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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Georgia

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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 September, parliament adopted a new defense code, which, according to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), could require non-GOC clergy to perform alternative non-military service, while GOC clergy are exempt from military and alternative service due to a long-standing constitutional agreement between the state and the GOC.

In May, the Supreme Court annulled a lower court decision that the government denial of permits to Muslims to build a mosque on land they owned was discriminatory and returned the case to the lower court for a retrial. TDI reported the court found that some governmental discrimination between religions could be remedied by parliament abolishing or granting tax privileges to all religions. NGOs and some Muslim community leaders again said the government continued to favor and influence the state-funded group All Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG). In August, TDI partially appealed a 2022 ruling by the Tbilisi City Court in favor of two Seventh-day Adventist university applicants who challenged scheduling of required exams on Saturday, their holy day.

TDI reported that due to the Tbilisi Court of Appeals ruling against it in a private lawsuit, the Evangelical Church of Georgia (ECG) was on the verge of losing the money collected by its parishioners to build its prayer house. In November, the Supreme Court rejected the ECG's appeal of the ruling. Between January and September, Jehovah's Witnesses reported to the government nine religiously motivated incidents of physical violence and harassment. During the year, the NGO Media Development Foundation documented 48 instances of religiously intolerant statements directed at Muslims and various other religious groups. Some were of antisemitic character and targeted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

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. 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 GOC churches to merge with the ROC, while some religious figures in Abkhazia continued to support turning the region's Orthodox churches into autocephalous Abkhaz Orthodox Churches. 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."

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with officials from the government to encourage government efforts to increase tolerance of minority religions and hold individuals accountable for discriminatory actions. The Ambassador met with GOC Patriarch Ilia II and other senior GOC leaders throughout the country and stressed the importance of religious diversity and tolerance. An embassy official met with the heads of the parliamentary Defense Committee and Human Rights Committee to discuss concerns over religious freedom and potential legislation that could affect it, including the new defense code.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.9 million (midyear 2023). 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 required to perform alternative service). 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 as legal entities. 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 NAPR. 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." In its definitions section, the law indicates religions considered "dishonest" or "fictitious" could be denied registration. 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 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; 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), Catholic Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, and 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 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.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs’ (MOIA) 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 Special Investigation 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.

The mandate of the State Agency for Religious Issues (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

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

According to officials from the Special Investigation Service, it initiated investigations into four crimes committed with a religious motive by year's end. The General Prosecutor's office did not initiate criminal prosecutions of these cases.

As in previous years, the TDI said 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 because of a crime) or to indict individuals for religiously motivated crimes.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

In September, parliament adopted a new defense code, to be implemented in 2024 and 2025, which according to TDI's analysis, could lead to discrimination on the grounds of religion and violate the constitution. According to TDI, the new defense code could require non-GOC clergy to perform alternative, nonmilitary service, while the GOC's concordat with the government would exempt GOC clergy from any type of service. This conflict between the new defense code and the concordat had not yet been litigated by year's end. Parliamentarians said the alternative service requirement would be applied equally during implementation.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

According to NAPR, only two religious groups filed for registration during the year, the Ozurgeti Evangelical Baptist Church and the Christ the Savior Church, and both applications remained pending because the religious groups needed to submit additional documents. NAPR reported the agency did not refuse registration to any religious groups during the year.

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 address issues pertaining to the registration and legal status of religious groups and teaching of religion in public schools. Many civil society representatives and members of other religious groups, including some individuals from the Muslim community, Catholic Church, and 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. In addition, they expressed concern that it would 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 making benefits available to all religious groups or to none. No progress toward such a law was reported by media.

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.

An investigation into alleged violations of the confidentiality of private communications of religious persons that surfaced in 2021 was continuing at the end of the year.

Many religious property cases pending before the courts failed to make progress during the year. NGOs and religious groups again 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 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. It also 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 had not ruled 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 initially 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. 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 again 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 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 May 25, the Supreme Court ruled on the longstanding Batumi New Mosque case. The Supreme Court annulled the previous judgment of the Kutaisi Court of Appeal from 2021 that the Batumi City government had discriminated against members of the Muslim community by denying permits to construct a mosque on land the community owned, and it returned the case to the same court for retrial. According to TDI, the decision of the Supreme Court "contributes both to the prolongation of the process and to the continuation of the systematic violation of Muslim rights." TDI blamed the government for intentionally delaying the case for seven years through multiple appeals.

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. 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.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

The TDI again said the Ministry of Education did not report to it any complaints of religious discrimination in schools 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.

In a 2019 case filed by nine religious groups alleging that the GOC's exclusive property tax exemption on land used for noneconomic purposes violated the constitutional guarantees of equal protection, TDI reported that the Supreme Court found the law amounted to discrimination, which could be remedied by parliament abolishing these privileges to all religions or by granting them to all religions. Because parliament did not make any amendments, the tax privileges were annulled for all religions, including for the GOC. Prior to this finding, TDI had 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 stating that the law was unconstitutional.

NGOs and some Muslim community leaders 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.

