

# Georgia:

## Pre-election environment in terms of freedom of religion or belief, equality and secularism

Monitoring results from 25 August to 25 September 2024



The document is prepared by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI)

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## Introduction

The Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) has been monitoring the pre-election environment in terms of freedom of religion or belief, equality, and secularism. This includes the monitoring of statements and activities by political subjects and public figures.

The present report covers the period from August 25 to September 25. The forthcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia are scheduled for October 26, 2024. The official pre-election period began 60 days before the election date, i.e., on August 27.

During this period, the government attempted to declare Orthodox Christianity as the state religion and, consequently, to restrict the independence and autonomy of the Orthodox Church. The government held negotiations with the Orthodox Church on this matter, using the topic for populist and propagandistic purposes. On September 17, 2024, the Parliament passed a package of bills "[On Protection of Family Values and Minors](#)." The discriminatory and homophobic legislation [restricts](#) freedom of assembly and expression, including access to information and media freedom, the right to respect for private and family life, the right to health care, and the freedom of labor.

The anti-Western messages of the Georgian government, the ruling political party, and government-controlled propaganda media are based on speculations in the name of the Orthodox Church, as well as homophobic and anti-human rights rhetoric.

## Failed Attempt to Declare Orthodox Christianity as the State Religion

On August 20, 2024, the political council of the Georgian Dream ruling party released a [statement](#) presenting four strategic objectives for the accomplishment of which the ruling party needs to obtain a constitutional majority. To achieve these goals, the party requested strong voter support. The fourth objective was not specified in the statement, but it was noted that **"the constitutional regulation of this issue could be of utmost importance for the protection of Georgia's identity and national values."**

In his speech at a pre-election event held in Ambrolauri on August 25, the party's "honorary chairman," oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, said that "there is yet another issue of existential importance for our country and our faith..."

On August 26, media spread [information](#) that the Georgian Dream wanted to declare Orthodox Christianity the state religion, and meetings on this matter were being held at the Patriarchate. Over the next few days, several high-ranking clergymen and representatives of the Patriarchate confirmed that discussions on this issue were ongoing.

On August 29, a [meeting](#) was held at the Patriarchate, which was attended only by bishops. Simultaneously, several bishops made statements saying that they were against declaring Orthodox Christianity as the state religion.

On August 30, the final meeting between representatives of the Patriarchate and the government was held, after which, instead of declaring Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, different conditions of the agreement were made public. According to a [statement](#) made by Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, the state and the Church agreed that the Constitution would include a provision stating that “Orthodox Christianity is the pillar of the state.” As Zviadadze noted, the meeting was attended by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze and representatives from the Patriarchate, including himself, the Patriarch’s locum tenens Shio Mujiri, Archbishop Theodore Chuadze, the Patriarch’s secretary Mikhail Botkovelevi, and the head of the Patriarchate’s Public Relations Service, Andria Jagmaidze.

On August 31, during a [pre-election event in Ozurgeti](#), Bidzina Ivanishvili talked about the promised fourth issue, stating that **“the mission of Orthodox Christianity as the pillar of Georgian statehood will be clearly specified in the Constitution of Georgia. Furthermore, the special role of the Orthodox Church in both Georgia’s history and its contemporary life will be emphasized.”** He cited a further strengthening of the constitutional status of Orthodox Christianity and the Orthodox Church as the reason for this amendment.

According to Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze’s [statement](#) of September 1, the government and the Patriarchate agreed that Article 8 of the Constitution of Georgia will be amended to include the following text as the first paragraph: “Orthodox Christianity is the pillar of the identity of the Georgian state,” while in the second paragraph, “after the phrase ‘in the history of Georgia,’ the phrase ‘contemporary Georgia’ will be added, to which the Georgian Orthodox Church has agreed in principle.”

It is noteworthy that Article 8 of the Constitution of Georgia concerns the relationship between the state and the Georgian Orthodox Church and already recognizes “the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia, and its independence from the state.” Thus, Bidzina Ivanishvili and his puppet government failed to gain the Church’s support for their pre-election populist attempt to declare Orthodox Christianity the state religion.

