

2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Georgia

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious persecution and recognizes equality for all regardless of religion, subject to considerations of public safety or health or the rights of others. It stipulates the independence of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and recognizes the GOC's "outstanding role" in the country's history. Laws and policies grant the GOC unique privileges.

In April, the government approved the Seventh-day Adventists' registration as a legal entity under public law. During the year, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) again said that prosecutors continued to fail to indict individuals for religiously motivated crimes. Parliament again failed to comply with a court order to end exclusive tax and property privileges granted to the GOC or to extend those benefits to other religious groups. Some Muslim community leaders and NGOs said the government continued to influence and favor the state-funded religious group All Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG). The Armenian Apostolic, Evangelical Lutheran, and Roman Catholic Churches and some Muslim groups again reported difficulties obtaining government recognition of their ownership of religious properties. Muslims again cited a lack of government transparency in decisions on mosque construction.

A longstanding legal dispute between the Muslim community and the Batumi city government over a proposed mosque remained unresolved. Many religious property cases pending before the courts and with the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARI) failed to make progress during the year. During the year, the government paid partial compensation for damages caused by the Soviet regime to the GOC, Muslim community, Catholic Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, and Jewish community. NGOs and religious groups continued to criticize the exclusion of other religious groups, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church, from legislation designating the five groups eligible to receive compensation. Media reported some politicians made anti-Muslim statements.

Religious leaders again said de facto authorities in the Russia-occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remained outside the administrative control of the central government, placed restrictions on some religious groups. Both regions continued to ban Jehovah's Witnesses, although the think tank Democracy Research Institute reported in 2021 that members of Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals could assemble freely in Akhalkalaki, which was administered by de facto South Ossetia officials. The GOC and Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) recognized Orthodox churches in both regions as belonging to the GOC, but GOC officials stated de facto authorities in South Ossetia pressured Orthodox churches to merge with the ROC, while some religious figures in Abkhazia continued to support turning the region's Orthodox churches into an autocephalous Abkhaz Orthodox Church. Sources said the ROC tacitly supported the autocephalic ambitions of breakaway churches without seeking formal recognition of their autocephaly from the GOC. De facto authorities in South Ossetia declared GOC religious services illegal but permitted them in practice. In Abkhazia, de facto authorities prohibited GOC clergy from entering the region. Most GOC worshippers in Abkhazia were unable to travel to Tbilisi-administered territory to celebrate Orthodox Christmas or Orthodox Easter due to lacking Abkhazia "passports."

During the year, the Human Rights Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) investigated eight cases involving crimes reported as religiously motivated, compared with 13 cases in 2021. By year's end, the Public Defender's Office reported it had received four complaints of discrimination or hate crimes based on religion during the year, compared with five in 2021. Jehovah's Witnesses reported nine incidents against the group during the year, including cases involving violence, vandalism, and theft from a kingdom hall, compared with six in 2021. The NGO Media Development Foundation documented 98 instances of religiously intolerant statements

on television, online, and in print by media representatives, political parties, clergy, public organizations, and others during the year, the majority of them expressing anti-Muslim sentiment, compared with 117 such incidents in 2021.

According to the TDI, there were documented instances of antisemitic statements being shared on social media, including two statements of others that GOC clergy reposted. These included a social media campaign against the late human rights defender Vitaly Safarov and his family as well as antisemitic statements made against Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. On February 28, the NGO Israeli House reported unidentified persons drew a swastika on the wall of the Jewish cemetery in Tbilisi's Samgori district. In June, inaugural Jewish and Islamic services were held in the Peace Project in Tbilisi, which promotes interfaith dialogue.

U.S. embassy officials met regularly with senior government officials, including the Prime Minister's advisor on human rights, members of parliament, and the Public Defender's Office, to encourage dialogue and tolerance between the government and minority religious groups. The Ambassador met with senior Orthodox Church leaders to stress the importance of religious diversity and tolerance. A senior embassy official met with the Protopresbyter of the Georgian Orthodox Church to highlight the importance of tolerance. The embassy continued to meet with NGOs to discuss interfaith relations and the integration of religious minorities into society, and to support NGO programs encouraging interfaith tolerance and dialogue and respect for minority religious rights.

Section I.

Religious Demography ✓

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.9 million (midyear 2022). According to a 2021 Georgian National Statistics Service estimate, the population is 3.7 million. According to the 2014 census, GOC members constitute 83.4 percent of the population, followed by Muslims at 10.7 percent and members of the Armenian Apostolic Church at 2.9 percent. The remaining 3 percent includes Catholics, Yezidis, Greek Orthodox, Jews, growing numbers of religious groups defined by the law as "nontraditional" such as Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and individuals who profess no religious affiliation.

