



FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF IN GEORGIA

2023
R E P O R T



TOLERANCE AND DIVERSITY INSTITUTE (TDI)

This report was prepared by the **Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI)** with support from the **USAID Rule of Law Program** implemented by the **East-West Management Institute (EWMI)** with financial support from the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID)**.

The content of the report is the sole responsibility of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute, and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the mentioned international organizations.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

E A S T • W E S T
M A N A G E M E N T
I N S T I T U T E

USAID სამართლის უზენაესობის პროგრამა
USAID RULE OF LAW PROGRAM



Contributors:

SABA SUTIDZE, MANUCHAR TSETSKHLADZE, NINO TETRAULI, MARIAM GAVTADZE

Project Manager:

MARIAM GAVTADZE

Design:

ELENE MINDIASHVILI

© 2024, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI)

website: www.tdi.ge

CONTENTS

METHODOLOGY	4
1. MAIN TRENDS AND STATE POLICY IN THE AREA OF RELIGION	5
2. DISCRIMINATION IN LEGISLATION	8
2.1. New Discriminatory Defense Legislation	8
2.2. Discrimination in the State Property Law	10
2.3. Discrimination in the Tax Code	10
2.4. Celebrating religious holidays and enjoying rest days	11
● Case of MP Tariel Nakaidze	11
● The Case of Adventist University Applicants	12
3. PROPERTY RIGHTS OF MINORITY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES	14
3.1. Restitution of historic property	14
● Preventing Catholics from visiting their historical churches	14
3.2. The Batumi New Mosque Construction Case	15
3.3. The case of the Evangelical Church of Georgia	16
4. STATE FUNDING OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS	18
5. CRIMES COMMITTED ON THE GROUNDS OF RELIGION	20
5.1. Data on religious hate crimes	21
5.2. Persecution of Muslims in the town of Adigeni	22
5.3. The Vitaly Safarov murder case	23
6. RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS	24
7. ANTI-SEMITISM	26
● A physical manifestation of antisemitism in Tbilisi	28

Methodology

The purpose of this report is to examine the legal and political aspects of the state of freedom of religion or belief in Georgia in 2023. It analyzes systemic problems that minority religious organizations have faced for years and continued into the reporting period. It also examines new legal and political developments related to freedom of religion or belief.

Various research tools have been used to obtain and process empirical data for this report: desk research, review of Georgian legislation, official documents, reports of international and local organizations as well as of the Public Defender, public information requested from local and central authorities, information received from various religious organizations, and analysis of the results of lawsuits filed by the TDI and court decisions. State policy and practice in the area of freedom of religion or belief are evaluated against constitutional and international standards for the protection of human rights.

1. Main trends and state policy in the area of religion

The year 2023 was intense in terms of political processes. The Georgian government took a number of steps that undermined the country's sovereignty, the crucial process of European integration, the activities of religious, civil, and media organizations, as well as fundamental human rights.

During the reporting period, the government initiated a **Russian-style draft law** aimed at declaring civil society and media organizations “agents of foreign influence.” The bill also applied to religious organizations, including religious charities registered as non-entrepreneurial (non-commercial) legal entities. Following the strong criticism of the bill from international partners and mass public protests in March 2023, the government was compelled to scrap this repressive bill. Nevertheless, the government re-initiated the bill in 2024.

The draft law on “agents of foreign influence,” initiated in 2023, was also criticized by the Councils of Religious and Ethnic Minorities of the Public Defender of Georgia. “The proposed draft law labels media, civil society organizations, charities, and even religious communities as ‘agents of foreign influence’ and completely belittles their activities and role in society... The proposed draft law contradicts the unwavering will of the citizens of Georgia to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic structures and the goals and human rights enshrined in the Constitution of Georgia. The adoption of the draft law will be alarming and destructive for the country’s democratic development,” reads the statement signed by 20 religious minority organizations and 23 ethnic minority organizations.¹

The measures of the government against European integration are permeated with anti-Western and undemocratic rhetoric, which is peppered with **populist speculation on religious themes**. Senior government officials have been increasingly manipulating the reputation of the Orthodox Church and attacking free society under the pretext of “defending the faith.”² In parallel, the non-secular and non-transparent funding of the Orthodox Church from the state budget has been increasing (for the topic of funding, see Chapter 4).

¹ Special Statement of the Public Defender’s Councils of Religions and Ethnic Minorities, March 2, 2023, <https://www.ombudsman.ge/eng/akhali-ambebi/sakhalkho-damtsveltan-arsebuli-religiata-da-etnikur-umtsiresobata-sabchoebis-sagangebo-gantskhadeba>

² The chairperson of the Georgian Dream, Irakli Kobakhidze, on the protests against the Russian law held in 2023: “These people do not serve their country, but openly engage in anti-Church propaganda and do it purposefully to undermine identity. Today, there was a demonstration of blasphemers of the Church. Those 20 people, who were blowing whistles at the rally, were blasphemers of the Church.” – March 3, 2023.
“There are particular organizations that swear against the Church. There were the relevant banners at the rally yesterday; we saw them. They were representatives of organizations that swear against the Church. It is extremely important to pay attention to that. It is fundamentally important for us not to allow propaganda against the Church and all those steps that are contrary to the state interests.” – March 10, 2023.

Against the backdrop of the processes taking place in the country, acute problems concerning the state of freedom of religion or belief and the rights of religious minorities are not getting the attention they deserve. The government, taking advantage of this situation, increases pressure on religious minorities, infringes their rights more and more severely, adopts laws detrimental to freedom of religion, and neglects hate crimes.

In 2023, the parliament of Georgia adopted a new **Defense Code**, which introduced new discrimination between religious associations. Particularly troubling are those provisions of the Code that indicate the government's desire to collect personal data about the faiths of Georgian citizens (see Chapter 2.1). Discriminating provisions that existed in the Law on State Property, the Tax Code, and the Labour Code have not changed during the reporting period (see more in Chapters 2.2 – 2.4).

For many years, the government and the State Agency for Religious Issues **have been trying to secure the adoption of a special law on religion**. During the reporting period, the government reiterated its intention to adopt such a law. In particular, the draft National Action Plan for the Protection of Human Rights 2024–2026 outlined plans to adopt a special law on Ensuring Freedom of Religion, as well as amendments to the existing model of registration of religious associations and regulations governing the construction of houses of worship. Legislation of this type would lead to the disappearance of some religious associations or a noticeable deterioration of their rights. The Action Plan was drafted in a non-transparent manner, without the participation of either organizations specializing in freedom of religion or religious organizations. It is commendable that the final version of the National Action Plan for the Protection of Human Rights, approved on December 28, 2023, no longer contains a provision on new legislation related to religion.

