opposition and the civil sector achieve their goal and **drag the country into the war**, nobody will be concerned about Georgia: *“If they start a war, no one will worry about us. We left, and they are siccing Russia.”*<sup>16</sup>

On 10 October 2024, TV Company Imedi broadcasted the words of Metropolitan Stephen of Chkondidi, Tsageri and Lentekhi Diocese: *“Today, those who zombify Georgia with Western values, tell us that if you do not choose the gay direction, there is no place for you with us. We must choose God and those who will be on God's side, parties or people. We should try to*

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<sup>15</sup> 1tv.ge, 8 September 2024, “Bidzina Ivanishvili – Today We Are Not Involved in the Pre-election Campaign, but in the Fight to Protect Peace, the Sovereignty of Our Country, Our Traditions and Values”, available at: <https://shorturl.at/N6gPY>.

<sup>16</sup> Archbishop Jacob's sermon, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=7958182737601025>.

*preserve our identity together with them. I don't want to speak in a party context,... It is necessary to make the right choice, and in no case should we give anyone the right to overthrow the government in the country by someone's statements or force.”<sup>17</sup>*

Deacon Davit Lasurashvili began his sermon on 14 October 2024 with an overview of the 2024 elections. According to his sermon, the government ensured Christian-national values and peace. The deacon urged the congregation: “A Christian should choose the power that upholds national and Christian values, and promises to do so in the future too.” According to him, “3-4 years ago, 15 opposition parties signed the so-called LGBT Memorandum” and added, “**How can a Christian vote for these parties.**” Conversely, the deacon positively assessed Georgian Dream and noted: “**In the last few years, the correct actions of the government in terms of protecting the country's dignity, sovereignty and traditional values have been observed, which I think should contribute to the return of our motherland to its roots.**”<sup>18</sup>

On 14 October 2024, Deacon Davit Isakadze focused on the protection of morality and Christian values in his sermon. At the end of the sermon, he spoke about the elections and stated: “We, the church, do not interfere in elections, we do not interfere in political activities, although it is our duty to vote and support the love of God and the motherland, morality, and we must choose the one who says and does it. On the other side there are wicked god-hating people **running around with LGBT flags.** We have to make a choice based on that.”<sup>19</sup>

The Patriarchate of Georgia emphasised long-term peace and protection of “family traditions” that resonated with identical messages from the government. On 22 October 2024, the Public Relations Office of the Patriarchate of Georgia made a statement regarding the parliamentary elections, where it explained “it cannot present itself as a political party”. However, the office also pointed out that “it will unequivocally support such a choice that will bring long-term peace to Georgia and the strengthening of those values in the society that will help strengthen Christian and family traditions.”<sup>20</sup> Considering that “peace”, “ensuring peace” and “family traditions” were the main slogans of the pre-election campaign of Georgian Dream, the position taken by the Patriarchate was perceived as endorsing the government.

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<sup>17</sup> imedinews.ge, 10 October 2024, “Reverend Stephen – Today, those who zombify Georgia with western values, tell us that if you do not choose the gay direction, there is no place for you with us. We must choose God and those who will be on God's side, parties or people”, available at: <https://shorturl.at/5tHXZ> .

<sup>18</sup> Deacon Davit Lasurashvili's sermon, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmz7w1N3tdQ>.

<sup>19</sup> Father Davit Isakadze's sermon, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=lnnwrBF7L-0>.

<sup>20</sup> Statement of the Patriarchate of Georgia: <https://shorturl.at/NpqI7>.

### 3. INVOLVEMENT OF CLERGYMEN IN THE PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN OF GEORGIAN DREAM

From 1 August 2024 to 26 October 2024, the leaders of the ruling party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, Shalva Papuashvili, Irakli Kobakhidze, Irakli Gharibashvili and Mamuka Mdinardze held large-scale events in six cities as part of their election campaign: Telavi, Rustavi, Ozurgeti, Gori, Akhaltsikhe and Tbilisi.

According to the observation made by the Democracy Research Centre, clergymen attended the pre-election meetings of Georgian Dream **in at least three cities**. However, they did not address the participants.

- 30 August 2024 – Regional event of Georgian Dream election campaign in Ozurgeti;<sup>21</sup>
- 15 September 2024 – Regional event of Georgian Dream election campaign in Gori.<sup>22</sup> During the election campaign, the leaders of the ruling party, Irakli Kobakhidze, Kakha Kaladze, Shalva Papuashvili and Mamuka Mdinardze, also visited the church under construction in Gori, which is being built with the support of **Kartu Foundation**;<sup>23</sup> and
- 19 September 2024 – Regional event of Georgian Dream election campaign in Rustavi.