Ethnicity, religious affiliation, and region of residence are strongly connected. Most ethnic Georgians affiliate with the GOC. A small number of mostly ethnic Russians are members of several Orthodox groups not affiliated with the GOC, including the ROC, Molokani, Starovery (Old Believers), and Dukhobory (Spirit Wrestlers). Ethnic Azeris are predominantly Shia Muslims and form the majority population in the southeastern region of Kvemo-Kartli. Other Muslim groups include ethnic Georgian Muslims in Adjara Region and Chechen Kists in the northeast; both groups are predominantly Sunni. Ethnic Georgian Sunni Muslims are also present in the south-central region of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Ethnic Armenians belong primarily to the Armenian Apostolic Church and constitute the majority population in Samtskhe-Javakheti Region.

Reliable information from the Russia-occupied regions of Georgia continued to be difficult to obtain. According to the 2016 census conducted by de facto Abkhaz authorities (the most recent), there were 243,000 residents of Russia-occupied Abkhazia. A survey conducted in 2003 by de facto authorities listed 60 percent of respondents as Christian, 16 percent as Muslim, 8 percent as atheists or nonbelievers, 8 percent as followers of the pre-Christian Abkhazian religion, and 1 percent as Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, or adherents of other religions. The remaining 7 percent listed no preference.

According to a 2015 census conducted by de facto South Ossetian authorities, there were 53,000 residents of Russia-occupied South Ossetia, of whom the majority were Orthodox Christians. Minority groups included Muslims and the Right Faith, a pre-Christian ethnic Ossetian religion.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom ✓

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religion, subject to considerations of public safety and the health and rights of others and for equality for all regardless of religion. The constitution prohibits persecution based on religion and prohibits compelling anyone to express his or her opinion about religion. It also prohibits political parties that incite religious strife. The law provides for freedom of religious belief, denomination, and conscience, including the right to choose and change religious affiliation.

The constitution recognizes the GOC's "outstanding role" in the country's history but stipulates the church shall be independent from the state and that relations between the GOC and the state shall be governed by a constitutional agreement (concordat). The concordat grants the GOC rights not given to other religious groups, including legal immunity for its patriarch and a consultative role in government, especially in state education policies; it reiterates an exemption of GOC clergy from military service (although by law, clergy from all religious groups are exempt). The concordat states that some of its provisions require additional legislation before they may be implemented, including the GOC's right to a consultative role in state education policies. There is currently no implementing legislation for the concordat. Changes to or cancellation of the concordat require a three-fifths majority of parliament and the consent of the GOC.

A religious group may register with the National Agency of the Public Registry (NAPR) as a legal entity under public law or as a noncommercial entity. Both statuses offer equivalent benefits, including legal recognition, tax exemptions for donations and other "religious activities" (a term not clearly defined by law), and the right to own property and open bank accounts. The civil code defines the activities and rights of denominations registered for legal entity under public law status. Unregistered religious groups may conduct religious activities but do not receive the legal status or benefits conferred on registered groups. Unregistered religious groups may have a charter and ownership of property may be based on that charter. The property should be registered with the National Registrar. They may maintain a bank account with a commercial bank, based on national bank regulations. Unregistered groups may also invite clergy to the country.

To register as a legal entity under public law, the law specifies a religious group must have a historic link with the country or be recognized as a religion "by the legislation of the member states of the Council of Europe." A religious group must also submit to the NAPR information regarding its objectives and procedures and a list of its founders and the members of its governing body. Religious groups registering as noncommercial entities do not have to demonstrate historic ties to the country or recognition by Council of Europe members but must submit to the NAPR similar information on their objectives, governing procedures, and names of founders and members of their governing body. There is no appeal mechanism for groups that are denied registration as a legal entity under public law, but they may reapply to the NAPR.

The state recognizes only civil marriages; it does not recognize marriages conducted by the GOC or other religious groups, regardless of their registration status.

The law grants the GOC exceptions from several requirements applicable to other religious groups, including payment of taxes on the construction, restoration, and maintenance of religious buildings and the payment of taxes on property. It exempts the GOC, but not other religious groups, from taxes on "profit from the sale of crosses, candles, icons, books, and calendars used...for religious purposes." In addition, the law states only the GOC may acquire nonagricultural state property through a direct sale by the government. Should other religious groups wish to acquire this type of

property, they must participate in public tenders. Only the GOC has the right to acquire agricultural state property free of charge; all others must pay a fee. The law grants the church ownership over state forests located near or adjacent to GOC churches and monasteries.