## Statements by the Georgian Dream Government regarding the Orthodox Church and Constitutional Amendments

Representatives of the ruling political party have made numerous statements on this issue. They openly stated that the issue of the Church is part of their pre-election promises, and that is exactly why they need to secure a parliamentary majority so that they can make the necessary amendments to the Constitution.

**[Bidzina Ivanishvili](#), Honorary Chairman of Georgian Dream**, August 31, pre-election event in Ozurgeti (Guria): *“In order to further strengthen the constitutional status of Orthodox Christianity and the Orthodox Church, and for the constitutional provision to more accurately reflect the current reality, the mission of Orthodox Christianity as the pillar*

*of Georgia's identity will be clearly reflected in the Constitution of Georgia. Additionally, the special role of the Orthodox Church in both Georgia's history and the country's contemporary life will be emphasized... We would like to thank the Church, His Holiness and Beatitude, and the bishops for supporting our initiative, as well as for their contribution, in general, to the safeguarding and preservation of Georgia's identity."*

**Bidzina Ivanishvili**, September 8, pre-election event in Akhaltsikhe (Samtskhe-Javakheti): *"Moreover, upon our victory, we will take concrete steps towards the independence, strengthening, and protection of the Orthodox Church. We will reflect the role of the Orthodox Church in the Constitution in the way it truly deserves. Orthodox Christianity will be enshrined in the Constitution as the pillar of Georgia's state identity!"*

**Bidzina Ivanishvili**, September 14, pre-election event in Gori (Shida Kartli): *"Georgia and Orthodox Christianity are inseparable concepts. Our ancestors were writing history with the blood they spilled for the defense of their homeland and faith for centuries, preserving the Christian values for future generations that safeguarded Georgia's European identity. Christian faith, along with the homeland and language, is one of the main pillars of Georgian identity that requires particular care and protection."*

**Bidzina Ivanishvili**, September 19, pre-election event in Rustavi (Kvemo Kartli): *"Moreover, after securing a constitutional majority, we will take concrete steps to strengthen the constitutional status of the Orthodox Church as the pillar of the state's identity."*

**Mamuka Mdinardze, Leader of the Parliamentary Majority**, September 3: *"When the state constitutionally recognizes and appreciates the role of the Church not only in the past but also in the present, this will also strengthen the role of the Church, and for the inclusion of this provision in the constitution, on the one hand, there will naturally be legitimization from society, because we will tell them about it in advance, and the Georgian Dream will earn high appreciation and support for voicing this initiative, and on the other hand, it will be a strong guarantee that no one will dare to attack the Church so easily. When the status of religion and the Church is elevated, the firmness in this regard will, naturally, also increase."* **Mdinardze also spoke on this issue on September 4 and 11:** *"...Yes, this decision is linked to the elections because we want to get broad public legitimacy to make this decision. [...] They are saying it is election-related in such a manner as if we are hiding it. Yes, it is indeed related to the elections because we are telling the people to give us broad legitimacy so that we can do this."*

**Guram Macharashvili, member of the parliamentary majority and People's Power**, August 30: *"Yes, the strengthening and protecting our Church at the constitutional level is indeed part of our pre-election promise, and we are doing this to win the voters' hearts. Yes, we are talking to the voters and giving them a promise that we will protect and strengthen our faith. There is nothing surprising about that."*

**Irakli Zarkua, Georgian Dream MP**, September 2: *"There have been repeated attacks on the Mother Church, including on the Patriarch, by those without a homeland and their*

*masters. Everyone must understand that the Georgian state, the Church, the laity, and the clergy are inseparable... We will do everything to protect and strengthen the Church.”*

## The Position of the Patriarchate on Declaring Orthodox Christianity as the State Religion

With regard to the government’s initiative, representatives of the Orthodox Church have made a number of comments about the dangers and risks they see in declaring the Church the official state religion. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of clergy were against the declaration of Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, citing the loss of the Church’s independence as the reason.

In their comments, clergymen referred to the position of the Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia II, on the matter of state religion, which he had held in the past.