<sup>21</sup> Georgian Dream's regional event in Ozurgeti, available at: <https://shorturl.at/17C5m>.

<sup>22</sup> Georgian Dream's regional event in Gori, available at: <https://shorturl.at/UC3Uq>.

<sup>23</sup> Visit of Irakli Kobakhidze, Kakha Kaladze, Shalva Papuashvili and Mamuka Mdinardze to Gori Resurrection Cathedral, available at: <https://shorturl.at/RnVzl>.

Clergymen were involved in election meetings and events of Georgian Dream delegates. Here too, the clergy did not address the audience:

- On 4 September 2024, in the village of Rike, clergyman Shalva Kekelia attended the pre-election meeting of Davit Kodua, the Georgian Dream delegate in Zugdidi;<sup>24</sup>
- On 10 September 2024, a clergyman attended the meeting in Kareli with Zaal Dugladze, the Georgian Dream majority MP of Khashuri and Kareli;<sup>25</sup>
- On 13 September 2024, a clergyman attended the meeting held during the pre-election campaign of Givi Chichinadze, the majority MP of Samtredia, Tskaltubo, Vani and Khoni;<sup>26</sup>
- On 14 September 2024, Georgian Dream delegate in Zugdidi, Davit Kodua, held a meeting with citizens in the Juma administrative unit. The meeting was attended by Deacon Bessarion;<sup>27</sup>
- On 23 September 2024, a clergyman attended the pre-election meeting in Anaklia with Georgian Dream delegate Davit Kodua in Zugdidi;<sup>28</sup>
- On 28 September 2024, Adigheni Festival 2024 was held. Metropolitan Theodore of Akhaltsikhe and Tao Klarjeti, Majority MP Anton Obolashvili, Mayor of Adigheni Municipality, Gocha Kimadze, and Chairman of the *Sakrebulo*, Shmagi Bidzishvili, congratulated the locals;<sup>29</sup>
- On 26 September 2024, a clergyman was also present at the meeting with the citizens of Georgian Dream Sagarejo delegate Davit Songhulashvili;<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The meeting of Georgian Dream delegate Davit Kodua in the village of Rike, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122110144880481190&set=pb.61564435721595.-2207520000&type=3>.

<sup>25</sup> The meeting of Georgian Dream majority MP of Khashuri and Kareli Zaal Dugladze in the town of Kareli, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1024537316341339&set=pb.100063552407654.-2207520000>.

<sup>26</sup> The meeting of Givi Chichinadze, the majority Georgian Dream MP of Samtredia, Tskaltubo, Vani and Khoni in Tskaltubo municipality, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1039539844843742&set=pb.100063632083732.-2207520000&type=3>.

<sup>27</sup> Meeting of Georgian Dream delegate Davit Kodua in the village of Juma, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122112591764481190&set=pb.61564435721595.-2207520000&type=3>.

<sup>28</sup> Meeting of Georgian Dream delegate Davit Kodua in Anaklia, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122114274104481190&set=pb.61564435721595.-2207520000&type=3>.

<sup>29</sup> Adigheni Festival 2024, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=928524879320722>.

<sup>30</sup> Meeting with the citizens of Sagarejo delegate of Georgian Dream, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1023216316481652&set=pb.100063798787034.-2207520000&type=3>.

- On 2 October 2024, a nun was present at the meeting with the residents of Akhaltsikhe, Adigheni, Borjomi and Aspindza majority MP Anton Obolashvili;<sup>31</sup>
- On 8 October 2024, a clergyman attended the meeting held during the pre-election campaign of Zviad Shalamberidze, the delegate of Zestaponi, Baghdati, Terjola and Tkibuli;<sup>32</sup>
- On 13 October 2024, a clergyman attended a meeting conducted by the delegate of Poti, Khobi and Senaki, Giorgi Khakhubia;<sup>33</sup>
- On 17 October 2024, Davit Sherazadishvili, the delegate of Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tetrtskaro and Tsalka, met with Etibar Eminov, Mufti of Administration of Muslims of Eastern Georgia, and, together with him, inspected the internal renovation works of the mosque in the village of Arkevani.<sup>34</sup>



<sup>31</sup> Meeting with the residents of Akhaltsikhe, Adigheni, Borjomi and Aspindza majority MP Anton Obolashvili, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1064278105700611&set=pcb.1064278342367254>.

<sup>32</sup> Zviad Shalamberidze, the delegate of Zestaponi, Baghdati, Terjola and Tkibuli, meeting with the residents, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=982972943843142&set=pcb.982973153843121>.