The criminal code prohibits interference with worship services, persecution of a person based on religious faith or belief, and interference with the establishment of a religious organization; the code does not define “establishment.” Interference with the establishment of a religious organization is punishable by a fine, “corrective labor” (community service) for up to one year, house arrest for six months to two years, or imprisonment for up to two years. Violations committed by public officials are considered abuses of power and are punishable by larger fines or longer terms of imprisonment if committed by force of arms or by insulting the dignity of a victim, although the law does not define “insult” and does not specify an amount or time limit for punishment under those circumstances. In cases of religious persecution, the perpetrator may face imprisonment for up to three years, depending on the use or threat of violence, his or her official position, and the damages caused. In cases of unlawful interference with the right to perform religious rituals involving the use or threat of violence, offenders may face imprisonment for up to two years; in cases where the offender holds an official position, the offender may face up to five years in prison.

According to a Ministry of Justice decree, accused and convicted individuals may meet only with spiritual representatives of the GOC and registered religious organizations. Prison regulations state prisoners have the right to possess and use religious literature and objects of worship.

The law prohibits restitution to religious organizations of religious buildings and their ruins previously owned by these groups and currently under state ownership, including historical religious buildings confiscated by the Soviet regime. The prohibition, however, does not apply to the GOC, which, per the terms of its concordat with the government, is entitled to receive all previously confiscated property. For other religious groups, the government, through the NAPR, lends the property on a for-use-only basis to the groups as legal entities under public law; this is not considered a transfer of state property.

The law stipulates that four religious groups are eligible to receive government payments in compensation for damages they experienced during the Soviet regime: the Muslim community (represented by AMAG), the Catholic Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Jewish community. According to the law, the government may not pay such compensation to any other religious group. The law does not provide compensation for the GOC although it recognizes that the GOC incurred damages during the Soviet regime. The GOC receives separate funding from the state budget.

Although the law states public schools may not be used for religious indoctrination, proselytizing, or forcible assimilation, the concordat accords the GOC the right to teach religious studies in public educational institutions; however, there is no implementing legislation allowing the GOC to do so. The concordat also authorizes the state to pay for Georgian Orthodox religious schools, although the government does not do so. The law states students may pursue religious study and practice religious rituals on school grounds “of their own accord,” but only after school hours. Outside instructors, including clergy of any faith tradition, may only attend or direct students’ religious education or activities if students invite them to do so; school administration and teachers may not be involved in this process. The law includes no specific regulations for private religious schools. Private schools must follow the national curriculum, although they are free to add subjects, including religious studies, if they choose to do so.

The MOIA’s Department of Human Rights is responsible for assessing whether crimes are motivated by religious hatred and for monitoring the quality of investigations into hate crimes.

By law, the Prosecutor General’s Office, which is separate from the MOIA, prosecutes human rights violations involving religious intolerance, while the Public Defender’s Office serves as the country’s human rights ombudsman and monitors complaints of restrictions on religious freedom. The Public Defender’s Office (Human Rights Ombudsperson) is a watchdog rather than an investigatory body; it makes recommendations to the MOIA and the State Inspector Service. The

Public Defender's Office's Tolerance Center (composed of leaders from minority religious groups) carries out educational activities and monitors and analyzes cases of religious and ethnic discrimination. It also coordinates the Council of Religions and Council of Ethnic Minorities, which are affiliated with the Public Defender's Office. The Council of Religions has a civic mandate to protect religious freedom; facilitate a constructive multilateral dialogue among religious groups; promote a tolerant, fair, and peaceful environment for religious groups; and engage religious minorities in the process of civic integration. It produces a periodic report on the status of religious freedom in the country that includes policy recommendations.

Until March 1, the State Inspector Service was a separate investigative body from the Prosecutor General's Office that investigated crimes such as torture, degrading treatment, and abuse of power or office perpetrated by law enforcement and public officials if committed with the use of force or in violation of human dignity and involving discriminatory elements, including religious motives. Following an investigation, the service referred these cases to the Prosecutor General's Office for prosecution. Parliament abolished the State Inspector Service, effective March 1. In its place, parliament established two separate agencies – the Special Investigation Service and the Personal Data Protection Service – to investigate abuse of power by law enforcement officials and to protect personal data, respectively. In contrast to the previous mandate to investigate all law enforcement bodies equally, the law does not authorize the newly created Special Investigation Service to investigate certain crimes committed by prosecutors, such as murder or bodily harm.

