



# **The needs of ethnic and religious minorities in the electoral programs of political parties**

Parliamentary Elections of Georgia 2024

Social Justice Center

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## Introduction

The parliamentary elections on October 26, 2024, is characterized by intense polarization and take on the nature of referendum. As a result, major parties and alliances are divided into two camps: on one side is the ruling party, and on the other side are the parties and alliances that have signed the Georgian Charter of the President. According to the agreement of the opposition parties, if the opposition wing wins the elections, the priority will be given to implementing institutional reforms outlined in the Georgian Charter. Consequently, some major parties and alliances do not have a detailed electoral program.

Georgian Dream presented its electoral program in the form of an audiovisual presentation at one of the party's events, and there is no printed version of the program. United National Movement presented a brief five-point document, while the Coalition for Change presented a seven-page document. More detailed electoral programs were presented by the Strong Georgia Alliance, For Georgia (Gakharia's party), and Girchi.

Below, we offer an analysis of the electoral programs of six major parties and alliances, focusing on the promises made regarding ethnic and religious minorities.

## Programs of the Political Parties

- Coalition for Change (4)

The coalition's electoral program, titled "The Future is Yours," published on October 17, does not include any mentions of ethnic minorities.

However, on October 5, the coalition released a statement on its social media page addressing <sup>1</sup>the needs of ethnic minorities. According to the statement, the coalition supports the introduction of a temporary interpreter position in institutions within municipalities densely populated by ethnic minorities to improve access to public services, until the issue is resolved. Beyond access to public services, the coalition also views the language barrier as an obstacle to making informed choices in elections. The statement mentions that local youth proficient in Georgian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian will be employed as interpreters, ensuring that all communication is properly translated. The same statement includes the coalition's promise to address the shortage of kindergartens and

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<sup>1</sup> Party Akhali's Facebook page, [link](#). Accessed: October 25, 2024.

improve school infrastructure in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities. The coalition sees a special role for private initiatives in solving these problems.

The coalition's 10th candidate on the list, Oktai Kazumov, in an interview with Radio Marneuli, voiced another promise related to the needs of ethnic minorities, in addition to the introduction of interpreter positions for access to state and municipal services. Specifically, according to Oktai Kazumov, the coalition promises voters that, under the 4+1 educational program, Georgian language courses will be provided free of charge.<sup>2</sup>

- **Unity - National Movement (5)**

The Unity - National Movement alliance presented a brochure outlining 5 priorities for the October 26 election. The brochure does not contain any specific references related to ethnic minorities.

- **Strong Georgia (9)**

In the Strong Georgia program, titled "Ilia's Path,"<sup>3</sup> under the subheading "Multiethnic Strong Georgia," three promises related to ethnic minorities are outlined:

1. Increasing the representation of non-dominant groups in both decision-making and implementation processes to support their political empowerment.
2. Improving and increasing accessibility to Georgian language learning through state funding and the provision of diverse services.
3. Protecting and developing multiethnic cultural heritage, including assigning "national value status" to cultural monuments of ethnic minorities.

In an interview with Radio Marneuli, the alliance's 22nd candidate, Agil Mustafayev, stated that municipal services should be available<sup>4</sup> in minority languages in all municipalities where ethnic minorities reside.

- **For Georgia (25)**

The for Georgia party's electoral program, titled "Manifesto for a Dignified Life," consists of several thematic sections.<sup>5</sup> In the subsection titled "Policy of Equality and Protection from Violence," one

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<sup>2</sup> Radio Marneuli, political parties' views on issues concerning ethnic minorities, October 15, 2024 - [link](#). Accessed: October 25, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Strong Georgia, Lelo, For the People, For Freedom, Election Plan "Ilia's Way" - [link](#). Accessed: October 25, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Radio Marneuli, political parties' views on issues concerning ethnic minorities.