[Longinos Suarishvili](#), representative of the Patriarchate’s Public Relations Office, August 26: *“The Patriarch was previously against declaring Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, which is why the constitutional agreement was developed, and the Church’s status was defined within it. The Church still holds this same view to date.”*

[Giorgi Zviadadze](#), protopresbyter, August 27: *“The Georgian Church maintains the same position that the Patriarch held earlier. ... At this stage, it is not appropriate to talk about amending the constitutional agreement.”*

[Grigol Berbichashvili](#), Metropolitan of Poti and Khobi, August 29: *“As I told you, in 2002, when the constitutional agreement was being drafted, various versions and options were studied, and the best one was chosen. What else can I tell you? What was the Patriarch’s position at the time? The one that was signed.”*

Some high-ranking clergymen perceived the declaration of Orthodox Christianity as the state religion as a threat to the Church’s independence.

[Nikoloz Pachuasvili](#), Metropolitan of the Akhalkalaki and Kumurdo Diocese, August 26: *“Declaring Orthodox Christianity the state religion means that the Church is not independent of the state, and accordingly, the state is not independent of the Church. Let’s take, for example, the appointment of church hierarchs and clergy - such decisions would be made by the state, or, more precisely, the Church would propose, and the state would approve.”*

[Zenon Iarajuli](#), Archbishop of Dmanisi and Agarak-Tashiri, August 28: *“Declaring the Orthodox Church the state religion in Georgia essentially means subordinating the Church institutionally to the state authority. ... If this is a deliberate declaration, one can think of nothing else but a wicked and malicious plan of institutional destruction of the Church and the state’s departure from democratic governance, which can only be a project carried out by special services of a country hostile to Georgia and its Church; or perhaps a sign of the future misfortune of dictatorship or authoritarianism.”*



**Spiridon Abuladze**, Bishop of the Skhalta Diocese, September 1: *“Just imagine the government appointing him [the leader of the Church] - that’s what it all looks like; without the government, such appointments cannot happen. The government will, naturally, choose whoever it wants; consequently, the government will choose bishops according to its mood or the attitude of the head of the government. ...And this is a very grave sin, a terrible sin.”*

**Davit Makharadze**, Metropolitan of the Alaverdi Diocese, September 1: *“The proposal was not accepted by the Catholicos-Patriarch and all the members of the Synod because we have a better form of cooperation and agreement - the constitutional agreement. Therefore, declaring Orthodox Christianity as the state religion will not benefit either side - neither the Church nor the state. Both sides have understood, analyzed, and realized that, and after that, when it comes to amending the constitution, we will likely have more intensive and frequent meetings, and we will familiarize ourselves with the revised version, and only after that will it be written into [the constitution] and announced publicly.”*

## Statements of Opposition Political Parties Regarding the Orthodox Church and Constitutional Amendments

Leaders of opposition parties commented on the ruling party’s initiative to declare Orthodox Christianity as the state religion. Some of them viewed the initiative as an attempt of the government to use the authority of the Orthodox Church for election purposes, while others saw it as an attempt to deprive the Church of its self-governance and independence. Some opposition politicians, however, engaged in populist discussions about the church and expressed their support for emphasizing the church’s historical role in the Constitution.

On September 1, Mamuka Khazaradze, chairperson of the Lelo political party and leader of the Strong Georgia coalition, issued a statement in which, on the one hand, he called the proposal an “election trick,” but on the other hand, expressed support for the initiative.

**Mamuka Khazaradze**, chairman of the Lelo party, September 1: *“We support clearly defining the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the life of the Georgian state at the constitutional level and believe that the entire political spectrum should agree on this. Therefore, let the vote on the constitutional amendments be held before the parliamentary elections. This will protect the church from being dragged into the pre-election propaganda by the Georgian Dream and will further solidify its status at the constitutional level.”*

**Badri Japaridze**, leader of the Lelo political party, September 2: *“Georgian Dream’s trick failed, and it received a very clear answer from the Georgian Orthodox Church - we will strongly support the position of the Georgian Orthodox Church.”*

**Grigol Gegelia**, member of the Lelo political party, September 2: *“Georgian Dream is trying to exploit a sensitive and important topic for society to gain a political dividend. We say that we are ready, here and now, to discuss and adopt a corresponding amendment if the church is interested in it.”*

Leader of the United National Movement Mikheil Saakashvili and Chairperson of the same party Tina Bokuchava also commented on the topic.