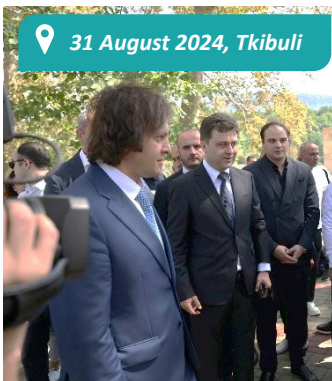
<sup>33</sup> The meeting held by Giorgi Khakhubia, the delegate of Khobi and Senaki, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1078643500928171&set=pb.100063475939607.-2207520000&type=3>

<sup>34</sup> A meeting between Davit Sherazadishvili, the delegate of Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tetrtskaro, and Tsalka and Etibar Eminov, Mufti of Administration of Muslims of Eastern Georgia, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=961642655997037&set=pb.100064539348673.-2207520000>.

## 4. MEETINGS OF THE GEORGIAN DREAM LEADERS WITH CLERGYMEN DURING THE PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN

As soon as the election campaign began, the visits of Georgian Dream leaders to Orthodox churches and chapels intensified. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze was particularly active in this regard:

- 31 August 2024 – Within the framework of his visit to Tkibuli, the Prime Minister also met with the clergy;<sup>35</sup>
- 8 September 2024 – Visit of Irakli Kobakhidze, Kakha Kaladze and Shalva Papuashvili to Shalva Akhaltsikheli Cathedral. The Chorbishop of the Patriarch, Metropolitan Theodore of Akhaltsikhe and Tao-Klarjeti, presented the icon to the Prime Minister as a gift;<sup>36</sup>
- 11 September 2024 – The visit of Irakli Kobakhidze and Shalva Papuashvili to St. Giorgi's Dzlevijvari Monastery of Nuns, where Metropolitan Yob of Mrovel-Urbneli and the Prioress of the Monastery, Schema Nun Valeria Skhiladze hosted the government representatives;<sup>37</sup>



<sup>35</sup> Irakli Kobakhidze's visit to Tkibuli, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1057708649046099&set=pcb.1057712932379004>.

<sup>36</sup> Visit of Irakli Kobakhidze, Kakha Kaladze and Shalva Papuashvili to the Shalva Akhaltsikheli Cathedral, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1063089635174667&set=pb.100044209220798.-2207520000&type=3>.

<sup>37</sup> Visit of Irakli Kobakhidze and Shalva Papuashvili to St. Giorgi's Monastery of Nuns, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1064903468326617&set=pb.100044209220798.-2207520000&type=3>.



- 27 September 2024 – The Prime Minister attended the solemn service celebrating the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Sioni Cathedral. Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II held the service in the cathedral together with the Incumbent of the Patriarchal Throne, Metropolitan Shio of Senaki and Chkhorotsku and the clergy;<sup>38</sup>
- 1 October 2024 – Bidzina Festival 2024 was celebrated in Akhmeta Municipality. The event was attended by Metropolitan Davit and the President of the Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili;<sup>39</sup>
- 14 October 2024 – Visit of Irakli Kobakhidze and Shalva Papuashvili to Svetitskhoveli Cathedral. The Prime Minister addressed the gathered congregation from the pulpit;<sup>40</sup>
- 16 October 2024 – The leaders of the ruling party, Irakli Kobakhidze, Kakha Kaladze and Shalva Papuashvili, attended the opening of the new building of the Public Broadcaster of Georgia. The event was attended by high-ranking clergymen;<sup>41</sup> and
- 22 October 2024 – Irakli Kobakhidze attended the presentation of the Kulevi oil refinery project. A clergyman was also present at the event.<sup>42</sup>



<sup>38</sup> The Prime Minister attended the solemn service celebrating the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Sioni Cathedral, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1076209893862641&set=pb.100044209220798.-2207520000>.

<sup>39</sup> Bidzina Festival 2024 was celebrated in Akhmeta Municipality. The event was attended by Metropolitan Davit and President of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=967027405452917&set=pcb.967036605451997>.

<sup>40</sup> Visit of Irakli Kobakhidze and Shalva Papuashvili to Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1088809322602698&set=pb.100044209220798.-2207520000>.

<sup>41</sup> Opening of the new building of the Public Broadcaster of Georgia, available at:

<https://1tv.ge/news/saqartvelos-pirveli-arkhis-akhali-shenoba-istoriuli-dghe-pirveli-arkhistvis/>.

<sup>42</sup> Presentation of the Kulevi oil refinery project, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1094694012014229&set=pb.100044209220798.-2207520000&type=3>.