In August, TDI partially appealed a 2022 Tbilisi City Court ruling regarding religious discrimination against two Seventh-day Adventist university applicants. The Tbilisi City Court partially ruled in favor of the applicants, who had contested the scheduling of an entrance examination on a Saturday. The TDI 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 as of the end of the year.

During the year, the government directly allocated from the state budget 25 million laris (\$9.3 million) to the GOC and SARI reported it allocated 5.5 million laris (\$2 million) to the four other eligible religious communities to provide partial compensation for damage caused during the Soviet regime. The 5.5 million laris (\$2 million) was distributed as follows: 3.35 million laris (\$1.2 million) to the Muslim community, represented by AMAG; 650,000 laris (\$244,000) to the Catholic Church; one million laris (\$375,000) to the Armenian Apostolic Church; and 500,000 laris (\$188,000) to the Jewish community. This was an increase from 2021 amounts of 2.2 million laris (\$826,000) to AMAG, 400,000 laris (\$151,000) to the Catholic Church, 600,000 laris

(\$225,000) to the Armenian Apostolic Church, and 300,000 laris (\$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. Some 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.

The MOIA's Academy trained 1,878 individuals about 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 training to 1,200 employees 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 and 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 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 access to 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. 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." 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. 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.

TDI reported that because of a monetary judgment against it, the ECG might be unable to finish building its only prayer house. In 2022, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals ordered the Church to pay the plaintiff in a civil lawsuit, the U.S.-based NGO 12 Baskets, \$90,000.00 in damages, reversing a lower court ruling in the defendant's favor. On January 30, pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili appealed the judgment to the Supreme Court, and on November 20, the Supreme Court found the ECG's appeal inadmissible, thus leaving in place the Tbilisi Court of Appeal's judgment. TDI said this would potentially leave the Church without funds collected by its parishioners that it had intended to use to complete construction of its first prayer house in Georgia.

According to media reports, in May, a GOC priest tried to obstruct prayers of Catholics in the Buzmareti Church near the Turkish border. The GOC Patriarchate accused the Catholics of staging a provocation. The Patriarchate said the 5th century Buzmareti Church was a historic

monument of the GOC, “while the Catholic Church as a separate entity started to form in the 11th century, therefore arguments on the confessional ownership of the church which existed six centuries before are not clear.”

The Public Defender’s Office reported it received seven complaints of discrimination or hate crimes based on religion by the year’s end, compared with four in 2022 and five in 2021. One case involved alleged discrimination on religious grounds in Buknari Village, where tensions between Christians and Muslims reportedly persisted despite a stable situation for the previous year. In another case, Muslim prisoners said the prison administration failed to offer them the possibility of receiving additional food from outside during religious holidays and 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 five persons as victims in connection with these cases. In one case, the prosecution charged one person with persecution for verbally and physically abusing three Jehovah’s Witnesses and threatening to assault them. The investigation was ongoing at year’s end. In the other case, one person was charged with domestic violence and threats.

As of September, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported one case of religiously motivated vandalism, one case of religiously motivated threat of assault, seven cases of verbal and physical abuse displaying religious intolerance, one case of theft, and four cases of religiously motivated assault. They stated that although police were notified in all cases, investigative results were still pending at year’s end. They also reported two cases that were under investigation in 2022 remained under investigation in 2023, as well as most of the cases from 2020 and 2021.

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 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.

As of September, the Media Development Foundation documented 48 instances of religiously intolerant statements on television, online, and in print by media representatives, political parties, clergy, public organizations, since the start of the year, compared with 98 such incidents during the same period in 2022. Of these statements, it classified 20 as being directed against Muslims (64 in 2022), while 28 were directed against various other religious groups (22 in 2022). Seven were antisemitic and mostly pertained to Ukrainian President Zelenskyy. In one example, on July 12, Davit Tarkhan Mouravi of the political party Alliance of Patriots said on TV Obiektivi: “Zelenskyy is a puppet, this is not his country, he is not Ukrainian, he is a Polish Jew, has never been Ukrainian, or Orthodox, or generally Christian. For Zelenskyy this war was the means for enriching himself, which he did.”

The Greek City Times website reported in February that GOC Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II ordained Hierodeacon Madai to the priesthood. Madai is the first Georgian ethnic Kurd to be ordained into the priesthood.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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 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 possible legislation such as the potential law on religion, and stress the importance of interfaith dialogue. An embassy official met with the heads of the parliamentary Defense Committee and Human Rights Committee to discuss concerns over religious freedom and potential legislation that could affect it, including the new defense code.

As part of multiple regional visits, the Ambassador met with GOC Patriarch Ilia II and other senior GOC leaders throughout the country to stress the importance of religious diversity and 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 October 30th titled “Social Commentary & Social Action,” copresented with the Smithsonian Institute. During the program, high school students from across Georgia discussed American art from a variety of time periods that examined a range of social issues, including freedom of belief and expression, marginalization, and diversity, and explored ways that American artists have used their artistic practice to make their voices heard. 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 roundtable discussions on religious tolerance and diversity.

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