During the reporting period, the government continued to **systemically violate the rights of Muslim citizens**. The issue of the **construction of a new mosque in Batumi** remained unresolved. Muslims have to continue to gather and pray in the open air. In 2023, the Supreme Court of Georgia issued a problematic ruling on the case of the construction of a new mosque and sent the case back to the appellate court, thus prolonging the infringement of the rights of Muslims (see Chapter 3.2). Meanwhile, a new hotbed of **violence and harassment of Muslims** emerged in Adigeni. The government responded to attacks on Muslims organized by an Orthodox priest, which contained elements of crime, with illegal actions. No investigation into the religious hate crime was initiated. Moreover, the authorities got directly involved in the persecution of Adigeni Muslims. The State Agency for Religious Issues and the mayor of Adigeni forced Muslims to give up their fundamental rights, the right to assemble and worship, as well as legally owned property (see Chapter 5.2).

The gross violation of freedom of religion and other fundamental rights of the **Evangelical Church** parishioners, disguised as a contentious civil dispute, continued during the reporting period. The dispute involves falsified documents, which the Georgian court and investigative authorities neglected (see Chapter 3.3).

The systemic problems faced by religious minorities over the years remain unchanged. These include the issue of **restitution of historical religious property** (see Chapter 3.1), discriminatory and non-secular

environments in public schools (see Chapter 6), **ineffective investigations of hate crimes** (see Chapter 5), etc.

Anti-Semitism has taken an extremely disturbing form. On October 7, 2023, following the attack on Israel by the Hamas terrorist organization, waves of anti-Semitic statements swept across social media. Anti-Semitic statements made on social media platforms were directed against Jews, Israelis, Zionism, and the State of Israel (see Chapter 7).

2. Discrimination in Legislation

Until now, the existing discriminatory norms in the legislation that establish differentiated approaches to religious minorities and grant exceptional privileges and rights only to the Georgian Orthodox Church remain a problem. The legislative and executive authorities have not taken any steps to eliminate the existing discrimination in the legislation. On the contrary, during the reporting period, the government continued to adopt new discriminatory legislation.

2.1. New Discriminatory Defense Legislation

On September 21, 2023, the Parliament of Georgia adopted the new Defense Code and related amendments to various laws. New legislation should be assessed as anti-constitutional and discriminatory based on religion:

- Unlike the previous legislation, the new Defense Code no longer provides the right to postpone military service for clergymen, which, in practice, was equivalent to exemption from military obligation;
- The new Defense Code and the Law on Non-Military, Alternative Labour Service provide that all clerics between the ages of 18 and 27 will be allowed to perform alternative, non-military labour service as an alternative to mandatory military service. However, this obligation does not apply to the clergy of the Georgian Orthodox Church, who, based on the Constitutional Agreement between the State and the Church, are exempt from all military obligations, including alternative service;
- According to the changes, all men between 18 and 60 will be automatically enrolled in the army reserve of the defense forces. An exclusive exception will apply to the clergy of the Orthodox Church because, according to the Constitutional Agreement, they are exempt from all military obligations;
- In addition to the creation of new areas of discrimination based on religion, the government's desire to collect the personal data of such special categories as a person's faith and religion is particularly alarming. In particular, information about a person's religious affiliation will be entered into the mobilization reserve's electronic data system to record the composition of the mobilization reserve. This will necessitate the collection of personal data about the religious affiliation of all men aged between 18 and 60. This information is, however, a sensitive special category of personal data.

The Ministry of Defense can not provide any legitimate purpose to justify collecting personal data on the religious beliefs of all men aged 18 to 60. In the written communication with the Public Defender's Office, the Ministry states the following as the purpose of such legislation: creating equal conditions for military servicemen of different religions; taking into account dietary needs based on religion;

burial per their religion in case of death of military servicemen during the war; supporting enjoyment of religious rites at the military unit, etc.³

The purposes stated by the Ministry can not justify the collection of information about religion, as all the above-listed needs (for example, dietary needs, practicing religion, etc.) can be ensured individually whenever such needs arise for particular servicemen. As for the burial and honoring of military servicemen killed in the war per their religious beliefs, this is carried out with the agreement of the deceased's family;⁴ therefore, there is no need to know the religious beliefs of the military servicemen. Consequently, it is evident that the government's goal is to illegally and repressively collect the data on religious beliefs of the population of Georgia, which is against the international standards of protection of human rights and personal data.

In November of the reporting year, the amendment was made to the Defense Code, according to which **the right to a fair trial was limited**, and the judicial protection of the rights became figurative. In particular, according to the new regulations, the decision on conscription into military service and alternative labour service can be appealed in court within 15 calendar days from its official introduction. However, an appeal of the said decision does not stop the process. Due to such regulation, the appeal of the decision to the court practically loses its meaning since the person may have already been enrolled in military service at the time of the case consideration.

Along with these legislative changes, the authorities introduced new, rather alarming terminology, such as “dishonest” and “fictitious” religious organizations, which are used as the main argument to support these changes to the new defense code. It is true that this terminology is not written directly in the texts of the laws but is found in the Defense Code explanatory note and public statements by the government. Nevertheless, the fact that such terminology is used in the legal and legislative spheres is alarming. This line of argument indicates that the state is instrumental in deciding which religious organizations are “fictitious” and which are “real.”

The amendments of the defense legislation have been criticized several times by the Council of Religions under the auspices of the Public Defender. In the statement published in April 2023, the Council called on the Parliament not to pass the discriminatory law.⁵ In the statement published in October, the Council again criticized the government's adoption of the problematic legislation: *“With this amendment, another discrimination was established on the basis of religion... The second significant problem is related to the collection of data in the electronic system of the mobilization reserve... which violates the fundamental principles of freedom of religion and belief and the processing of personal data and creates a serious threat that highly sensitive information found in the hands of the state, will become the basis of future discriminatory practices”* - we read in the statement of the Council of Religions.⁶

3 See the 2023 Human Rights Report of the Public Defender of Georgia, pages 177-178 (available in Georgian).

4 Article 2 of the Annex, Order №14 of the Minister of Defense of Georgia on the Approval of Conducting Military Ceremonies and Rituals, 19 March 2019.