## 5. GEORGIAN DREAM'S PRE-ELECTION LARGESSE TO THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

In addition to passing pseudo-religious laws, the ruling party tried to gain the favour of the Orthodox Church and its parishioners by transferring state property and budget funds to the Patriarchate. On 13 2024, the Prime Minister issued three orders, under which **the Patriarchate received three plots of land from the state; two of them in the form of direct sale, for 1 GEL, and one – in the form of gratuitous usufruct for a period of 99 years:**

1. The area of agricultural land in Gori is 215,389 m<sup>2</sup>. The National Property Agency, in accordance with the Prime Minister's order, handed over the plot of land to the Patriarchate with a 99-year gratuitous usufruct;<sup>43</sup>
2. The Patriarchate bought a 1,004 m<sup>2</sup> plot of land in Tbilisi, on the Nutsubidze Plateau, on Leo and Nodar Gabunia no. 41a, with buildings located on it, from the state for 1 GEL;<sup>44</sup> and
3. A 5,670 m<sup>2</sup> plot of land located in Mtskheta municipality was given to the Patriarchate for 1 GEL.<sup>45</sup>

In total, the Patriarchate had received **222,063 m<sup>2</sup> plots of land** before 26 October 2024.

Under the order of the Prime Minister on 15 March 2024, **35 million** GEL was allocated to finance the Patriarchate's high schools, vocational colleges and the development fund for educational and cultural events.<sup>46</sup> In addition, under the order of 14 August 2024, the Patriarchate's St. Andrews Georgian University was financed with **2 million** GEL. The church has an annual funding of **25 million** GEL. However, under the orders passed before the parliamentary elections, the **funding of the Patriarchate amounted to 64 million GEL.**<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia, available at: [https://www.gov.ge/files/602\\_89620\\_461585\\_1320.pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/602_89620_461585_1320.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia, available at: [https://www.gov.ge/files/602\\_89619\\_523961\\_1319.pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/602_89619_523961_1319.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia, available at: [https://www.gov.ge/files/602\\_89616\\_880497\\_1316.pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/602_89616_880497_1316.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia, available at: [https://www.gov.ge/files/602\\_87825\\_512495\\_375.pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/602_87825_512495_375.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia, available at: [https://www.gov.ge/files/602\\_89320\\_832707\\_1142.pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/602_89320_832707_1142.pdf).

The harmful practice of gifting the Patriarchate with state-owned property continued **after the elections as well**. Irakli Kobakhidze gave four large plots of land and the buildings attached to the church through four orders on 2 December 2024:

1. A **3,194 m<sup>2</sup>** non-agricultural plot of land in the settlement of Manglisi and three buildings attached to this plot were given to the church in the form of a direct sale for 1 GEL;<sup>48</sup>
2. A **12,183 m<sup>2</sup>** agricultural plot of land located in the village of Pirveli Maisi in Khobi Municipality was given to the church for 1 GEL. Under the same order, Irakli Kobakhidze gave his consent to the Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia to transfer the adjacent **3,877 m<sup>2</sup>** plot of land to the church as gratuitous usufruct and the buildings attached to it for a period of 99 years from the date of signing the contract;<sup>49</sup>
3. A **296 m<sup>2</sup>** non-agricultural plot of land in Kutaisi, on Irakli Abashidze Avenue, adjacent to no. 27, was transferred to the church in the form of direct sale at a symbolic price of 1 GEL. The National Property Agency was instructed to ensure the implementation of the order;<sup>50</sup> and
4. **3,125 m<sup>2</sup>** of land located in the village of Chogha, Chkhorotsku municipality, was given to the church in the form of a direct sale for 1 GEL.<sup>51</sup>



<sup>48</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia, available at: [https://www.gov.ge/files/602\\_90509\\_937109\\_1741.pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/602_90509_937109_1741.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia, available at: [https://www.gov.ge/files/602\\_90508\\_763351\\_1740.pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/602_90508_763351_1740.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia, available at: [https://www.gov.ge/files/602\\_90507\\_779940\\_1739.pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/602_90507_779940_1739.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia, available at: [https://www.gov.ge/files/602\\_90506\\_190836\\_1738.pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/602_90506_190836_1738.pdf).

## 6. PRO-GOVERNMENT STATEMENTS OF CLERGYMEN ON THE DAY OF VOTING AND AFTER THE ELECTION

Similar to the pre-election campaign, the clergy made pro-government statements on the election day as well. The topics voiced in their statements – peace, “family values”, the LGBT community and “foreign forces” – were the main messages of the pre-election campaign of Georgian Dream.