The mandate of SARI, which is part of the Office of the Prime Minister, is to promote and ensure peaceful coexistence based on principles of equality and tolerance. Its responsibilities include researching the existing religious situation and reporting to the government, preparing recommendations and drafting legal acts pertaining to religion for government consideration, and serving as a consultative body and intermediary for the government in disputes arising between religious associations. SARI may issue nonbinding recommendations to relevant state institutions regarding approval of applications for the construction of religious buildings, determination of their locations, and transfer of such properties to religious organizations.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to officials from the newly created Special Investigation Service, the organization launched operations on March 1, but did not initiate investigations into crimes committed with a religious motive by year's end.

As in previous years, the TDI said that the MOIA generally correctly applied the appropriate articles of the criminal code in most cases and the quality of investigations of crimes motivated by religious hatred continued to improve. The institute again said, however, that the Prosecutor General's Office continued to fail to determine whether an individual was a "victim" of a crime under law (defined as a person who has incurred moral, physical, or material damage as a result of a crime) or to indict individuals for religiously motivated crimes.

In 2021, the NAPR denied the registration applications of six organizations due to "nonexistence of legal grounds envisioned by legislation": the Evangelical Church – Source of Life; Protestant Confession – Presbyterianism; the Georgian Christian Evangelical Protestant Church – Biblical Friends (Quakers); the Caucasus Orthodox Catacomb Church; the Evangelical Church; and the Georgian Christian Protestant Church – Eternal Freedom. According to NAPR, these organizations did not reapply for registration during the year because they said they believed the government would again deny their applications.

On April 20, the NAPR approved the Seventh-day Adventists' registration as a legal entity under public law.

On May 20, the Episcopal Church applied to the NAPR for registration as a legal entity under public law. On May 23, the NAPR suspended the registration process due to what it said were legal deficiencies in the submitted documentation. The Episcopal Church reported it planned to reapply, although it had not done so by year's end.

According to NGOs and minority religious groups, many religious issues, such as tax exemptions and restitution issues, continued to lack a clear legislative framework. SARI and some religious groups' representatives, including members of the Jewish community and the Armenian Apostolic Church, said they remained in favor of drafting a new, broader "law on religion" to define which groups would be eligible for these and other benefits and to address issues pertaining to the registration and legal status of religious groups and the teaching of religion in public schools. During the year, there were no public discussions or indications that the government planned to adopt a special law on religion and religious organizations, although some NGOs said they believed this was still the government's intention. Many civil society representatives and members of other religious groups, including some individuals from the Muslim community, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Baptist Church, remained opposed, arguing such legislation would create a hierarchy of religious groups and allow the government to discriminate against smaller religious communities and increase its leverage over them. Critics of such a law also said it might include new criteria for registration that would be difficult for nontraditional religious groups to meet. They expressed concern that it would also expand the role of SARI, which some smaller groups said they viewed as an entity that promoted government control of religious organizations rather than a protector of religious freedom. They advocated instead for making benefits available to all religious groups or to none.

Most prisons continued to have GOC chapels and areas for prayer. Authorities allowed Muslims to pray in their cells or prayer areas and to possess Qurans and prayer rugs. According to SARI and Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Baptist, Muslim, and Jewish groups, prisoners had access to counseling and services appropriate to their religious group upon request. The government provided accommodation for the dietary restrictions of Muslim and Jewish prisoners. During religious holidays, prisoners were exempt from fulfilling their regular duties.

In November, the Prosecutor General's Office stated it was investigating alleged violations of the confidentiality of private communications of religious persons that surfaced in 2021. The investigation remained ongoing at the end of the year. The office said representatives of religious confessions were recognized as victims under the law. On August 1, 2021, Nika Gvaramia, director general of the pro-opposition television channel Mtavari Arkhi TV, reported the State Security Service was spying on clergy, including GOC clergy, among other groups. In September 2021, thousands of State Security Service files and transcripts of telephone conversations were published without authorization on the internet and widely covered in the media. These appeared to document widespread surveillance by the State Security Service of religious leaders, including their interactions with political leaders, journalists, and foreign diplomats. The government and ruling Georgian Dream Party denied the legitimacy of these documents, while NGOs, journalists, and religious leaders said many of the documents were accurate. Numerous political and civil society leaders expressed concern that the State Security Service monitored private conversations with their personal religious or spiritual leaders and said such activity had a chilling effect on religious freedom, as it confirmed their suspicion the State Security Service was monitoring religious groups.

Many religious property cases pending before the courts failed to make progress during the year. NGOs and religious groups said the government was responsible for the delays, saying it intentionally failed to resolve problems faced by religious groups.