<sup>5</sup> Gakharia for Georgia, Manifesto for a Dignified Life, Election Program 2024 - [link](#). Accessed: October 25, 2024.

paragraph is dedicated to issues concerning ethnic minorities. Specifically, the party promises to support the integration of ethnic minorities into social and political life. To promote political integration, the party pledges to ensure representation of ethnic minorities in central legislative and executive authorities, as well as in local self-government bodies. The party also notes that "it is important this does not remain just a promise. Therefore, we are already working to ensure that the party is represented in decision-making positions, including by members of ethnic minorities." The party also promises equal opportunities for employment and political participation for representatives of ethnic minorities. Finally, the party states that combating all forms of discrimination is a constant priority for For Georgia.

Apart from this paragraph, the introduction of the party's program also emphasizes the importance of the diversity of Georgian society. For Georgia notes that the policies implemented by the party will ensure the protection of the interests and rights of all people and vulnerable groups, including minorities, and "will promote their full integration into the social, cultural, and economic life of the country." The party believes that existing differences in the country can be turned into an advantage, fostering the development of a united yet diverse society.

- [Girchi \(36\)](#)

The Girchi program consists of texts and videos posted online. It does not contain any references to ethnic minorities.<sup>6</sup>

- [Georgian Dream \(41\)](#)

Georgian Dream did not present its electoral program in printed form. At an event held on October 7, where Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze presented the party's electoral program orally, no promises or mentions regarding ethnic minorities were made.

Thus, messages and promises from Georgian Dream toward ethnic minorities must be sought in leaders' speeches. On September 8, at a Georgian Dream support rally held in Akhaltsikhe, Bidzina Ivanishvili addressed the crowd<sup>7</sup> with a lengthy speech. The honorary chairman of Georgian Dream made several promises, including the completion of full gasification of the region by 2025, job creation, and tourism development.

Ivanishvili also stated that although Georgian Dream plans to reflect the role of the Orthodox Church as a cornerstone of Georgia's identity in the constitution, this will not diminish the importance of other religious denominations in Georgia. He noted that respect for different

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<sup>6</sup> Girchi's Program, Elections 2024 - [link](#). Accessed: October 25, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Georgian Dream's Facebook page, September 8, 2024 - [link](#). Accessed: October 25, 2024.

religions will continue in the future: “Every religious denomination will be as protected as before, and the state will remain the guarantor of their freedom, as we live in a country where the state equally cares for every citizen, regardless of nationality or religious affiliation.”

## Recommendations developed by the Social Justice Center to promote the integration and protection of the rights of ethnic and religious minorities

To protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, improve their integration, and enhance their socio-economic and political engagement, it is essential to apply a comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach. The measures to be implemented should include evidence-based, targeted policies that address the specific needs of ethnic minorities in the following key areas:

- Strengthening political participation;
- Promoting social and economic integration;
- Protecting and supporting the cultural identity of ethnic minorities;
- Upholding principles of religious freedom, secularism, and religious neutrality.

## Necessary steps to strengthen the political participation of ethnic minorities:

- To strengthen the representation of ethnic minorities in central and local representative bodies, it is essential to introduce a special affirmative mechanism recognized in international practice. This should be done in consultation with minority groups, civil society, and international actors;
- In executive and legislative branches, as well as in local governments of regions densely populated by ethnic minorities, regular and democratic consultative mechanisms should be established in line with the recommendations and standards of the Council of Europe. These mechanisms would address issues related to ethnic minorities. The relevant legislation should mandate consultation with these mechanisms when making decisions affecting ethnic minorities, and any negative decision must be justified if their recommendations are not followed;
- The employment rate of ethnic minorities in public services should be increased by introducing special recruitment procedures, a competitive selection process, and enhancing support programs for employees (mainly additional Georgian language training programs);
- To better reflect the perspective of ethnic minorities in decision-making processes, appropriate advisor positions should be created at the level of central and executive authorities within the offices of ministers and mayors;

- The citizenship restoration process should be simplified by easing the Georgian language examination and other bureaucratic processes, and exempting certain categories of applicants (such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, etc.) from the examination requirement;
- For repatriated Meskhetians, the citizenship acquisition process should also be simplified by removing artificial and unfounded bureaucratic barriers.