**Mikheil Saakashvili**, former president of Georgia and leader of the United National Movement, August 29: *“Ivanishvili, when he repeatedly insulted the Patriarch in conversations with me, always referred to the fact, most likely invented by him, about the purchase of the Trinity Cross twice. His main claim was that the Patriarchate was stealing money from him (Ivanishvili). No matter what promises he makes now, he needs to introduce the status of the ‘state religion’ and, if given the opportunity, he will use money not only to control the church but also to run it.”*

**Tinatin Bokuchava**, chairperson of the United National Movement, September 2: *“The Patriarchate of Georgia will always be the guardian of the Georgian citizens, the Orthodox Church, and faith, and will reject any pre-election, propagandist, dirty deals with the government, whose leader, inclined towards idolatry, is once again trying to use one of our most sensitive and precious things, our faith, to retain power.”*

**Kakhaber Okriashvili**, MP from the United National Movement - United Opposition **“Strength in Unity,”** September 2: *“Tomorrow, on September 3, the autumn session of parliament opens, so why delay this good deed? The entire opposition is ready to vote for this postulate in September and introduce it into the constitution before the elections. These tricks of the Georgian Dream will no longer work. The time of your political scams has passed; assume that you are already in the opposition!”*

On this topic, Nika Gvaramia, co-chairperson of the Akhali political party and leader of the Coalition for Change, in his Facebook post focused on illegal surveillance and wiretapping by the state, which became known in 2021.

**Nika Gvaramia**, September 3: *“For example, I will support a constitutional amendment that would prohibit the government from eavesdropping on, spying on, and videotaping the Orthodox Church clergymen, which are then reflected in intelligence reports of the Georgian Security Service and leaked to the public; also, from planting bugs in confessionals, or forcing priests to write confessions to be given to the Georgian Security Service in exchange for personal blackmail, which, again, are made public in the form of the briefs.”*

## Speculation on the topic of Church in the Government’s Anti-Western Messages

During the pre-election period, the leaders of the Georgian Dream actively used Orthodox Christianity and the name of the Church for anti-Western propaganda messages. Under the guise of defending the Church and “faith,” they portray human rights activists, non-governmental organizations, political opponents, and Western partners as a “spy ring” of the West, “fighters against the Church,” “blasphemers of the Church,” “anti-national, anti-church, radical groups,” and “hostile force.”



**Mamuka Mdinardze, leader of the Parliamentary Majority, August 25:** *“No person who considers their homeland, faith, and language to be of utmost importance should stay home, because a single vote could decide the fate of a constitutional majority.”*

**Guram Macharashvili, member of the parliamentary majority and the People’s Power party, August 30:** *“Forces hostile to Georgia know perfectly well that the Church plays a major role and has a significant influence on society; this deeply irritates them, and they constantly try to discredit the Church. Our goal is to reflect this very role and influence of the Church in the Constitution. It is a simple truth – the strengthening of the Church is opposed by only those forces that fight against our faith and everything Georgian!”*

**Archil Talakvadze, Georgian Dream MP, September 2:** *“In recent years, there have been unprecedented pressures and attacks on the Orthodox Church. Of course, the goal is not accidental.”*

**Bidzina Ivanishvili, Honorary Chairman of Georgian Dream, September 8:** *“On October 26, the Georgian people, unfortunately, will not have to choose between good and better; because of the radical opposition, the people without a homeland, on October 26, we will have to choose between war and peace, between pseudo-liberal values and those based on nationalism, family, faith, and independence. We have to choose between the dignified European future of our country and the unacceptable reality that the radical opposition and foreign actors want to present as European.”*

**Irakli Kobakhidze, Prime Minister of Georgia, September 8:** *“The election to be held on October 26 is not an ordinary election. It is a decisive referendum in which unlove for the homeland is pitted against patriotism, militant atheism against respect for the Church, slavery against sovereignty. This referendum will inevitably be won by love for the country, respect for the Church, and the independence of Georgia.”*

**Shalva Papuashvili, Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, September 9:** *“Today, when our faith is being directly, openly, and shamelessly attacked... You can clearly see the kind of campaign they wage against the date of Christmas, how they fight against icons, how they try to damage and discredit our Mother Church.”*