5 Statement of the Council of Religions, 3 April 2023, available in Georgian: http://tolerantoba.ge/index.php?news_id=943

6 Statement of the Council of Religions, 19 October 2023, available in Georgian: http://tolerantoba.ge/index.php?news_id=947

2.2. Discrimination in the State Property Law

The Law on State Property grants exclusive rights to the Georgian Orthodox Church and restricts other religious communities from acquiring state property. In particular:

- Article 3 of the Law restricts religious organizations’ **acquisition and exchange** of state-owned property. The Georgian Orthodox Church is an exception;⁷
- Article 4 of the Law restricts the right of religious organizations to **privatize state-owned religious buildings and their ruins**. Based on the Constitutional Agreement between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the State, this restriction does not apply to the Orthodox Church. In addition to the discriminatory content, said legislation restricts religious minorities from returning their historical properties confiscated by the Soviet regime;⁸
- As a result of the legislative amendments of 2020, the Georgian Orthodox Church was granted the exclusive right to receive the state forests into ownership (Article 3.6). To find out how many units of forest plots were transferred to the Church after the amendments of the law until the end of 2023, TDI requested public information from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, LEPL National Agency of State Property, and LEPL National Agency of Public Registry. As of April 2024, none of the mentioned public agencies have provided the information to TDI.

TDI has been challenging the legislative provisions that restrict religious organizations from acquiring, exchanging, and privatizing state property at the Constitutional Court since 2019; however, the Court has not yet ruled. Prolonging the consideration of these cases by the Court for an unreasonable period of time promotes discrimination against non-dominant religious communities and undermines their rights.

2.3. Discrimination in the Tax Code

Discrimination in the Tax Code of Georgia, which imposes an unequal tax system for religious minorities, remains unresolved. In particular:

- Land registered on the balance of religious organizations used for non-commercial purposes is taxed with **property tax** (Subparagraph “a” of the first paragraph of Article 201). At the same time, based on the Constitutional Agreement between the State and the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Church is exempt from property tax on land used for non-commercial purposes.⁹

7 Constitutional claim N 1440 of nine religious organizations represented by the TDI. The claim was submitted to the Court in 2019. Available in Georgian – <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=1410>

8 Constitutional claim N 1640 of seven religious organizations represented by the TDI. The claim was submitted to the Court in 2021. Available in Georgian – <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=12279>

9 Constitutional claim N 1422 of nine religious organizations represented by the TDI. The claim was submitted to the Court in 2019. Available in Georgian – <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=1430>

- The Constitutional Agreement also exempts the Georgian Orthodox Church from **import tax** when importing religious products. All other religious communities are obliged by the Tax Code to pay an import tax (Articles 159 and 195);¹⁰

TDI has ongoing appeals at the Constitutional Court regarding the mentioned norms. TDI appealed Article 201 in 2019 and Articles 159 and 195 in 2021. However, the court has not yet concluded these cases like the appealed norms of Law on State Property.

2.4. Celebrating religious holidays and enjoying rest days

The issue of eliminating discriminatory legislation towards non-dominant religious communities remained unresolved during the reporting period. According to the legislation, it is problematic for representatives of religious minorities working in any sector and for students and pupils to enjoy their religious holidays and rest days.

According to the Labour Code, 13 holidays are defined as public holidays (counting with days – 17 days off), out of which only six are related to events of secular importance, and the rest are exclusively Georgian Orthodox Christian holidays. The cultural and religious holidays of other religious and ethnic communities living in Georgia are neglected.

According to the Labour Code of Georgia, an employee can ask for alternative days off instead of the holidays established by the Code only if the contract stipulates so. Religious minorities can only benefit from this general regulation. In this case, requesting alternative days off depends on the labour contract and the employer's goodwill. Such general regulations do not create proper guarantees for the employee.

- **Case of MP Tariel Nakaidze**

Concerning this issue, the discrimination case based on religion against Tariel Nakaidze, a Muslim member of the Parliament, should be noted. In particular, Tariel Nakaidze was absent from the plenary session on 28 June 2023 to celebrate Kurban Bayram (Eid Al-Adha), one of the most important holidays of Islam. The Parliament considered his absence unauthorized leave and deducted 10% of his monthly salary. In October 2023, Tariel Nakaidze appealed to the court about the fact of discrimination by the Parliament against him.¹¹

At the plenary session of the Parliament on June 27, Tariel Nakaidze spoke publicly about the regulation of public holidays in Georgia, noting that it is problematic when representatives of any religious minority within the country are not allowed to have the day of rest on major religious dates for them. In an address to the Speaker of Parliament, he also noted that since Kurban Bayram, one of the most

¹⁰ Constitutional claim N 1593 of nine religious organizations represented by the TDI. The claim was submitted to the Court in 2021. Available in Georgian – <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=11126>

¹¹ The interests of the Member of Parliament, Tariel Nakaidze, are protected by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) and the Human Rights Clinic of the Ilia State University Law School.

important holidays of Islam, was to be celebrated the following day, adherence to his religious beliefs would effectively mean he would have to miss the June 28 plenary session.

In the Procedural Rules of the Parliament of Georgia, the list of honorable excuses for absence from a plenary session does not include celebrations of important religious holidays. The Parliament did not consider Tariel Nakaidze's preliminary statement either, in which he mentioned that he had no other choice but to miss the plenary session scheduled for June 28.

The Parliament did not focus on protecting freedom of religion or belief but instead prioritized the observance of the formal requirements of its Procedural Rules. These rules do not acknowledge that members of the Parliament belonging to religious minorities cannot take leave of absence to celebrate important dates according to their faith. Under such circumstances, the Parliament should have individually assessed Tariel Nakaidze's case and the significant importance of allowing its members to enjoy the right to freedom of religion or belief and should have decided in favor of protecting fundamental human rights.¹²

- **The Case of Adventist University Applicants**

Since 2020, the Tolerance and Diversity Institute has been defending the interests of two applicants who are members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and applied to the National Examination Center on June 30, 2020, with a request to postpone the exam scheduled for July 18, because due to their religious beliefs, they could not participate in exams on Saturdays.¹³ The Center unlawfully and unjustifiably rejected the applicants' request, thus violating their freedom of religion and belief, education and equality rights. TDI applied to the Tbilisi City Court on July 15, 2020, with an injunction application to secure the claim.¹⁴ The application demanded that the National Assessment and Examinations Center be instructed to allow the applicants to take the exam on July 17th or 19th or any other day except Saturday, which the court approved. As a result, applicants took the exam on a different day.

Later, on July 24, 2020, TDI submitted to the Tbilisi City Court the complaint of university applicants, requesting the identification of discrimination on the grounds of religion, the elimination of the consequences of discrimination by invalidating the disputed act of refusal, and a symbolic compensation of 1 GEL for moral damages caused by discrimination. On April 20, 2022, the Tbilisi City Court partially satisfied the applicants' request. The court recognized the controversial act issued by the National Examinations Center as invalid, which limited the possibility for applicants to change the examination date. However, the court did not find discrimination on the grounds of religion and, hence, did not impose symbolic compensation for moral damages on the center.