On 25 October 2024, a few hours before the voting day, Deacon Shalva Kekelia emphasised in an Imedi TV programme that every person should make a choice independently when faced with a choice. However, at the same time, he “reminded” his parishioners that in the event of the victory of those who “consider LGBT propaganda to be nothing”, same-sex marriage would be legalised in Georgia.

*“I don't want this to happen in my country too so that we are not concerned by LGBT propaganda. I called upon my congregation again yesterday because the congregation asked me for my opinion that people should make their own choices. I told them that the people, who tarnish your church, tarnish your patriarch, for whom LGBT propaganda is nothing if it is like that and then, **if they win, God forbid, they're going to pass this law, they're going to allow same-sex marriage.**”<sup>52</sup>*

On 26 October 2024, Reverend Shio, the Incumbent of the Patriarchal Throne, made a statement, according to which it is necessary to walk in a godly way. He emphasised that it was necessary to preserve Christian values: *“Saving and preserving essential core values. These are our Christian values and the Church. I hope that today's elections will be an important step towards this goal.”<sup>53</sup>*

On 26 October 2024, Deacon Andria Jaghmaidze, Head of the Public Relations Office of the Patriarchate, also released a statement. According to him, elections are a unique occasion when

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<sup>52</sup> imedinews.ge, “Father Shalva – They Tell Us That You Will Be as We Want – Not as You Want, We Will Decide Everything for You. This Is Very Unacceptable for Me. Everyone Who Makes a Choice Is Responsible for His Choice”, 25 October 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/KkR4B>.

<sup>53</sup> 1tv.ge, 26 October 2024, “Reverend Shio – In Order for the Nation to Occupy a Worthy Place in the Future Order of the World, It Is Necessary to Save the Main Values, I Hope the Elections Will Be a Step Towards This Goal”, available at: <https://shorturl.at/6wOVq>.

each citizen can contribute to the future of the country, make a choice, and according to this choice, events in the country will develop further. He wished Georgia a good future, **peace and preservation of values for the country**.<sup>54</sup>

On the next day of the elections, on 27 October 2024, in his sermon, Deacon Aleksandre Bolkvadze evaluated the results of the elections. According to him, a large part of the Georgian people does have a Christian spirit. However, Deacon noted with regret that he expected more people to vote for the ruling party: *“I am happy. **I have one regret. I thought more would vote in favour.** Most of the people are Christian in spirit. This makes me very happy.”*<sup>55</sup>

According to Reverend Yakob, Bishop of Bodbe, the balance of power was divided absolutely correctly during the elections. In his sermon on 3 November 2024, He addressed the President of Georgia and female oppositionists. According to him, **they only want to appease foreigners**. *“I want to call upon our president and women from the opposition, what will these street actions give us?! Today, if we treat each other like this, thinking about Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region is out of the question. Whose child's blood do you want to spill? Think about it, what are you protecting? You are talking because you want to appease foreigners, otherwise what are you doing for Georgia? Can we live in such a way that the elections are over and we all do the work together – to strengthen Georgia?”*<sup>56</sup>

By posting an announcement on the official Facebook page of the Patriarchate, after the Central Election Commission had summarised the results, the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia II congratulated Georgian Dream on the victory in the elections. According to the statement, **once again a landslide victory of Georgian Dream was confirmed**. The statement emphasises that although the opposition protests the election results and plans to continue protesting, he is hopeful that the government and the opposition will be able to use the next years for the progress and prosperity of the country.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> imedinews.ge, “Deacon Andria – I Wish Georgia a Good Future, Peace and I Wish That the Values That Are Crucial to Us Will Be Rooted Very Firmly in Our Consciousness”, 26 October 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/VNd7K>.

<sup>55</sup> Father Aleksandre Bolkvadze’s sermon, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n57fP9o2enY>.

<sup>56</sup> 1tv.ge, 3 November 2024, “Reverend Jacob – I Want to Appeal to Our President and Ladies From the Opposition, What Will These Street Actions Give Us, Whose Sons Do You Want to Be Bleeding, What Are You Defending? Think About It”, available at: <https://shorturl.at/8EmgT>.