**Kakha Kaladze, Mayor of Tbilisi, September 9:** *“Law [on Transparency of Foreign Influence] requires one thing – to make the public aware of where the money comes from, to register all this - where the mentioned sum was received and which particular projects they are being spent on. I understand that some do not want to make this public because everything will become apparent – who is fighting against Georgian statehood, our culture, traditions, Church, and faith. This will all come to light. Therefore, they prefer to secretly and illicitly finance revolutions, extremist organizations, and societal rift and confrontation.”*

**Irakli Kobakhidze, Prime Minister of Georgia, September 14:** *“Shida Kartli preserves some of our country’s most valuable heritage, numerous churches and monasteries that remind us of how important it is to protect each pillar of our national identity – homeland, language, and faith. [...] When the laity and the clergy were united, when the Georgian*

*people stood together to protect their national identity – homeland, language, and faith – no one was able to defeat Georgia. No one will be able to defeat Georgia on October 26 either.”*

**Mamuka Mdinaradze**, leader of the parliamentary majority, **September 11**: *“The role of the Church in preserving our identity is decisive, and why is it that the spy ring is constantly fighting against it and the Church is always their main target? Good and bad exist everywhere, including among the laity and the clergy; we have to recognize this, but if they learn about someone’s alleged misdeed, they pursue it to the end, but will never produce a positive report about anything good. They accuse the 99% of terrible things and fight them. Why? Because the Church is one of the main pillars of our statehood and homeland.”*

**Vladimer Bozhadze**, Delegate of the Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia from **Gldani, September 13**: *“Yes, you, the voters, must decide the fate of our country. The fate of our country will be decided in Georgia, as it has been since October 1, 2012, and not outside the country, no matter what denunciations they write or what hearings they attend abroad to sneak on their own country, Mother Church, and people. I am sure that Georgia will win again and continue its path towards Europe, but it will continue with peace, prosperity, and only with dignity.”*

**Mikheil Kavelashvili**, member of the parliamentary majority and People's Power, **September 17**: *“On one side stands the Patriarch, King Erekle II, Bidzina Ivanishvili, Robert Sturua, Lasha Talakhadze, Geno Petriashvili, already our team members, also, Lasha Bekauri and I can name many others who have been repeatedly insulted, reviled, and called names by this 'UNM crowd,' these people without roots and homeland, these liberal fascists.”*

**Bidzina Ivanishvili**, Honorary Chairman of Georgian Dream, **September 19**: *“As you know, Georgia has historically been proud of its centuries-old tradition of religious tolerance and, on the other hand, Orthodox Christianity, which, along with homeland and language, is one of the key foundations of our identity. You are also aware that attacks on the Orthodox Church are continuous, aiming to undermine Georgia’s identity.”*

On September 16, **Michael Roth, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the German Bundestag**, visited Georgia and held meetings with representatives of opposition parties and the non-governmental sector, as well as President Salome Zourabichvili. The ruling party and the government representatives refused to meet him, citing a [statement](#) Roth made on May 14 about the Orthodox Church as the main reason. Once again, the government used this issue to voice its anti-Western rhetoric.

**Shalva Papuashvili**, Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, **September 16**: *“As I understand, he [Michael Roth] is here to support the opposition, and it seems the opposition will line up to meet him. This person insulted the Georgian people, so there is no desire on our side to meet with him. He insulted the Georgian people’s Church, the government elected by the Georgian people, and Georgian democracy by standing with the radical opposition at an anti-government demonstration.”*

**[Kakha Kaladze](#), Mayor of Tbilisi, September 16:** “The man who is primarily busy making offensive statements – at least, that is how we remember him – from him we hear statements against the Church, faith, and in general, against the country, and peace.”

**[Guram Macharashvili](#), September 3:** *“On October 26, the choice will be crucial and, at the same time, simple: the Patriarch’s sermon or Michael Roth’s insults against the Church; the respect for Georgian kings or the gibberish of king Levan Berdzenishvili, the insulter of the kings; participation in the Christmas Alilo procession or conduct of gay prides.”*

On this same topic, statements were made by other leaders and MPs from the Georgian Dream, including [Mamuka Mdinaradze](#), [Nino Tsilosani](#), [Nikoloz Samkharadze](#), [Guram Macharashvili](#), and [Levan Machavariani](#).