The Constitutional Court continued to review a case alleging discrimination against non-GOC religious groups. The case was initially three separate cases, but the court combined them into one. In 2019, nine religious groups filed a case with the court alleging that the GOC's exclusive property tax exemption on land used for noneconomic purposes violated constitutional guarantees of equality before the law. On December 28, 2021, the Constitutional Court combined this case with two other cases submitted by the TDI. TDI's first case, submitted in 2019 on behalf of nine religious associations, disputed the constitutionality of import tax regulations that allowed the GOC

to import religious items free of duty while requiring all other religious groups to pay tax on them. TDI's second case, submitted in 2021, challenged the constitutionality of the law prohibiting religious organizations other than the GOC from privatizing state-owned religious buildings, their ruins, and the land on which they were located, and from regaining full legal ownership of property that was seized by the Soviet regime and currently under state ownership.

At year's end, the Constitutional Court did not rule on whether it would hear another case brought by nine Christian and Muslim religious organizations challenging restrictions on the rights of religious organizations other than the GOC to purchase or exchange state-owned property. The court heard arguments on the case in early 2020.

The Armenian Apostolic Church continued to petition SARI for restitution of five churches in Tbilisi and one in Akhaltsikhe, all of which the GOC also claimed and which authorities registered as state property. At year's end, SARI still had not responded to any of the Armenian Apostolic Church's 57 petitions – 20 filed in 2015 and 37 in 2018 – for ownership or right-of-usage status. The Armenian Apostolic Church reported it operated all 57 churches in the country but did not own any of them. It also said it had not petitioned NAPR during the year to register them as church-owned property. According to the Armenian Apostolic Church, SARI stated in 2020 that the church had not provided sufficient evidence of ownership but that it was in communication with the church and expressed willingness to cooperate in the future. According to Armenian Apostolic Church representatives, they did not engage SARI or petition NAPR on this issue during the year, as they did not see such efforts as productive.

Muslim community members continued to state there was a lack of transparency in government decisions regarding construction of mosques. The Muslim community continued to dispute the government's ownership, as a legacy of the Soviet era, of mosques in Kvemo Kartli, Adigeni, and Adjara. The government also stated that, in some cases, the existing mosques were former Georgian Orthodox houses of worship converted when the Ottoman and Persian empires ruled the country or were constructed during those periods on land where Georgian Orthodox houses of worship had once stood. AMAG reported that when the government transferred state-owned mosques, it only did so for AMAG to use for a 49-year or unlimited period; the government did not transfer full ownership of the property or land.

On January 13, the Supreme Court found both the Batumi City Hall and the New Mosque Construction Fund's cassation claims admissible and decided to review the two claims as one case at an unspecified future date. This followed a 2021 ruling by the Kutaisi Court of Appeal that upheld a 2019 decision by the Batumi City Court that the Batumi city government had discriminated against the New Mosque Construction Fund (an entity representing members of the Batumi Muslim community seeking to establish a new mosque) by denying in 2017 the necessary permits to build a mosque on land that they owned. The project remained stalled at year's end.

The government continued to pay subsidies for the restoration of religious properties it considered national cultural heritage sites. The National Agency for Cultural Heritage, housed within the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport, allocated two million lari (\$750,000) during the year for the restoration of religious monuments, all belonging to the GOC, compared with 2.25 million lari (\$844,000) in 2020. The agency reported that during the year, it granted permission for mosque rehabilitation projects in the villages of Zvare and Dzantsmab of the Keda Municipality to begin in 2023.

By year's end, neither the Kobuleti city government nor a contracted company had acted on a 2021 Supreme Court order that they must connect an Islamic boarding school in Kobuleti, near Batumi, to utility services. The school remained unable to persuade the government to enforce the court decision.

The GOC did not offer any formal religious studies classes in public institutions but did offer religious studies as an extracurricular activity. Although the GOC had the right under the concordat to have direct involvement in public institutions, such as schools, the government did not define clear legal structures for it to do so.

The TDI said the Ministry of Education did not report to it any complaints of religious discrimination during the year, but the TDI remained concerned that students were hesitant to report such cases for fear of reprisal from fellow students, teachers, or school officials.

The TDI reported it continued to press parliament to amend the law granting the GOC tax and property privileges not available to other religious groups, as required by a Constitutional Court ruling in 2018 that the law was unconstitutional. The ruling instructed parliament to make legislative changes to either abolish the privileges or grant them to all religious organizations no later than the end of 2018. According to the TDI, neither parliament nor the government took any steps towards complying during the year. Although the Constitutional Court's ruling was legally binding, the court had no means to enforce parliament's compliance.