<sup>57</sup> Statement of the Patriarchate of Georgia, available at: <https://shorturl.at/FPIu3>

Irakli Kobakhidze responded to the statement of the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia, thanked Ilia II and noted that his messages are very noteworthy.<sup>58</sup>

In the aftermath of 26 October 2024, some of the clergy congratulated Georgian Dream on “victory” in the elections. According to Reverend Saba, Metropolitan of Khoni and Samtredia, the elections were held, the Patriarch blessed Georgian Dream and, accordingly, the Georgian nation should accept the result. According to his statement, if a person loves the country and wants peace, **it is necessary to do as the Patriarch says and not to expect legitimacy from other countries**: *“Who can be bigger than the Patriarch, who should give us so to say the so-called legitimacy of these events?”*<sup>59</sup>

Reverend Yakob also made an identical statement. In his sermon, he called upon the parishioners **to come to terms with the results of the elections**. He also emphasised that the pre-election agenda of the ruling party was **national**, while that of the opposition parties was designed **to appease foreigners**.<sup>60</sup>

Reverend Yakob called Georgian dream national. According to him, after Zviad Gamsakhurdia, this is the second government that **put Georgia on the national platform**.<sup>61</sup>

Metropolitan Theodore of Akhaltsikhe and Tao-Klarjeti expressed his gratitude to Georgian Dream and announced on 8 November 2024: *“I would like to thank the first persons of our country, our homeland, who are trying to lead our country on this path, and thank our people, who preferred all kinds of prosperity, all other values, to be with the Lord and to walk on the Lord's path.”*<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> radiotavisupleba.ge, “Irakli Kobakhidze –Thanks to the CEC, Thanks to the Patriarch”, 17 November 2024, available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33205332.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Reverend Saba’s sermon, available at: <https://1tv.ge/news/meufe-saba-patriarqma-brdzana-rom-es-archevnebi-chatarda-da-unda-mivighot-shedegebi-chemi-tkhovnaa-daujeret-patriarqs/>.

<sup>60</sup> Reverend Yacob’s sermon, available at: <https://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/301939>.

<sup>61</sup> Reverend Yacob’s Statement, available at: <https://shorturl.at/VxbXQ>.

<sup>62</sup> Reverend Theodore’s statement, available at: <https://shorturl.at/k1Gne>.

## 7. CLERGYMEN'S SUPPORT TO OPENLY PRO-RUSSIAN POLITICAL FORCES

Another political force openly endorsed by the clergy was the openly pro-Russian far-right political party Alliance of Patriots, which participated in the parliamentary elections together with the leaders of the pro-Kremlin Conservative Movement/Alt-Info. In addition to attending the gatherings, the clergy also **blesed the regional offices of the political party opened for the elections.**

The leaders of Conservative Movement/Alt-Info, together with the representatives of Alliance of Patriots, held 11 meetings in Tbilisi and 26 meetings in the regions before the elections. **11 out of the 37 meetings were attended by clergymen:**

- Leaders of Conservative Movement/Alt-Info held their first regional meeting on 4 August 2024 in Rustavi. The meeting was attended by a clergyman;<sup>63</sup>
- The second regional meeting was held on 25 August 2024. A clergyman was present at the meeting held in Batumi;<sup>64</sup>
- On 1 September 2024, Alliance of Patriots opened a regional office in Terjola, which was blessed by Reverend Spyridon Tskipurishvili;<sup>65</sup>



<sup>63</sup> Meeting of Conservative Movement/Alt-Info in Rustavi, available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1A-6bfb0FUF5UHfLw4FcyNT75tJBQnjVN/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>64</sup> Meeting of Conservative Movement/Alt-Info in Batumi, available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cd1hYNEgRfOLFAPLS6JGLi9qAQE67Ub/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>65</sup> Consecration of the regional office in Terjola, available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/14hytKIPPtSJxTF8RtfQVN6DPcxyJt0Qw/view?usp=sharing>.

- On 6 September 2024, in Zestaponi, a meeting was held with the supporters of Alt-Info, Alliance of Patriots and Georgian Idea. The meeting was attended by a clergyman,<sup>66</sup>
- On 8 September 2024, a clergyman attended a regional meeting of Alliance of Patriots in Kutaisi,<sup>67</sup>
- On 14 September 2024, a clergyman attended a regional meetings held in Ozurgeti,<sup>68</sup> Samtredia,<sup>69</sup> Terjola<sup>70</sup> and Zestaponi;<sup>71</sup>



- Leaders of Conservative Movement/Alt-Info received a blessing from Father Giorgi Pavlov, the Pastor of St. Giorgi's Church in Sagarejo. Father Giorgi said: **"Everything will end with the victory of the national-patriotic forces – I said it a million times;"**<sup>72</sup>
- On 28 September 2024, a clergyman attended a meeting held by the radical group in Kareli;<sup>73</sup>

<sup>66</sup> A visit of the radical group in Zestaponi, available at:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aMQpCxLw9wJJTgrRuUeLyyeSzDjZx7V\\_/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aMQpCxLw9wJJTgrRuUeLyyeSzDjZx7V_/view?usp=sharing).

