

## Senator Shaheen After Meeting with Kobakhidze: "I Don't Understand the Willingness to Follow in Footsteps of Russia's Dictatorship"

By Messenger Staff

At the beginning of August, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the top candidate on the Georgian Dream election list, did not meet with Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen and Republican Congressman Michael Turner, who were on an official visit to Georgia. The American lawmakers were instead met by the country's Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze. However, in an exclusive interview with *Voice of America*, Senator Jeanne Shaheen expressed her disappointment with the meeting with Kobakhidze, as she did not see readiness from the Georgian government to continue the U.S.-Georgia partnership.

"After the meeting with the Prime Minister, I was very disappointed. The United States has been supporting Georgia's democratic aspirations for over 30 years. We've supported Georgia through [financial] assistance, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is also present in the country. During our visit to Georgia, one of the things we did was visit Gori, where we saw initiatives that support young people. We met very impressive young individuals. We also saw initiatives supporting entrepreneurs affected by Russia's occupation.

So, hearing from the Prime Minister that he wants to renew relations, but then seeing no willingness to take practical steps to make that happen [was disappointing]. One of the things we asked [during the meeting] was what needs to happen for relations to improve and to ensure that we continue the partnership we've had for these 30 years. In response, he expressed frustration with civil society and NGOs that are critical of the government. He told us that he thinks this needs to stop and that the United States should cease supporting NGOs. Congressman Turner was very direct with him, saying that we live in a democracy and that we hope Georgia is also a democracy. We're used to criticism; we're often criticized too, but that doesn't mean we should stop or fail to move forward in ways that benefit both sides.



But he [Irakli Kobakhidze] didn't have any positive initiative to ask of us or to inform us that they are truly interested in continuing the partnership we've had," stated Jeanne Shaheen.

In response to this statement, the senator was asked about Irakli Kobakhidze's claim that he had never asked Shaheen to stop funding the part of civil society that criticizes the government. Kobakhidze also said that they had not discussed the "foreign agents" law.

"I was not alone in that meeting; many other people were there who can confirm what he [the Prime Minister] said, including Congressman Turner. Once again, this is very unfortunate. I think he assumes that because he is the head of government, if he keeps lying, he will just tell more lies, and people will believe it. So, I think this is simply not trustworthy. You asked me about the 'foreign agents' law. During this visit, the Prime Minister and I did not discuss this law. When the law was first introduced, we

opposed it, and during my time in Georgia, I made my position very clear that we were against it. I had the chance to speak with the Prime Minister before he became Prime Minister about our opposition to this law. There is a record of that. So [this time], we discussed other issues," the senator noted.

The conversation also touched on the upcoming elections scheduled for October 26 and the expectations regarding how fair and democratic they would be.

"I think this is a real cause for concern. We've heard from several observer groups that they are very worried about whether this election will be free and fair. This was an issue we raised with every government representative we met — the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the President.

The Prime Minister told us that they are committed to holding free and fair elections. I hope that will be the case. I understand that Georgia has a difficult

geographic location, and I respect that. I also respect the challenges the country faces due to Russia's occupation of 20% of its land. But I do not understand the willingness to follow in the footsteps of Vladimir Putin and Russia's dictatorship.

This is not the position of the Georgian people. We have heard from the people of Georgia that they want to be part of the European Union and the West, and they see that as their future, not Russia. So, following dictatorship in Russia doesn't seem to be the future path for Georgia," the senator noted.

According to the senator, it is disappointing that there seems to be no interest in continuing U.S. assistance to Georgia.

"The assistance we've provided to Georgia has been very important in terms of continuing to protect human rights, improve democracy, better address issues in the country, and fight corruption. So, it is very disappointing that we don't see interest in continuing this in the future," the senator stated.



### Remarks of Ambassador Pawek Herczynski on the International Day of Democracy

Today we celebrate the International Day of Democracy. Democracy has improved the lives of millions around the world. At the same time, in many places, it is under threat.

Democracies are based on simple, yet fundamental values of freedom, respect for human rights, and free and fair elections.