The government’s anti-Western messaging and manipulation using the Church are further reinforced by government-controlled propaganda media. For instance, on September 2, the [host of the news program](#) on the **Imedi TV channel** described the opposition as enemies of the Church and the ruling party as the protector of the Church. *“The Church, which has enjoyed the greatest public trust for years, has also been enduring the harshest and most aggressive attacks from radicals. The Catholicos-Patriarch of all Georgia, personally, is the target of the attacks too. These preconditions and facts demonstrate to Georgian Dream that the constitutional provision is necessary; this issue is supported by the Patriarchate.”*

## The Orthodox Church and Clergy in the Ruling Party’s Pre-Election Campaign

During the pre-election campaign, in parallel with populist exploitation of church-related topics, representatives of the ruling party and the government have been actively visiting churches and monasteries and appearing together with Orthodox clergy. Since the start of the campaign, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, along with fellow party members, has visited several churches and monasteries.

**[On August 31](#)**, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, along with other officials, attended an event in Tkibuli dedicated to the City Day of Tkibuli and Miner’s Day. High-ranking clergy, including the Metropolitan of the Kutaisi-Gaenati Diocese, Ioane Gamrekeli, were also present at the event.



Photo: Facebook page [ირაკლი კობახიძე / Irakli Kobakhidze](#)

**On September 6,** Irakli Kobakhidze delivered a commencement address to the first graduating students of the Kutaisi International University (KIU). In addition to government and party members, the graduation ceremony was attended by Metropolitan Ioane Gamrekeli of the Kutaisi-Gaenati Diocese.



Photo: Facebook page [ირაკლი კობახიძე / Irakli Kobakhidze](#)

**On September 8,** Irakli Kobakhidze was hosted by Patriarch's Chorepiscopus, Metropolitan Theodore of Akhaltsikhe and Tao-Klarjeti at the St. Shalva of Akhaltsikhe Temple. The Prime Minister was accompanied by Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili, Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, government members, and representatives of the local authorities. Metropolitan



Theodore thanked the government representatives for their visit and gave the Prime Minister an icon of the Virgin Mary as a gift.



*Photo: Government of Georgia*

**On September 11,** Irakli Kobakhidze, together with Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili, visited the St. George Convent of Dzlevijvari (Kareli Municipality). They were hosted by Metropolitan Iob of Mroveli-Urbneli and the abbess of the convent, Schema-Nun Valeria Skhiladze.



*Photo: Government of Georgia*

**On September 15,** Irakli Kobakhidze, along with Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili, Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, and Parliamentary Majority Leader Mamuka Mdinardze, visited the Church of the Resurrection in Gori, which is under construction. The government officials were hosted by Metropolitan Andria of Gori and Ateni. The clergyman spoke about the construction

process with the Prime Minister and underlined the special importance of financial support from Bidzina Ivanishvili's Cartu Foundation. The Prime Minister promised state support in the construction process. Metropolitan Andria presented the government representatives with icons as gifts.



*Photo: Government of Georgia*

**On September 18**, the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Science, and Youth Affairs, Givi Mikanadze, attended the presentation of the documentary film “St. Grigol of Khandzta,” produced with the blessing and prayers of the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, Ilia II.



გივი მიქანაძე  
ფოტო: საქართველოს  
პარლამენტი

*Photo: Parliament of Georgia*

## Propagandist Statements by Representatives of the Orthodox Church

During the pre-election period, some Orthodox Church clergymen, in their sermons and public speeches, made statements in support of the government and against civil society, human rights, and the West.



**Spiridon Abuladze, Bishop of Skhalta, September 1:** *“Especially now, here in Georgia, there are 15 political parties that have signed horrible LGBT memoranda and are saying that they support this ideology. Today we have a government led by Mr. Bidzina and his team, who are fiercely fighting against this perversion, this filth, and disaster; you know that he does not hide that and openly challenged those countries and forces that preach and promote this perversion. But will we always have a government like this? Who knows what will happen 10 years from now, or 20, 30, or 50 years? [...] Thank God that the government is in dialogue with us, with the Church. May God bless Mr. Bidzina Ivanishvili and our government. [...] Take, for example, the governments in the USA and European Union countries. They are terrible LGBT governments. They openly declare that their main ideology is LGBT, etc., and that whoever does not obey us, does not have LGBT ideology – which is a hell and disaster - we will attack and destroy them. And you know the speeches of their presidents, how they pressure the whole world, including the Georgian government and the Georgian nation.”*