¹² See the assessment by Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI): Discrimination Case against MP Tariel Nakaidze, available at: <https://tdi.ge/en/news/1097-discrimination-case-against-mp-tariel-nakaidze>

¹³ See Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), Freedom of Religion and Belief in Georgia (Amid and Beyond the Covid Pandemic), 2020 - 2021 (May), pg. 23-25.

¹⁴ The July 20, 2022 statement of TDI, available at: <http://tdi.ge/en/news/842-tdi-appeals-court-against-national-assessment-and-examinations-center>

In August 2022, TDI appealed the City Court's decision to the Tbilisi Court of Appeals. **In February 2024, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals granted TDI's claim, found indirect discrimination on the grounds of religion against university entrants, and ordered LEPL National Assessment and Examinations Center to pay them symbolic compensation of 1 Lari for moral damages.**

3. Property rights of minority religious communities

Issues related to religious property and places of worship remain among the most pressing problems faced by minority religious communities. Religious communities encounter obstacles in their attempts to return religious property seized during the Soviet period and in the construction of houses of worship. The legislation is also discriminatory, which, in contrast to the attitude towards the Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, restricts other religious organizations' rights to return and acquire religious properties. It is the property and independence of a religious organization that is at issue in the case of the Evangelical Church of Georgia, which, due to an unsubstantiated decision made by the Tbilisi Court of Appeals in 2022 (whose review was denied by the Supreme Court), is facing the threat of losing its only house of worship.

3.1. Restitution of historic property

As in previous years, the problem of restitution of historic property to minority religious communities remained unresolved during the reporting period. The restitution of historic property has been problematic since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the restoration of independence. So far, only the Georgian Orthodox Church has achieved property restitution.

Unlike the Orthodox Church, most of the property seized during the Soviet period was not returned to other religious communities. Part of such property belongs to the state, while another part was given to the Patriarchate of Georgia. For example, the Patriarchate appropriated seven Catholic churches.¹⁵ In 2017, the state transferred the historically Armenian Tandoyants Church, located in Tbilisi, to the Patriarchate.¹⁶ In 2019, part of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, located in the Asureti village of Tetrtskaro municipality, which is also a monument of cultural heritage, was transferred to the Patriarchate of Georgia with the right to use.¹⁷

- **Preventing Catholics from visiting their historical churches**

In addition to the fact that minority religious communities cannot reclaim religious buildings seized from them, the Orthodox Church prevents them from visiting these buildings on religious holidays. An example of this is the historically Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Kutaisi, whose

¹⁵ For detailed information about the problem of restitution of religious property in Georgia, see the TDI's report "Restitution Policy in Georgia," available at: https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/restitution_policy_in_georgia.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 14

¹⁷ See detailed information in the Public Defender's parliamentary report for 2020, pg. 169; available at: <https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2021070814020446986.pdf>.

feast day is celebrated on December 8. On that day, Catholic parishioners used to visit it annually and perform a prayer. However, in October 2022, when a statue of Our Lady of Fatima was brought to Georgia, Orthodox priests taped off the church and did not allow the papal nuncio and parishioners to enter it.¹⁸ In May 2023, the Eparchy of the Orthodox Church installed a gate and fenced off the territory.¹⁹ On December 8 2023, on the feast day of the church, representatives of the Kutaisi–Gaenati Eparchy of the Orthodox Church refused to allow Catholics to enter the temple on various pretexts.²⁰

The same holds true for Buzmareti, a historically Catholic church in the Turkish–Georgian border area, which Catholic believers visit every year to perform the liturgy on the Feast of the Ascension. Orthodox clergy did not allow them to hold the liturgy in the church or in the churchyard, and Catholic clergymen and parishioners had no choice but to hold the rite outside the church yard. In 2023, however, the Orthodox clergy even tried to prevent them from doing so and occupied the place where Catholic believers conducted the liturgy in previous years.²¹

3.2. The Batumi New Mosque Construction Case

The issue of the construction of a new mosque in Batumi remained unresolved in the reporting period. The Supreme Court’s decision on the case filed in 2017 by the Foundation for the Construction of a New Mosque in Batumi to challenge the unlawful decision by the Batumi City Hall regarding the construction permit, whereby the case was sent back to the Kutaisi Court of Appeals for reconsideration, was damaging to the rights to freedom of religion and equality.

The Supreme Court overturned the decision of the Kutaisi Court of Appeals (which upheld the reasoning of the Batumi City Court that the refusal to build the mosque was discriminatory) and stated that the Batumi City Hall’s refusal to grant permission for the construction of a new mosque was not discriminatory against the Muslim community, even given that seven Orthodox churches had been built in the same functional zone where Muslims requested permission to build the mosque.

The Supreme Court’s decision is also alarming because it states, without any justification and with a completely out-of-context reference to the constitutional agreement between the Orthodox Church and the State, that the Orthodox churches built in the 21st century are monuments of cultural heritage and, therefore, Batumi City Hall should ignore the fact that they were built illegally.²²

The case is still pending before the Kutaisi Court of Appeals, where terms of the settlement were discussed at one of the sessions. However, Batumi City Hall failed to present its position on the settlement terms within the one-week deadline of December 19, 2023 (and even after that) set by the court.

¹⁸ For details, see the news of the information agency of the Catholic Church, Catholic.ge, available in Georgian at <https://shorturl.at/itGK1>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For details, see the news of the information agency of the Catholic Church, Catholic.ge, available in Georgian at <https://shorturl.at/eCP56>.

²¹ For details, see the news of the information agency of the Catholic Church, Catholic.ge, available in Georgian at <https://shorturl.at/aisAR>.

²² For a detailed assessment of the Supreme Court decision, see TDI’s news at <https://tdi.ge/en/news/1071-case-batumi-new-mosque>

This prolongs the litigation, which is yet another clear manifestation of the government’s discriminatory strategy in relation to this case. In particular, gross violations by the government of the fundamental rights of Muslims are persistent. For many years, due to illegal barriers erected by the authorities, Muslims have been unable to build a prayer house and have had to gather and pray in the open air to this day. The government has used every available leverage to delay the resolution of the dispute and, by appealing it in various instances, has dragged the case on for seven years. The above-mentioned Supreme Court decision has also contributed to the prolongation of the case and the continuation of the systemic infringement of the rights of Muslims.