A healthy democracy thrives on diversity. Opposition parties, vibrant civil society and independent media are essential for ensuring that governments are accountable.

This year, more than half of the world's population will take part in elections. This includes Georgia. Voting is your consti-

tutional right and a civic duty. The vote of each of you will decide the future of Georgia.

The European Union actively defends democracy within and beyond our borders.

The European Union has been a strong ally of Georgia since its independence. For decades, we have been helping to strengthen Georgia's democracy.

On this day, and every single day, we must ensure that democratic values we share are upheld for the benefit of all of us.

We stand by the Georgian people on their path to join the European Union. Tsin, Sakartvelo, tsin!



Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.6984; Euro - 2.9939; GBP - 3.5446; 100 Russian Ruble - 2.9708; Swiss Franc - 3.1825

# Georgian Orthodox Church Rejects Georgian Dream's Proposal to Declare Orthodoxy as State Religion

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

The Georgian Orthodox Church declined the offer from Georgian Dream to constitutionally declare Orthodoxy as the state religion. According to the plan of Georgian Dream, this was intended as a significant pre-election move. However, it turned out that this was not part of the Patriarchate's agenda.

On August 20, Georgian Dream's political council issued a statement listing reasons why, after 12 years in power, they still wanted to win a constitutional majority. Three of these reasons were named immediately, and one was said to be under consultation, with further information to be provided at the end of August.

On August 21, after a months-long hiatus, Georgian Dream founder Bidzina Ivanishvili reappeared and discussed the fourth constitutional amendment, which, according to him, could be of great importance for "protecting Georgia's identity and national values." Ivanishvili did not specify the details, stating that consultations were still ongoing.

A few days later, the mystery was revealed. On August 27, Formula TV reported that the fourth issue Georgian Dream was planning to introduce into the constitution was the declaration of Orthodoxy as the state

religion. Meetings regarding this matter took place in the Patriarchate on August 26 and 29. It was also reported that Bidzina Ivanishvili met secretly with the Patriarch.

Although Orthodoxy does not hold the status of a state religion, there has been a concordat — a constitutional agreement between the Church and the state since 2002 — that emphasizes the special role of the Orthodox Church. Apparently, the Patriarchate is satisfied with this status and opposes declaring Orthodoxy as the state religion. The main reason is that, with such a status, the Church could end up under state control.

The Patriarchate's official response was polite, acknowledging the state's proposal as an "act of courtesy" aimed at strengthening the Church's status through a constitutional provision. Most clergy agree with this idea, but they do not believe it is necessary to rush the issue, especially during the pre-election period.

The Patriarchate and Georgian Dream agreed that no hasty decision would be made on this matter, as it concerns "a constitutional amendment." Any decision will adhere to three main principles: a) no provision will be added without the Church's input; b) it will not take the form

of declaring Orthodoxy the state religion; and c) the constitutional amendment will strengthen and enhance the role of the Church.

On August 31, despite the Patriarchate's opposition, Bidzina Ivanishvili, speaking during Georgian Dream's election campaign, stated that consultations with the Church had been successfully completed, though he did not mention declaring Orthodoxy as the state religion. Instead, he said that if they win a constitutional majority in the elections, they will reflect the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church "more precisely" in the constitution. Ivanishvili feels that Article 8 of the constitution is insufficient, and he believes it should be amended to state that "Orthodoxy is the cornerstone of Georgia's identity" and plays a special role "in both the history and the modern life of our country." However, the Patriarchate is still consulting on which term should be used — "cornerstone," "foundation," or "defining."

Declaring Orthodoxy the state religion was intended to be a key part of Georgian Dream's election campaign, something the Church was well aware of. "There's no doubt, it's a pre-election offer, whoever tries to hide or dress it up," said Bishop Nikolaoz of Akhalkalaki, Kumurdo, and

Kari. This comment upset members of Georgian Dream.