NGOs and some Muslim community leaders again said the government continued to favor and influence the state-funded AMAG, including by selectively transferring land to AMAG and influencing the selection of AMAG's religious leader. The groups again said AMAG was a "Soviet-style" organization that served as a tool of the state to monitor and control religious groups. Several Muslim groups remained critical of AMAG for insisting it represented all Muslim communities in the country within one organization.

One religious leader said that a SARI staff member, who had unexpectedly called to request that one of the church's pastoral leaders meet with SARI without explaining the purpose of the meeting, was aggressive and verbally abusive during the phone call, including cursing at the pastoral leader.

On April 20, the Tbilisi City Court partially ruled in favor of two Seventh-day Adventist university applicants who, in 2020, contested the scheduling of an entrance exam on a Saturday. The TDI, on the students' behalf, had also asked the court to find that the Ministry of Education discriminated against the applicants because of their religion and to award "symbolic compensation" of one lari (\$0.38) for "moral damages." The court annulled the disputed administrative act of the National Assessment and Examinations Center rejecting the university entrants' request to reschedule their exams. The court, however, did not find discrimination based on religion and refused to grant symbolic compensation for moral damages. TDI appealed this part of the court's ruling to the Tbilisi Court of Appeals in August. That appeal remained pending at year's end.

During the year, the government directly allocated from the state budget 25 million lari (\$9.3 million) to the GOC and SARI reported it allocated 5.5 million lari (\$2 million) to the four other eligible religious communities to provide partial compensation for damage caused during the Soviet regime. The 5.5 million lari (\$2 million) was distributed as follows: 3.35 million lari (\$1.2 million) to the Muslim community, represented by AMAG; 650,000 lari (\$244,000) to the Catholic Church; one million lari (\$375,000) to the Armenian Apostolic Church; and 500,000 lari (\$188,000) to the Jewish community. This was an increase from 2021 amounts of 2.2 million lari (\$826,000) to AMAG, 400,000 lari (\$151,000) to the Catholic Church, 600,000 lari (\$225,000) to the Armenian Apostolic Church, and 300,000 lari (\$113,000) to the Jewish community. SARI's position was that the payments were of "partial and of symbolic character," and that the government continued to consider levels of damage and "present-day negative conditions" of religious groups in determining compensation. NGOs and religious groups continued to criticize the exclusion of other religious groups, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church, from the legislation designating the five groups eligible to receive compensation, and they questioned the criteria the government used to select which groups received compensation.

On December 8, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals overturned the July decision of the Bolnisi District Court, which had ruled it discriminatory for the municipality of Marneuli to transfer all funds allocated for religious activities to the GOC. The Social Justice Center, an NGO representing the plaintiff AMAG, said that one of the Court of Appeals' judges showed bias against the plaintiffs based on their ethnic origin.

The MOIA's Academy trained 1,878 individuals on the subjects of hate crimes and the prohibition of discrimination. During the year, 474 trainees completed the MOIA Academy's online course on "Religious and ethnic diversity in Georgia" for police units working in areas with a high

concentration of ethnic and religious minorities. The MOIA Department of Human Rights provided 1,200 employees training on intolerance and discrimination. Additionally, up to 40 investigators received training on the topic of identifying and investigating hate crimes.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Russia continued to occupy and control 20 percent of Georgian territory, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Reliable information from those regions continued to be difficult to obtain. According to the “constitution” adopted in Abkhazia, all persons in the region are equal before the law regardless of religious beliefs and everyone has the right to freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It forbids the formation of associations or parties or activities that incite religious discord. The “constitution” of South Ossetia guarantees freedom of conscience and faith but states, “Orthodox Christianity and traditional South Ossetian beliefs represent one of the foundations of the national self-awareness of the Ossetian people.”

The ROC and the GOC both formally recognize the Orthodox churches in Abkhazia as well as in South Ossetia as belonging to the GOC, but GOC representatives said de facto authorities in South Ossetia continued to pressure the Georgian Orthodox churches in the separatist republic to merge with the ROC. Sources said that the ROC tacitly and unofficially supported breakaway churches that did not have official autocephaly from the GOC. De facto authorities continued to restrict GOC clergy’s accessing these areas. Some religious figures in Abkhazia continued to support turning the region’s Orthodox churches into an autocephalous Abkhaz Orthodox Church, while others wished to subordinate them to the ROC, and still others wished to subordinate them to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, according to GOC and other religious officials. Orthodox priest and self-declared head of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church Vissarion Aplia continued to call for independence from the GOC.