3.3. The case of the Evangelical Church of Georgia

The Tolerance and Diversity Institute has been defending the rights of the Evangelical Church of Georgia and its pastor, Zaal Tkeshelashvili.²³

The gross violation of freedom of religion and other fundamental rights of members of the Evangelical Church of Georgia is disguised in a civil dispute. On November 9, 2022, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals ordered Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili (the defendant) to pay the plaintiff the donations received over the years by the Evangelical Church, which were intended to complete the construction of the Church’s first and only prayer house.

The plaintiffs in the case are US citizen Byung Chan Park and his US-registered organization, “12 Baskets.” In 2019, Park filed a complaint against Zaal Tkeshelashvili with the Tbilisi City Court, demanding that the defendant pay him the donations the plaintiff himself collected on behalf of the Evangelical Church from Christian believers abroad.

The City Court did not grant any of the plaintiff’s claims. However, on November 9, 2022, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals ordered the Evangelical Church to pay the plaintiff USD 90,000. On January 30, 2023, Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili appealed the decision of the Tbilisi Court of Appeals to the Supreme Court of Georgia. The Supreme Court found the Pastor’s appeal inadmissible, thus leaving the decision of the Court of Appeals in force.

A detailed examination and analysis of the case materials leads to a reasonable doubt that plaintiff Park acted maliciously and used religious associations for his murky financial activities. The case materials contain copies of allegedly falsified documents sealed by an American notary. The Tbilisi Court of Appeals not only brushed aside the need to examine the allegedly falsified documents for authenticity but also did not evaluate this fact at all. Furthermore, the Court used these documents to impose USD 70,000 on Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili. Namely:

1. The plaintiff, Byung Chan Park, presented copies of two agreements to the court as proof of his right to request USD 70,000 from the Pastor. Park could not provide the original copies of these agreements. Despite the defendant’s request, the court did not order an examination to authenticate these copies;

²³ Report on the case against the Evangelical Church of Georgia, TDI, February 9, 2023; https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/the_case_against_the_evangelical_church_of_georgia.pdf

2. These agreement documents presented by Park contained numerous inconsistencies, and the fact that the court did not order to authenticate them strengthens the suspicion of the court's bias. For example, the documents indicated the serial number of Byung Chan Park's passport, issued in 2015, while the assignment agreements presented to the court were dated 2014; the agreements did not have primary notarial requisites (i.e., the signature of the notary, notarial act, date of notarization, etc.), which are mandatory requisites according to the relevant legislation of the State of Washington.

In November 2019, Zaal Tkeshelashvili applied to the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia with the request to launch an investigation into the alleged falsification of documents. More than three years have passed since then, but to no avail.

In the course of official correspondence with the Washington State Department of Licensing (which supervises notary who possesses the seal mentioned above), it was established that **the notary public whose seal is visible on the controversial documents was not able to provide the Department of Licensing with any evidence of notarization of these documents.** Under the state of Washington's legislation, a public notary must retain such documentation for ten years after performing the notarial act.

As regards plaintiff Park's organization, "12 Baskets," it is worth noting that, according to the Corporations and Charities Filing System, this organization has been dissolved repeatedly for failing to submit annual reports to the state for many years. This raises reasonable doubts that Byung Chan Park is using this organization and its charity status to evade taxes and engage in suspicious transactions.

The ongoing contentious and unfounded civil litigation and the reversal of the decision by the Court of Appeals suggest that this case is part of a repressive state policy against the Evangelical Church of Georgia and Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili aimed at silencing them and seizing the property and independence of this Church.

4. State funding of religious organizations

As in previous years, the state continued to finance the Georgian Orthodox Church in 2023, too. **The Patriarchate again received GEL 25 million from the central budget.** Although both the state and the Patriarchate cite the compensation for damages caused to the Church in the years of Soviet rule as the reason for transferring this amount and other material resources to the Patriarchate, it is obvious that such a transfer of amount is more akin to subsidizing the Patriarchate than compensating damages by the state.

In addition to the GEL 25 million annually allocated to the Church from the state budget, the state has additionally transferred other material benefits to the Georgian Orthodox Church on the basis of the Prime Minister's decrees.

Besides GEL 25 million, **in 2023, the government of Georgia transferred a total of GEL 33,350,213** for higher, vocational, and general educational institutions subordinated to or existing under the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church, as well as its charity foundations.²⁴

In addition, the following properties were transferred to the Georgian Orthodox Church in 2023 by direct sale for the symbolic price of GEL 1: land plots with a total area of 1,7 hectares, located in the municipalities of Tskaltubo, Martvili, Tbilisi, Kharagauli, Ozurgeti, Abasha, and Dusheti; and land plots, arable lands, and pastures with the total area of 691 hectares, located in the municipalities of Kareli, Sagarejo, and Adigeni were granted under usufruct with the right of free of charge use.²⁵

On top of budgetary funding, the Georgian **Orthodox Church also receives funding from local self-governments, which averaged GEL 6.6 million in 2023.** This funding is also neither transparent nor secular. In most cases, the purpose of the funding and the information on its expenditure are unknown.

The TDI requested public information on the transfer of funds to religious organizations from 59 municipalities and city halls of five self-governing cities (Tbilisi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, Batumi, and Poti). According to the data provided by 58 municipalities, 41 municipalities²⁶ transferred a total of GEL 5.3 million to the Orthodox Church in 2023. In addition, the funding budgeted by six municipalities totaled GEL 1.3 million. Thus, based on the information provided and the overall analysis of municipal budget documents, the municipal funding for the Orthodox Church in 2023 amounted to GEL 6.6 million.

²⁴ Letter GOV 0 24 00008280 of the administration of the government of Georgia, March 21, 2024.

²⁵ Letter GOV 0 24 00008280 of the administration of the government of Georgia, March 21, 2024.

²⁶ According to the information received, 17 municipalities did not allocate any funds to churches.

The financing of the Orthodox Church is particularly large in the municipalities with the majority Muslim population. The Adigeni municipality allocated GEL 449,206 “for the improvements of the surrounding walls and territories of the monastery complexes”; the Marneuli municipal government transferred GEL 450,000 to the Marneuli-Khujabi Eparchy;²⁷ and the Bolnisi municipality transferred GEL 360,000 to the Bolnisi Eparchy.

Compared to the above-mentioned sums, other religious communities receive negligible municipal funding. The analysis of public information requested by the TDI shows that **in 2023, the municipalities allocated a total of GEL 27,671 to non-Orthodox religious organizations.** According to the data provided by the self-governing cities and municipalities, the said amount was transferred to other religious organizations for utility bills and repair works by Ninotsminda²⁸ and Dmanisi²⁹ municipalities, as well as Isani³⁰ and Krtsanisi³¹ district administrations in Tbilisi. In addition, GEL 20,100 was allocated in the 2023 budget of Marneuli municipality for the payment of utility bills to churches and mosques; however, Marneuli municipality did not provide public information, and consequently, it is impossible to establish whether any amount was transferred or how much was transferred for the payment of utilities to mosques.