<sup>67</sup> The radical group meeting in Kutaisi, available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ofedF5YEt90NfZ3rRCx2UHRunaj6XdfE/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>68</sup> The radical group meeting in Ozurgeti, available at:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JcvVf4KBC\\_8Yd1dxo4ULObzOScndTNXe/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JcvVf4KBC_8Yd1dxo4ULObzOScndTNXe/view?usp=sharing).

<sup>69</sup> The radical group meeting in Samtredia, available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TIPZEiWx3LvUSmVcGgKEm1aWc3iVDMY7/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>70</sup> The radical group meeting in Terjola, available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qgK8BRBWkCN5eJLB8QsJl9TCIsATG5sr/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>71</sup> The radical group meeting in Zestaponi, available at:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aMQpCxLw9wJJTgrRuUeLyyeSzDjZx7V\\_/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aMQpCxLw9wJJTgrRuUeLyyeSzDjZx7V_/view?usp=sharing).

<sup>72</sup> Leaders of Conservative Movement/Alt-Info received a blessing from Father Giorgi Pavlov, pastor of St. Giorgi's Church in Sagarejo, available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16ix6zZGaYmn9pUGPNLEfnsgDqRiW7lCo/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>73</sup> The pre-election meeting of the radical group in Kareli, available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/13Ri5l6QVcTgUeqUa1mGk6bCL3nty9aO5/view?usp=sharing>.



- On 5 September 2024, leaders of Conservative Movement/Alt-Info held a meeting in Abasha, which was attended by a clergyman;
- On 6 October 2024, far-right groups held a meeting in Tbilisi, near the *Upper Bethlehem Temple*, which was attended by clergymen;<sup>74</sup> and
- On 6 October 2024, a clergyman attended the pre-election meeting held by the ultra-right group in Zugdidi.<sup>75</sup>



On 8 October 2024, Deacon Basil Akhvlediani expressed his open support for Conservative Movement/Alt-Info and, in the TV programme *Alternative Vision*, while evaluating the pre-election environment, he said: *“I see Alt-Info as a wake-up call by God’s grace. I can’t even call them politicians. This is a God-given national liberation group; God-given people who are trying to free us from this quagmire.”*<sup>76</sup>

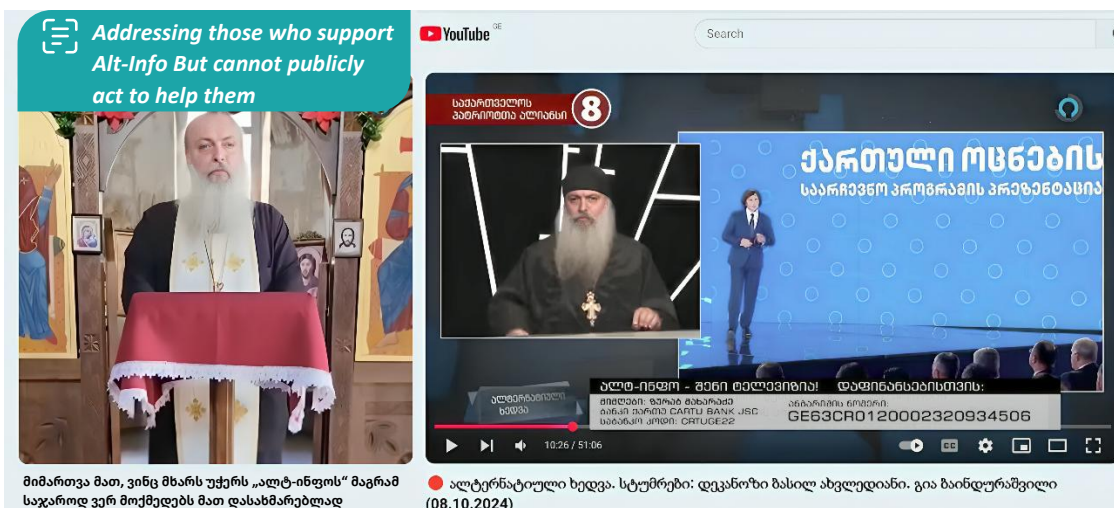
During one of his sermons, Deacon Basil Akhvlediani directly and openly called upon the congregation to support Conservative Movement/Alt-Info and said: *“Alt-Info guys are a phenomenon in our country. They preach the truth and they only need our support. Behind the*