**Andria Jagmaidze, Spokesperson of the Georgian Patriarchate, September 2:** *“In recent times, we are living in the epoch marked by a great dynamic of changing values, and the Church has to fight hard to avoid a radical replacement of values. [...] I mean the slanderous and targeted campaign to discredit the Church that has been going on for many years, and also an important factor - the intense line of LGBT propaganda that we see on the part of the Church’s opponents and that has become a defining line between the Church and some nongovernmental organizations or political parties. These circumstances have probably prompted the state to take this step.”*

**Stephane Kalaijishvili, Metropolitan of Chkondidi, Tsageri, and Lentekhi, September 2:** *“The situation in Georgia today is that some sodomites and atheists have united, and they are trying to lure our children with candies in bright wrappers, saying that if they overthrow this government, we will find bars of gold waiting for us in Europe.” And about the threat from Russia: “In reality, very big problems await us. First of all, the Russia issue will escalate, and with such foolish actions, 2008 might seem insignificant compared to what will happen.”*

During his sermon on August 28, **Bishop Jakob Iakobashvili of Bodbe** spoke about foreign interference in elections:

*“I am in favor of an extremely close relationship with America and the European Union. But I am not a fool to believe that everything is as they tell us. Our elections will be over and, with God’s help, everything will be fine because this is Georgia, and we, Georgians, will decide the fate of Georgia. Let foreign countries interfere less in the elections. They will say that they do not interfere, but every country does.”*

**On September 21, during his sermon, Bishop Jakob** commented on Michael Roth’s visit, echoing the narrative of Georgian Dream politicians: *“We have to get through this time as well; as friends, they will part or something will happen. We owe nothing to any nation. When there was any need, they took us to Afghanistan as a contribution, and today, it turns out, they may stop supporting our army. The army is not the government! It is ours, isn’t it? We are not threatening anyone, but if someone goes against Georgia, we*

*will take care of all of them; let them consider it! [...] They will not let me into Europe, I do not need to [...] let them blame themselves if they lose people like us.”*

In contrast to most of the Orthodox clergymen, **Metropolitan [Nikoloz Pachuashvili](#) of Akhalkalaki and Kumurdo** focused on the pre-election promises made by the ruling party to “win the heart” of the Church.

*“No matter how they hide or package it, it is clear that this is a pre-election offer, a pre-election program.”*

Metropolitan’s position was followed by harsh criticism from Georgian Dream deputies. **Georgian Dream MP [Aluda Ghudushauri](#)** described his remark as “absolutely wrong and unacceptable,” while **[Guram Machavariani](#) from the People’s Power** stated, “*What Metropolitan Nikoloz has said does not fit within ecclesiastical, human, or moral ethics. It is sad that a high-ranking cleric sneers at the strengthening of the role of the Church, who, on the contrary, should be doing everything to strengthen Mother Church.*”

## Conclusion

The monitoring of statements made by the government, the ruling party, Orthodox clergymen, propagandist media, and representatives of opposition political parties during the pre-election campaign reveals that the government and ruling party leaders actively use Orthodox Christianity and the Church for anti-Western propaganda messaging. Under the guise of protecting the Church and the “faith,” they portray human rights defenders, nongovernmental organizations, political opponents, and Western partners as “a spy ring” of the West, “fighters against the Church,” “blasphemers of the Church,” “anti-national, anti-Church radical groups,” and “hostile forces.” A clear example of exploiting the topic and populism in the name of the Church was the unsuccessful attempt to declare Orthodox Christianity the state religion. In their anti-Western, anti-democratic, and anti-human rights narratives, they often employ homophobic rhetoric. In addition to restricting human rights, the government used the adoption of the package of bills on the Protection of Family Values and Minors for electoral purposes.

Anti-Western messaging and manipulation of Church-related topics by the government are bolstered by the government-controlled propaganda media. During the pre-election campaign, government and ruling party representatives actively visited churches and monasteries and publicly appeared with Orthodox clergy.

In turn, the Orthodox Church hierarchs frequently openly support the government and spread statements against civil society, human rights, and the West.