Since 2014, four other religious communities (Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Armenian Apostolic Church) have also received annual state funding as symbolic compensation for damages suffered under Soviet rule. The State Agency for Religious Issues administers the distribution of this funding. In 2022, the state increased this funding by GEL 1 million, which remained unchanged in 2023. As a result, the total annual funding for all the four religious associations was GEL 5,5 million. Recognizing only four religious communities as victims of Soviet repressions should be seen as discriminatory, as many other religious communities were also subjected to repressions during the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, in 2023, the list of state beneficiaries was not expanded to include others.

²⁷ On the approval of the 2023 budget of Marneuli municipality (Code: 05 02 04).

²⁸ GEL 6,322 was transferred to Samtskhe-Javakheti and Tsalka vicariate of the Eparchy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and GEL 1,224 to Surb Astvatsatsin Church, in the Eshtia village, of the Armenian Catholic Ordinariate of Eastern Europe.

²⁹ GEL 125 was allocated to Amamlo mosque for the electricity bill.

³⁰ GEL 10,000 was transferred to the Georgian Eparchy of the Armenian Apostolic Church for repair costs of the building of cultural-educational center Hayartun, operating at the Surb Etchmiatsin Church.

³¹ GEL 10,000 was allocated to the Armenian Apostolic Church for repair works.

5. Crimes committed on the grounds of religion

This chapter presents data on crimes committed on the grounds of religion. Most frequently, such crimes are again directed against Jehovah's Witnesses.

Effective state response to such crimes remains challenging, manifested in failing to initiate investigations, delaying the process of granting victim status and identifying perpetrators. This is ultimately reflected in a low conviction rate.

The qualification of the offense in the case of the murder of Vitaly Safarov, motivated by ethnic intolerance and anti-Semitism, remained a problem. The Supreme Court deemed inadmissible the cassation appeal filed and upheld the lower courts' decisions that had acquitted the defendants of the motive for the murder of Vitaly Safarov – racial, religious, national, and ethnic intolerance.

Persecution of Muslims on religious grounds continues. In 2023, in Adigeni, Muslim believers were threatened, obstructed in their activities, and harassed, but the authorities did not purposefully launch the investigation. Moreover, the involvement of officials at various levels in covering up the crime and in persecuting Muslims contains elements of abuse of official power.

An example of offenses allegedly committed by the authorities is the secret materials leaked in 2021, revealing allegedly illegal mass wiretapping and surveillance by the State Security Service, which contained information on personal data, private communication, and people's personal lives.³² The absolute majority of the released documents related to the topic of religion. The materials show that the authorities illegally eavesdrop on and watch representatives of the Orthodox Church and other religious organizations.³³ According to information³⁴ provided by the Prosecutor's Office to the TDI, 121 people have been granted victim status in the investigation of the above-mentioned crime, of whom 14 are clergymen. However, criminal prosecution against any particular person has not yet been initiated. The prosecutor's office says that the investigation is still underway.

32 Statement of the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia, September 18, 2021; <https://pog.gov.ge/en/news/https-pog-gov-ge-1-2>

33 See the statement by the TDI on September 15, 2021: <http://tdi.ge/en/statement/statement-about-illegal-recordings>

34 Letter N13/1053 from the General Prosecutor's Office of Georgia, January 11, 2024.

5.1. Data on religious hate crimes

According to the unified report “Statistics of Crimes Committed on the Grounds of Intolerance Based on Discrimination” for the year 2023, prepared by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, the Special Investigation Service,³⁵ the Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia, and the Supreme Court of Georgia, during the reporting period:

- **The Ministry of Internal Affairs** launched investigations into five cases of religious hate crimes, including two cases where the offenses were committed on the grounds of gender and religious intolerance.³⁶
- **The Special Investigation Service** opened investigations into seven cases of the same category of offenses. All seven cases involved offenses committed against Jehovah’s Witnesses and included verbal and physical insults, threats of physical violence, demands for leaving the place of preaching, and damage to information/literature stands.³⁷
- **The Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia** initiated criminal proceedings in only two cases of religious hate crimes, one of which was motivated by gender in addition to religious intolerance. During the reporting period, the Prosecutor’s Office recognized six people as victims.³⁸
- **Courts:** regarding convictions for religious hate crimes, no person was convicted by district (city) courts for this category of offenses.³⁹ During the reporting period, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals handed down four convictions for offenses under Article 156 of the Criminal Code (Persecution of persons on grounds of religion or belief), with three of the convictions using the commission of an offense motivated by religious intolerance as an aggravating circumstance.⁴⁰

35 On March 1, 2022, the task of investigating the offenses under Article 155 (Unlawful interference with the performance of divine service) and Article 156 (Persecution of persons because of their speech, opinion, conscience, confession, faith or creed, or political, social, professional, religious or scientific activities) of the Criminal Code of Georgia was transferred from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Special Investigation Service; therefore, until the last quarter of 2023 (i.e. when Statistics of the Crimes Committed on the Grounds of Intolerance Based on Discrimination also included the offenses investigated by this service), the statistics on the initiation of investigations into the above-mentioned crimes were not published.

36 Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Special Investigation Service, Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia, Supreme Court of Georgia – Joint report of data on crimes committed on grounds of intolerance with discrimination basis, 2023. See at: https://www.geostat.ge/media/60645/Hate_2023.pdf.

37 Letter SIS 3 24 00001322 from the Special Investigation Service of January 26, 2024.

38 Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Special Investigation Service, Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia, Supreme Court of Georgia – Joint report of data on crimes committed on grounds of intolerance with discrimination basis, 2023. See at: https://www.geostat.ge/media/60645/Hate_2023.pdf.

39 Ibid.

40 Letter N1/563 from the Tbilisi Court of Appeals, January 31, 2024.

5.2. Persecution of Muslims in the town of Adigeni

Since late 2012, harassment of Muslims and religious hate crimes committed against them have become systemic. The state has failed to respond effectively, thereby encouraging new offenses.

The most frequently, offenses are committed in Adigeni municipality, where the Muslim population is large.⁴¹

In 2023, a new round of persecution of Muslims began in Adigeni. On June 16, in the town of Adigeni, the abbot of the Zarzma monastery, Nikoloz Getsadze, and a group of local Christians broke into the private property of Muslim religious servant Merab Mikeladze, where Muslims had gathered for Friday prayer and demanded that they not hold the prayer, give up the property, and leave Adigeni.⁴²

The law enforcement authorities did not take measures provided for by the law against the group of Christians. The authorities did not even initiate an investigation into the incident. Government officials believed that this problem should be resolved through informal negotiations by having the Muslims concede their legal rights. Government officials tried to force Muslims to cede their private property in Adigeni, stop prayers and religious activities, and, in return, promised them budget funds to buy a building in a neighboring village. Moreover, the government wanted the new building to be registered not as the property of a particular Muslim community but as the property of a completely different religious organization – the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia. A number of circumstances indicate that this latter organization is under the full control of the government.