## Protection and Support of the Cultural Identity of Ethnic and Religious Minorities

- It is important to document the cultural monuments of minorities and create a corresponding list of cultural heritage. Additionally, a stable and sustainable funding mechanism should be established to support and promote the development of minority cultures.
- The wooden mosques of Adjara should be granted cultural heritage status, and their structural and aesthetic restoration should be carried out in full compliance with relevant standards.
- Negative myths and stereotypes about ethnic and religious minorities should be removed from school textbooks. Information about the cultures, traditions, histories, religions, and languages of ethnic minorities, including those with smaller populations, should be included in educational curricula, materials, and teacher training programs. Special attention should be given to appreciating the role of ethnic minorities in Georgia's diverse society. Furthermore, awareness should be raised regarding the fact that the rights of ethnic minorities are an integral part of human rights.

To raise public awareness, large-scale campaigns focusing on ethnic minorities should be conducted, with the main platforms being public broadcasters and other media outlets.

An inclusive definition of Georgian nationality and citizenship, based on civic rather than ethnonationalist identification, should be encouraged.

- To overcome social alienation between the ethnic majority and minorities, special programs should be developed to facilitate direct contact between members of these groups. For this purpose, exchange programs can be organized between educational and sports institutions, allowing members of both minorities and the majority to get to know each other and overcome existing stereotypes and potential negative prejudices.
- The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages needs to be ratified. Georgia has been delaying fulfilling this commitment, made during negotiations to join the Council of Europe, for 24 years.

## Promoting Social and Economic Integration:

- It is important to document the cultural monuments of minorities and compile a corresponding cultural heritage list. Additionally, a stable and sustainable funding mechanism should be established to promote the development and support of minority cultures.
- The wooden mosques of Adjara should be granted the status of cultural heritage monuments, and their structural and aesthetic restoration should be carried out in full compliance with relevant standards.
- Negative myths and stereotypes about ethnic and religious minorities should be removed from school textbooks. Information about the cultures, traditions, history, religions, and languages of ethnic minorities, including numerically smaller minorities, should be included in the curriculum, educational materials, and teacher training. Special attention should be given to recognizing and valuing the role of ethnic minorities in Georgia's diverse society. Additionally, awareness should be raised that the rights of ethnic minorities are an integral part of human rights.
- To raise public awareness, large-scale campaigns focused on ethnic minorities should be conducted, with public broadcasting and other media outlets as the main platforms.
- It is important to encourage an inclusive definition of "Georgianness" and Georgian citizenship based on civic rather than ethno-nationalist identifications.
- To overcome social alienation between ethnic majorities and minorities, special programs should be developed, providing direct contact between members of these two groups. To achieve this, exchange programs can be organized between educational and sports institutions, allowing minority and majority members to get to know each other and overcome existing stereotypes and potential negative preconceptions.
- The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages should be ratified. Georgia has delayed fulfilling this commitment, made during negotiations to join the Council of Europe, for 24 years.

## Freedom of Religion and Equality:

- It is essential to cease the automatic framing of religious organizations, especially the Muslim community, within the scope of state security. Instead, rights-based approaches should be strengthened to allow believers and religious organizations the freedom of worship and the autonomy to manage their organizational matters independently.

- It is important to develop an appropriate legal framework that enables the restitution of cultural monuments and religious sites illegally confiscated during the Soviet period to their historical and confessional owners.
- The State Agency for Religious Issues should be abolished, considering its vague and broad mandate, the low level of trust in it, and the risks associated with it.
- The funding policy for religious organizations should be reviewed, and new approaches should be based on principles of equality, secularism, and transparency.
- Discriminatory provisions and preferential approaches should be eliminated from the Law on State Property, the Tax Code, and the State Defense Code. Currently, the Defense Code includes a provision that fully exempts only Orthodox clergy from the requirement of performing alternative labor service or deferring it, which violates the principle of equality.
- In the process of issuing permits for the construction of religious buildings, the principle of equality must be strictly upheld. In this regard, it is important to support the Georgian Muslim community's longstanding request to build a new mosque in Batumi.

It should be noted that the above recommendations were developed by the Social Justice Center in consultation with activists, community leaders, and researchers from ethnic minority communities and were also shared with major political parties and alliances.

## Conclusion

The long pre-election period for the October 26 parliamentary elections, which began with the spring protests, is marked by intense polarization and a single-issue focus. Major opposition parties and alliances view the upcoming elections as a kind of referendum.