Representatives of the GOC remained unable to travel to or conduct services in Russia-occupied Abkhazia, including in the majority-ethnic-Georgian Gali District. According to GOC representatives, the district’s ethnic Georgian population continued to have to travel to Tbilisi-administered territory to celebrate religious holidays. According to the Democracy Research Institute, very few GOC worshippers in Abkhazia were able to travel to Tbilisi-administered territory to celebrate Orthodox Christmas (January 7) or Orthodox Easter (May 2) because only 1,000 of 45,000 ethnic Georgians had Abkhazia “passports.” De facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia continued to restrict movement across the administrative boundary line with the rest of Georgia and to detain and fine residents for “illegal border crossings,” according to multiple reports by international and domestic observers.

De facto authorities in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia continued to ban Jehovah’s Witnesses, although the Democracy Research Institute reported in 2021 that Jehovah’s Witnesses and Pentecostals could assemble freely in Akhagori, which was administered by de facto South Ossetia officials.

According to GOC representatives, de facto authorities allowed the GOC to conduct services in South Ossetia, despite a legal ban.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom ✓

During the year, the Human Rights Department of the MOIA investigated eight cases involving crimes reported as religiously motivated, compared with 13 cases in 2021, 22 cases in 2020, and 44 cases in 2019. The department did not provide further details. Religious organizations and NGOs, which also tracked cases, attributed the decline in incidents in part to government- and self-imposed COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on public activity that were in place until April.

According to the Social Justice Center and local sources, tensions between Muslims and Christians continued in Buknari Village, Chokhatauri District, Guria Region, following intercommunity clashes in 2021 stemming from an incident where a group of Christians assaulted two teenage Muslim boys. The incident reportedly occurred while the boys were going to or from a local prayer room established in a private home. Following the assault, Muslims from the area and neighboring regions held demonstrations in the village, resulting in clashes between the Muslim demonstrators and Christians. According to local sources, no serious confrontation took place during the year and the situation was stable, but trust among communities had not been fully restored. Sources said tensions manifested, for example, around school issues, such as including Muslims on the school board, and land issues.

The Public Defender's Office reported it received four complaints of discrimination or hate crimes based on religion by the year's end, compared with five in 2021. One case alleged discrimination on religious grounds in Buknari Village, where tensions remained despite the situation being stable for the past year. In the second case, Muslim prisoners said the prison administration failed to offer them the possibility of receiving additional food from outside during religious holidays and also failed to allocate dedicated prayer rooms for Islamic worship, while providing them for Orthodox prisoners. The investigation of a March 2021 case in which an individual threw a Molotov cocktail in a Jehovah's Witness kingdom hall in Mtskheta remained pending at year's end. The Public Defender's Office stated effective and timely investigations into religiously motivated hate crimes remained a challenge and called on the government to take "all necessary steps to address the systemic problems."

During the year, the Prosecutor General's Office prosecuted two individuals for crimes motivated by religious intolerance and recognized 12 persons as victims in connection with these cases. The prosecution charged one suspect with verbal and physical abuse after police arrested him for brandishing a knife and threatening to kill members of the Jehovah's Witnesses on June 10. The Tbilisi City Court found the individual not psychologically sound after considering expert testimony and ordered him remanded to a hospital. The second case involved a man who threatened to kill a Muslim religious leader during a May 13 service in the Batumi Central Mosque. The assailant received a two-year prison sentence. The Prosecutor General's Office appealed the decision and requested a tougher sentence.

Following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in April, Jehovah's Witnesses reported the group resumed public outreach activities, including door-to-door proselytizing. Between January and September, Jehovah's Witnesses reported to the government nine religiously motivated incidents, compared with six in 2021. In one incident, unknown individuals broke into a kingdom hall in Tbilisi and stole audiovisual equipment. In another, unknown individuals threw rocks and eggs at a kingdom hall in Tianeti. In a third, a man in Tbilisi threatened members with a knife. Jehovah's Witnesses said the vandalism and theft cases remained under investigation at year's end, while the court ordered the perpetrator in the knife case receive mental health treatment in a hospital. Jehovah's Witnesses said cases from 2020 and 2021 remained pending.

Representatives of the Public Defender's Office's Tolerance Center, which represents minority religious groups, continued to report what they termed a widespread societal belief that minority religious groups posed a threat to the GOC and to the country's cultural values.

Minority religious communities, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, and Protestants, continued to report resistance from local communities to their establishment of places of worship and religious schools.