Predictably, the government used these so-called negotiations to protract the process and cover up the crime. It did not deliver on its illegal promise to purchase a new building for the Muslims.

Seeing that the government condoned the crime, Orthodox priest Nikoloz Getsadze and his followers continued to persecute the Muslim community into 2024. On March 8, 2024, the abbot of the Zarzma Monastery, along with dozens of local residents, again attacked the Muslims gathered for Friday prayer in Adigeni, threatening them with violence. Getsadze and his followers demanded that Muslims leave the private property and stop Friday prayers. The law enforcement authorities did not take legal actions against the attackers this time either.⁴³

Representatives of both local and central authorities have been involved in the coercion of Muslims, presented by the government as “negotiations.” Active participants in this process are the State Agency for Religious Issues, operating under the Prime Minister and its chairperson, Zaza Vashakmadze,⁴⁴

41 See the TDI report on freedom of religion or belief in 2010–2019, pg. 86; https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi-report-freedom_of_religion_in_georgia_2010-2019.pdf

42 “Muslims in Adigeni are forced to abandon their prayer house and religious school – locals cite the dissatisfaction of Orthodox clerics as the reason,” Samkhretis Karibche, 31.07.2023, available in Georgian at: <https://sknews.ge/ka/news/39410>

43 Adigeni Muslims Urged to Limit Friday Prayer Gatherings Amidst Tensions, Civil.ge, 15 March 2024 <https://civil.ge/archives/587273>

44 Vashakmadze accuses and threatens Muslim religious servant Merab Mikeladze: “We believe that Merab Mikeladze will bear all the expected responsibility that could theoretically follow from this in the future, and therefore, this move on their part can be seen as destruction and the prospect of aggravation,” Samkhretis Karibche, 03.04.2024, available in Georgian at: <https://sknews.ge/ka/news/40796>

the mayor of Adigeni Gocha Kimadze,⁴⁵ and the governor of Samtskhe–Javakheti region, Besik Amiranashvili.⁴⁶ The government tries to protect the alleged offenders and grossly violates legislation and human rights, which constitutes the alleged misconduct by state officials.

5.3. The Vitaly Safarov murder case

The issue of the qualification of the crime in the case of the murder of Vitaly Safarov, committed on the grounds of ethnic intolerance and anti-Semitism, remained a problem during the reporting period.

Vitaly Safarov, a 25-year-old citizen of Georgia and human rights defender was murdered on September 30, 2018. The factual and legal circumstances of the case indicated that two persons were involved in the murder, and the motive of the crime, based on the perpetrators’ anti-Semitic and xenophobic statements, was intolerance. In addition, it was evident that the perpetrators had links to neo-Nazi groups.⁴⁷

However, in 2019, the Tbilisi City Court acquitted the defendants of the charge of racial, religious, national, or ethnic intolerance and found them guilty only of killing committed by a group of persons, sentencing them to 15 years in prison. On February 16, 2023, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals upheld the lower court’s decision. With its 21 September decision, the Supreme Court found the cassation appeal inadmissible, thus leaving into force lower courts’ decisions whereby the defendants were acquitted of the charge of killing Vitaly Safarov on the grounds of racial, religious, national, and ethnic intolerance.⁴⁸

45 Adigeni Mayor Gocha Kimadze: *“It will be closed and prayers will not be held – this is our great desire... We do not interfere, if they want to pray, let them do so, but... this mosque was opened in violation of the law, and this is what worries you, and I under stand you too,”* – Radio Liberty, 13.03.2024; Available in Georgian at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/დაბა-ადიგენში-მუსლიმთა-სახალხო-ლოცვა-ადარ-იქნება/32858798.html>

“This is a house, and it will not operate as a mosque; if they so desire, a mosque will be opened in any village where the Muslim community resides, and the mayor’s office will assist them in this matter... This mosque that is operating there, will not bring peace. Therefore, I believe that there is no need for it to be located here,” Samkhretis Karibche, 09.03.2024; Available in Georgian at: <https://sknews.ge/ka/news/40636>

46 The so-called negotiations are being held in the administration of the governor. See the news of Samkhretis Karibche, “Why the talks between Merab Mikeladze and the state did not take place” (05.04.2024). Available in Georgian at <https://sknews.ge/ka/news/40824>

47 Murder of human rights defender, Vitali Safarov Case details and legal assessment, humanrights.ge, September 5, 2019; Available at: <http://www.humanrights.ge/index.php?a=main&pid=19945&lang=eng>

48 Decision of the Supreme Court of Georgia on the case №259ap-23 Tbilisi k.a. 259ap-23, September 21, 2023; Available in Georgian at: <https://bit.ly/4aRbHBs>

6. Religion in public schools

According to the Law of Georgia on General Education, one of the key principles for public schools is religious neutrality and non-discrimination, which implies a secular learning environment based on the principle of equality for all pupils. Nevertheless, indoctrination, proselytism, and violation of religious neutrality remain serious problems in public schools.

According to information provided to the TDI by representatives of minority religions, it is still a common practice for public schools to display religious symbols for non-academic use, as well as to differentiate pupils representing particular religious communities on religious grounds. However, the Ministry of Education, despite this problem, does not take proactive measures to prevent and eliminate such practices. The rate of complaints from pupils/their parents also remains low, which can be explained by a lack of trust and a fear of greater stigmatization.

According to the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia,⁴⁹ in 2023 the internal audit of the Ministry did not examine a single case of religious or ethnic intolerance and/or religious and ethnic discrimination in public schools, as well as violations of religious neutrality, religious proselytism, and indoctrination in schools.

During the reporting period, according to media reports, a new optional/voluntary subject was planned to be introduced in schools in cooperation and coordination with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth and the LEPL National Center for Teacher Professional Development.⁵⁰ According to the Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia,⁵¹ teachers and clergymen selected through a competition announced by the Patriarchate were undergoing training. According to the plan, a “values-based educational club” was to be launched, for which, according to a September 2023 statement, 25 pilot public schools had been selected to teach an optional/voluntary subject if the schools wished. In 2023, the TDI repeatedly requested public information on this issue from the Ministry of Education and the LEPL National Center for Teacher Professional Development. However, in complete disregard of the legislation, these institutions have not provided the TDI with the information requested.