According to the ruling party, the main issues ahead of the elections are the protection of Georgia's sovereignty from interference by Western, liberal countries and the elimination of the "radical opposition." Georgian Dream interprets state sovereignty as both political independence and the protection of Georgian traditions and customs from Western, liberal values. By "eliminating the radical opposition," the ruling party implies the political defeat of major pro-Western forces and potential legal actions against them.

For major opposition parties and alliances, the main topic for the upcoming elections is the end of what they call Georgian Dream's "authoritarian regime" and a return to the pro-Western trajectory. This specific focus of the October 26 elections has largely overshadowed socio-economic and rights-related issues. This is evident in the fact that neither of the two largest parties/alliances, Georgian Dream and Unity - National Movement, has presented a detailed electoral program.



Regarding the electoral programs and promises presented, Georgian Dream has made only one promise specifically related to ethnic and religious minorities, either in its program or through a high-ranking leader. However, even this single promise contains logical contradictions and factual inaccuracies. Specifically, as mentioned above, Bidzina Ivanishvili promised ethnic minorities that reflecting the role of the Orthodox Church as a pillar of Georgian statehood in the constitution would not diminish the significance of other religions, stating that "every religious denomination will be as protected as before, and the state will continue to guarantee their freedom, as we live in a country where the state equally cares for every citizen, regardless of their nationality and faith."

Granting special constitutional status to the Orthodox Church, let alone recognizing it as the state religion, would place other religious denominations and their followers in unequal conditions. The statement that the state cares equally for all citizens regardless of nationality and faith is factually inaccurate, as evident in the socio-economic and cultural exclusion of ethnic minorities and the routine violations of religious freedom for religious minorities, including the denial of permission to build a new mosque in Batumi and the increase in incidents of harassment against the Muslim community in recent years.<sup>8</sup>

As for the opposition parties, as we have seen, Unity - National Movement did not make any specific promises related to the needs of ethnic minorities in its electoral program or through party leadership.

In the Coalition for Change program, the promises related to creating interpreter positions to improve access to public services, as well as addressing pre-school and school education challenges in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities, are commendable. However, transparency and political accountability require more details and specific plans from major opposition parties, especially for promises aimed at addressing such complex, long-standing, and systemic issues.

The Strong Georgia and For Georgia electoral programs include promises of political participation for ethnic minorities. This promise is indeed positive, considering that, in both cases, it covers ethnic minority participation at both legislative and executive levels. However, these promises are also general, and more specificity is needed, particularly regarding the legislative and other mechanisms intended to increase the political engagement of ethnic minorities.

Strong Georgia also promises ethnic minorities free and diverse Georgian language learning services and the designation of minority cultural monuments as national heritage. These promises are clearly positive, though more specifics are needed, particularly concerning the promise of access to Georgian language education.

Finally, Agil Mustafayev, the 22nd candidate on the Strong Georgia list, promised in the media that municipal services in municipalities populated by ethnic minorities would also be provided in

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<sup>8</sup> Nigvziani 2012, Tsintsqaro 2013, Samtatskaro 2013 - [link](#), Chela 2013 - [link](#), Kobuleti 2014 - [link](#), Mokhe 2014 - [link](#), Village Adigeni 2016 - [link](#), Buknari 2021 - [link](#), Town Adigeni 2023, 2024 - [link](#).

minority languages. This promise is clearly positive; however, given that it was not included in the alliance's electoral program and was voiced by only one candidate, it raises doubts about the existence of a consensus on this issue within the alliance.

**Considering above, it can be said that three major opposition parties and alliances—Coalition for Change, Strong Georgia, and for Georgia—have addressed issues important to ethnic minorities in their electoral promises, including education, Georgian language learning, access to services in minority languages, political participation, and cultural recognition. However, it is also noteworthy that the promises lack detail, making it impossible to determine in what form and through which mechanisms these political entities intend to fulfill their promises.**

Notably, none of the major opposition electoral entities addressed religious freedom or the concept of a secular state in their electoral programs. Finally, none of the major electoral entities wished to make any promises related to rectifying the injustice connected to the artificial obstacles to building a new mosque in Batumi.