During the year, the Media Development Foundation documented 98 instances of religiously intolerant statements on television, online, and in print by media representatives, political parties, clergy, public organizations, and others as of September, compared with 117 such incidents in 2021. Of these statements, it classified 64 as being directed against Muslims (89 in 2021), while 22 were directed against various other religious groups (28 in 2021). Of the statements, 35 were made by politicians, 47 by media representatives, 12 by various other organizations, three by a religious representative, and 26 by members of the public. The foundation attributed the decrease in

observed discriminatory statements to shifting its focus to monitoring developments in Ukraine as a result of Russia's war on that country.

In September, the news outlet *Open Caucasus Media* reported Giga Chelidze, the leader of the neo-Nazi Georgia National Unity group, began posting antisemitic videos online on a twice-weekly YouTube channel called Fascist Talks. One video began with Chelidze giving the Nazi salute. According to *Open Caucasus Media*, on his show, Chelidze called Marxism and liberalism "viruses of the international Jewry," whom he accused of starting the war in Ukraine.

On February 28, the NGO Israeli House reported unidentified persons drew a Nazi swastika on the wall of the Jewish cemetery in Tbilisi's Samgori district. Representatives of Israeli House reported the incident to Isani-Samgori police. An investigation was ongoing at year's end. On April 20, the MOIA responded to a letter of inquiry from the TDI on the status of the investigation, stating "all relevant measures" were being taken to identify the vandals.

According to a TDI report, on March 6, GOC clergyman Khareba Chikovani circulated an antisemitic post on Facebook in which the post's original author wrote, in the context of the war in Ukraine, that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was a Jew and purposefully killed Ukrainians as part of a conspiracy.

According to a TDI report, on February 27, Giorgi Samsonadze, a GOC priest of the Mtskheta-Tbilisi Eparchy, reposted antisemitic content on his personal Facebook page in which the post's original author blamed Russian aggression on Jews with "curls" (i.e., *peyot* – Hebrew for sidelocks or sideburns).

There was also an antisemitic social media campaign against the late Vitaly Safarov and his family; Safarov was a young human rights defender murdered in 2018 on what a court found to be ethnic and antisemitic grounds.

The media outlet *JAMnews* reported that in June, Tbilisi police detained animal rights activists during protests against animal sacrifice connected to celebrations of Lomisoba, an ancient Christian Georgian festival with pagan roots that typically occurs in the mountainous regions following Easter.

The *Times of Israel* reported that in June, inaugural Jewish and Islamic services were held in the interfaith Peace Project, a former warehouse in Tbilisi housing the Peace Cathedral, the Masjid al-Salaam Mosque, and the Beit Knesset HaShalom Synagogue. Founded by Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, Metropolitan Bishop of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, the Peace Project was intended as a space for interfaith dialogue as well as worship services. Songulashvili told The *Times of Israel*, "Through our fellowship...it is my hope that we will learn from each other's spiritual experiences as we push each other to broaden our understanding of being human, being believers, and being members of this fine planet."

Section IV.

U.S. ✓

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with officials from the government, including the Prime Minister's advisor on human rights, and members of parliament, to encourage government efforts to increase tolerance of minority religions and to hold individuals accountable for discriminatory actions. They also continued to meet with the Public Defender's Office and officials in its Tolerance Center to discuss discrimination against minority religious groups, hear members' concerns about potential legislation such as the potential law on religion, and stress the importance of interfaith dialogue. An embassy official met with the head of the parliamentary Human Rights Committee to discuss concerns over religious freedom and potential legislation that could affect it.

Embassy representatives met with senior officials from the GOC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the wake of a number of antisemitic statements made by others that GOC clergy had reposted on social media to raise concerns over the GOC's inaction on curbing antisemitic comments and sermons. As part of multiple regional visits to mark the 30th anniversary of Georgia-U.S. diplomatic relations, the Ambassador met with GOC leaders throughout the country to stress the importance of religious diversity and tolerance. A senior embassy official met in July with Protopresbyter of the Georgian Orthodox Church Giorgi Zviadadze to highlight the importance of tolerance.

Embassy officials continued to meet with NGOs, including the Center for Development and Democracy, the Social Justice Center, TDI, and the Council of Jewish Women of Georgia, to discuss interfaith relations, the integration of religious minorities into society, and the promotion of religious freedom for all.

The embassy promoted International Religious Freedom Day by holding a virtual event on social media on October 27 with embassy officials and head of the Center for Ethnic and Confessional Relations Lela Jejalava, who each gave remarks and answered questions from high school and university students about religious freedom concepts and cases. The embassy also used social media to promote religious freedom through posts highlighting shared values among faith traditions, support for religious tolerance, and a shared appreciation in Georgia and the United States for cultural diversity. The embassy supported interfaith dialogues with students through a number of roundtable discussions on religious tolerance and diversity.