<sup>74</sup> The pre-election meeting of the radical group in Tbilisi, in the Upper Bethlehem Temple, available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nEnK9raLLDQN3tMeuRtYp3Ooot5YMzTd/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>75</sup> The pre-election meeting of the radical group in Zugdidi, available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fKsrkuXTESkiNL5QeuW77TAiswYW3C0/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>76</sup> Deacon Basil Akhvlediani in the programme *Alternative Vision*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0v36ALfz4XY&t=1407s>.

scenes, we talk to each other that we are all choosing number 8 in the elections, but we avoid expressing it publicly. We must remember that this kind of situation is not normal.”<sup>77</sup>

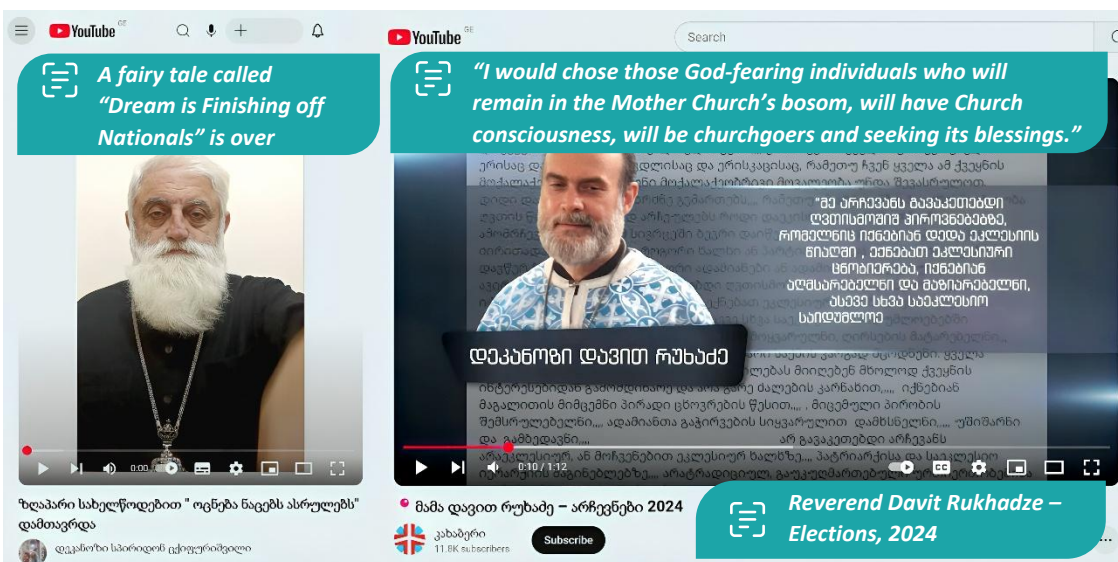


Before the elections, Deacon Spiridon Tskipurishvili called on the public to support Alliance of Patriots of Georgia.<sup>78</sup> The Deacon's election appeal was spread on social networks, where he addressed the public: *"Call to arms! No one stays at home, neighbours, relatives, those living in the same district – we all go to the elections and colour number 8, Georgian Georgia."* The video clip is accompanied by a photo of the Deacon, wherein he was seen holding an election poster supporting the leaders of Conservative Movement/Alt-Info. After the vote, the Deacon issued a statement on 3 November 2024 in which he once again openly endorsed Conservative Movement/Alt-Info. The Deacon condemned the policies of Georgian Dream as well as opposition parties. On the one hand, he called on the parishioners not to join the protests organised by the opposition parties and, on the other hand, he appealed to the supporters of the government that *"the fairy tale called the Dream is fulfilled by the Nationals is over and it's time to support the real Christian and conservative power in the country."*

<sup>77</sup> Sermon by Deacon Basil Akhvediani, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3S1hPvRlFY>. The page is now deleted (the report contains a photo of the said video address).

<sup>78</sup> Deacon Spyridon Tskipurishvili's pre-election address, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ekih8kKzK-4>.

A few days before the voting day, namely on 24 October 2024, the address of Deacon Davit Rukhadze was broadcast by Alt-Info,<sup>79</sup> where he called upon the public to support “God-fearing individuals” who “will be in the bosom of the Mother Church; will make important decisions for the country only based on the country's interests and not dictated by external forces. I wouldn't choose non-church people or fake church people.” The address carried implicit support for Conservative Movement/Alt-Info and negative attitudes towards both the government and the main opposition forces.



<sup>79</sup> Deacon Davit Rukhadze's pre-election address, available at: <https://shorturl.at/C5LLn>.