It is a commendable fact that since 2019, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the Public Defender, has involved human rights experts in the process of approving school textbooks. The hu-

⁴⁹ Letter MES 6 24 0000109212 from the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth, February 2, 2022.

⁵⁰ “A new project on retraining teachers, organized by the Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia, has started,” June 19, 2023; Available in Georgian at: <https://sazu.ge/posts/post/750>

⁵¹ “The second phase of teacher retraining, organized by the Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia, has begun,” Imedi TV company, September 16, 2023; Available in Georgian at: <https://bit.ly/4aUn4sq>

man rights and non-discrimination criteria provide for the assessment of textbook content from the perspective of tolerance and a culture of diversity. The process of textbook evaluation and revision continued in 2023. In particular, experts were involved in the process of approving school textbooks for grades 11 and 1, as well as some subjects for grades 4 and 10.

The TDI requested information from the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth to find out whether the approval process involving human rights experts continued into 2024. The Ministry responded to the TDI that the approval process has ceased as the revision of subject standards is underway, and once this is finalized, the issue of textbook development will be reviewed and further steps will be outlined.⁵²

■ 52 Letter MES 2 24 0000436567 from the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth, April 17, 2024.

7. Anti-Semitism

After the terrorist organization Hamas launched an attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, anti-Semitic hate rhetoric strengthened in Georgia, as well as in the world. Tolerance and Diversity Institute has been observing and studying anti-Semitism cases in Georgia for several years. The overview below is based on the main anti-Semitic messages spread in Georgian social networks in October–November 2023 observed by TDI.

Posts and comments spread on social media often featured religious stereotypes and collective blaming of the Jewish nation (for example, blaming Jews collectively for the crucifixion of Christ and portraying them as persecutors of Christians).

“A nation that crucified Jesus Christ and instead of repenting continues to spit on him to the present day... A nation that has been working for thousands of years to make the Antichrist king... About this nation, some Georgians say, ‘God is your defense,’ ‘God is your help,’ and the like...”

“After the crucifixion of Christ, Israel was invaded and occupied, and the Jews were scattered throughout the world. God punished them in this way because the Jews crucified Jesus!”

“Pedigree-less and bloodless sub-humans, you tortured and killed Christ, and who are you waiting for now, dumbasses?”

Some of the users even justified the holocaust or denied it altogether and declared it as a fabricated lie by the Jews.

“What Nazi Germany did to the Jews – but the point is that it did not; all of this is also Jewish fairy tales.”

Conspiracy theories about the Jews were also common in the spread narrative as if the Jews controlled and ruled the whole world.

“This is the country that manages the largest flows of world finance and secretly runs the world.”

“I never justify war and violence, but Israel and the Jews are the sources of many vices; just take the Freemasons as an example; all the great Freemasons are Jews, and we all know what the Freemasons are constantly striving for.”

Among the social media accounts that posted antisemitic statements are pages that have tens of thousands of followers. Various human rights defenders also spread anti-Semitic statements.

On January 12, 2024, the ambassador of Israel responded in a Facebook post to the anti-Semitic and hateful comments made by the musician Erekle Deisadze. In his comment, Deisadze refers to the state of Israel as an occupier and justifies the terrorist attack of Hamas. There's also a call in his statement that *“All Zionists must be exterminated.”* In response, the Ambassador of Israel said: *“Well, the mask has been removed. Another purported “human rights defender” turns out to be just your regular Antisemite... Shame on you, Erekle Deisadze, for your antisemitic, ugly words calling for the killing of all “Zionists,” which basically includes all citizens of Israel and a majority of Jews worldwide.”*⁵³

Similar to previous years,⁵⁴ antisemitic statements were shared by Orthodox Clergymen. In his post, the clergyman, Archpriest Basil Akhvlediani,⁵⁵ whose Facebook page has 9,300 likes and 11,000 followers, repeats a dangerous, widespread religious stereotype about Jews, according to which the Jewish people are collectively responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, which is the most widespread manifestation of antisemitism.

“In the end, the ultimate punishment of Christ’s crucifiers, the Jews, will be the placement of a decorated armchair in Jerusalem for Antichrist ...!”

Archpriest Basil Akhvlediani also denies the idea of a sovereign state of Israel:

“For your information, the Jewish nation, according to its fundamental canonical teaching, has no right to have its own, separate sovereign state, as confirmed by rabbis themselves...”

Another Georgian Orthodox Church clergyman, Giorgi Samsonadze, also shared a video and a post on his Facebook page in which the Jewish nation was accused of crucifying Christ and alleged that the Jews persecuted Christ and Christians.⁵⁶

It should be noted that antisemitic statements by high-ranking clerics of the Georgian Orthodox Church have increased since 2020.⁵⁷ Neither the Patriarchate nor the government have condemned the increasing antisemitic remarks. Anti-Semitism is an extremely acute form of hatred and hate speech, which has led humankind to the most severe and tragic events. The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) underlines the importance of fighting hate speech by the states and calls on public figures, especially politicians and religious leaders, not only to condemn hate speech but also to reinforce those values that hate speech threatens.⁵⁸

53 Statement by the Israeli Ambassador in Georgia (the Facebook post of the Israeli Embassy), 12 January 2024: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/TYFJMvk3BipTqL8x/>

54 See TDI’s report: Freedom of Religion and Belief in Georgia 2022, pg. 32 http://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi_forb_report_2022_eng.pdf

55 Source: Facebook post by Basil Akhvlediani, October 2023.

56 Source: Facebook post by Giorgi Samsonidze, October 2023.

57 See: Anti-Semitism of the Church, TDI, 2021 <https://tdi.ge/en/statement/antisemitism-church-updated-summary>

58 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), General Policy Recommendations N15, Rec. 4.

- **A physical manifestation of antisemitism in Tbilisi**

On October 19, 2023, a video of the Israeli flag being torn down, trampled with feet, and desecrated circulated on social media. The incident took place outside the State Medical University, on Vazha-Pshavela Avenue in Tbilisi, where the flag of Israel was hoisted in front of the building of the educational institution.

According to the media report, the Ministry of Internal Affairs opened an investigation into the desecration of the Israeli flag under Article 174 of the Administrative Offenses Code (Desecration of official symbols of the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or other international organizations or desecration of the flag or coat of arms of other states); four people were fined, and the Israeli flag was hoisted back at the University.⁵⁹

59 Administrative Proceedings Initiated Against Foreign Students for Desecration of Israeli Flag, Civil.ge, 20 October 2023
<https://civil.ge/archives/564603>