The plan faced strong criticism from the opposition. Tina Bokuchava, chairperson of the United National Movement, claimed that Ivanishvili was using religion and the Church for purely propagandistic election purposes. Additionally, she said that declaring Orthodoxy the state religion was a way for the government to gain control over an institution it doesn't already control. Mikheil Saakashvili described the plan as "another trick by the oligarch," saying that Ivanishvili was trying to cover up "Georgian Dream's" declining popularity in the elections. Salome Samadashvili of "For a Strong Georgia" noted that the "Russian oligarch," fearful of losing the elections, was "clinging to the Church." Giorgi Gakharia, leader of the "For Georgia" party, believes the government is trying to subordinate the Church in order to gain votes from Orthodox followers, which he said is part of Georgian Dream's pre-election strategy.

Opposition representatives also point out that Georgian Dream is the only government that has harmed the Church. "Dream's" government secretly listened to and spied on representatives of the Orthodox Church, then released the SSG's

"files" to discredit the Church. Additionally, they claim that Georgian Dream has brought Christian art "to the brink of destruction and disappearance," citing Gelati, where the frescoes are on the verge of ruin. Now they are trying to don the mantle of the Church's strengthener. "The Church belongs to all of us, and it is everyone's duty to take care of its strengthening," stated Fikria Chikhradze.

Along with the criticism of Georgian Dream's plan, the leader of For a Strong Georgia, Mamuka Khazaradze, states that there is no need to wait for the supposed "Dream" constitutional majority after the elections. He suggests that Dream should present the offers they have regarding the Church and hold a vote on the constitutional amendment before the elections, to ensure that the Church is protected from "Dream's" pre-election propaganda. This idea was endorsed by opposition MP Kakha Okriashvili, who urged Georgian Dream to introduce the constitutional amendments before the parliamentary elections.

It is evident that Georgian Dream's election strategy regarding Orthodoxy did not succeed, but they do not acknowledge this failure and continue to talk about "strengthening the role of Orthodoxy."

## The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

### "Apology? Never!" - Protest in Kutaisi Against Ivanishvili's Remarks

A protest titled "Apology? Never and Not Ever!" took place near the Meshkishvili Theatre in Kutaisi. The demonstrators protested against the recent statements made by Georgian Dream leader Bidzina Ivanishvili.

The protesters label the oligarch's messages as capitulatory and demand that Georgian



Dream members apologize for what they call their leader's "Russian narrative."

"What Russia couldn't achieve in 2008, the oligarch is doing today," the demonstrators claim.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of Georgian Dream, recently gave a speech in Gori, where he discussed the August War and issues of territorial integrity. In his remarks, Ivanishvili once again blamed not Russia but the

former government for the 2008 war and called for a "Nuremberg trial" against the United National Movement. According to Ivanishvili, the August War was a "provocation planned externally," with the former government responsible for igniting it. Despite Russia's attack and subsequent occupation in 2008, Ivanishvili said that, after the elections, "they will find the strength to apologize for the fact that the United National Movement engulfed our Ossetian sis-

ters and brothers in flames in 2008."

### Tbilisi Court Approves Anti-Corruption Bureau's Access to "Vote for Europe" Bank Data



The Tbilisi City Court has authorized the Anti-Corruption Bureau to access the bank account information of the founders of the "Vote for Europe" movement, as well as the organization itself. Kakha

Kozhoridze, the movement's lawyer, criticized the decision as "absolutely unlawful" and plans to appeal to the Tbilisi Court of Appeals.

The "Vote for Europe" movement, launched by President Salome Zurbashvili on July 11, aims to protect Georgia's European future and mobilize pro-Western voters ahead of the October 26 elections. The lawyer argues that the movement does not have a declared electoral purpose and therefore the Bureau's actions violate Georgian law. Kozhoridze emphasized that neither the movement nor its founders have declared any intention to run for office.

At a press conference on September 13, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze defended the Anti-Corruption Bureau's actions, claiming the movement is agitating for the opposition, particularly the UNM-led coalitions, and suggested possible illegal election funding.

## Weather

Monday, September 16

Day Partly Cloudy  
High: 24°C

Night Rain  
Low: 14°C

Tuesday, September 17

Day Mostly Cloudy  
High: 22°C

Night Mostly Cloudy  
Low: 16°C

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