



# Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia

2024  
report





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# KEY FINDINGS

## STATE'S RELIGIOUS POLICY

2024 in Georgia was marked by repression led by the ruling party Georgian Dream, gross violations of fundamental human rights, and an intentional rejection of the country's Euro-integration path. Within these repressive processes, the issue of freedom of religion or belief, already insufficiently addressed in political and public discourse, was virtually excluded from public discussion and adequate evaluation.

In May 2024, the law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" (commonly referred to as the Russian Law), adopted by the Georgian Dream government, violated freedom of religion and belief alongside other fundamental human rights and endangered the activities of religious organizations.

The Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence poses a threat to the freedom of religion or belief and the right of individuals to express their religion or belief freely, without fear or stigma, both individually and in community with others. It interferes with religious activities and autonomy and grants the state leverage to collect special category personal data concerning individuals' religious affiliation and sensitive personal information.

In 2024, Georgian Dream announced an initiative to amend the Constitution of Georgia to declare Orthodox Christianity as the state religion. In reality, this initiative risked limiting the independence of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and subordinating it to the state. Ultimately, this attempt failed, as it was critically assessed and did not gain the full support of the GOC.

During the reporting period, the role and activities of the State Agency for Religious Issues remained problematic. The agency does not serve to protect human rights and freedoms, but is viewed as a mechanism of control over non-Orthodox religious organizations. The agency did not express any position on the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, which obligates religious organizations to register in a discrediting registry as “organizations serving the interests of a foreign power.” The agency’s negative and anti-human rights role was also evident in the 2023–2024 case of continued persecution and rights violations against Muslims in Adigeni.

The alleged illegal surveillance and wiretapping by the State Security Service remained uninvestigated. This case became known in 2021 through the leak of over 50,000 files, which contained personal data, private communications, and information about the private lives of individuals, most of them related to religious issues.

There was significant regression in court decisions regarding religious freedom and discrimination on religious grounds. The prevailing trend shows that even if lower courts issue favorable decisions, higher courts tend to reverse them, harming human rights and freedoms. In most new cases, courts issue negative decisions from the outset.

### **PRE- AND POST ELECTION ENVIRONMENT**

During the period before and after the 2024 parliamentary elections, the Georgian government and the Georgian Dream party actively employed anti-democratic and anti-Western propaganda against human rights, with the central themes being the protection of the Orthodox Church, “family values,” and “traditions.” On the other hand, many sermons and public speeches by Orthodox clergy included rhetoric supportive of the Georgian Dream government and hostile toward civil society, human rights, and the West.

A positive trend is the emergence of statements from some Orthodox clergy and representatives of other religious denominations condemning violence against pro-European demonstrators, calling for the release of political prisoners, and supporting Georgia’s European course.

## DISCRIMINATION IN GEORGIAN LEGISLATION

Discriminatory norms in legislation remain a problem, as they establish differentiated approaches toward religious minorities and grant exclusive privileges and rights only to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Discrimination remains in the defence, tax, state property and labour legislation.

To this day, legislative and executive bodies have taken no steps to eliminate this discrimination from the legal framework. On the contrary, during the reporting period, the government continued to adopt new discriminatory and human rights-violating legislation, an example of which is the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (often referred to as the “Russian law”) adopted in 2024.

## PROPERTY RIGHTS OF MINORITY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

For minority religious communities, one of the most pressing issues continues to be problems related to religious property and places of worship. Religious communities face obstacles both in reclaiming property confiscated during the Soviet era and in the process of constructing new houses of worship.

During the reporting period, the issue of constructing a new mosque in Batumi by the Muslim community remained unresolved. The Supreme Court’s decision, along with the repeated indefinite postponements of the lawsuit in the Kutaisi Court of Appeals, contributes to both the protraction of the case and the ongoing systemic violation of Muslim rights.

During the reporting period, the case of the Evangelical Church of Georgia remained ongoing, in which serious violations of freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental rights of the Evangelical Church’s congregation were disguised as a controversial civil law dispute.

## STATE FUNDING OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

As in previous years, the State continued to finance the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). In addition to the 25 million GEL, the Government of Georgia allocated another 39,364,180 GEL and a large amount of real estate to the GOC.

In 2024, the Muslim community of Georgia received 4,150,000 GEL; the Armenian Apostolic Christian community of Georgia received 1,100,000 GEL; the Roman Catholic community of Georgia received 700,000 GEL; and the Jewish community received 550,000 GEL. As a result, the total annual funding allocated to these four religious communities amounted to 6.5 million GEL. This funding was granted to the four religious communities as symbolic compensation for the damage inflicted during the Soviet era. The state's recognition of only these four religious communities as victims of Soviet repressions must be regarded as a discriminatory approach, since many other religious associations were also subjected to persecution under the Soviet regime.

## CRIMES MOTIVATED BY RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

As in previous years, inadequate responses to crimes motivated by religion remain a problematic issue, manifesting in failure to initiate investigations, ineffective investigations, delays in granting victim status to those affected, and a protracted process of initiating criminal prosecution.

In 2024, as in 2023, the authorities deliberately failed to initiate investigations into violent threats, hate speech, and interference in religious activities directed against Muslim believers in Adigeni. Moreover, the involvement of various government bodies in this case indicates attempts to cover up the crimes and prevent Muslims from exercising their lawful rights.

## RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Indoctrination, proselytism, and violations of religious neutrality in public schools remain significant challenges to this day. Despite the existence of the problem, the Ministry of Education does not proactively detect or prevent such incidents.



In 2024, at the public school in the village of Artsivani, in the Tsalka municipality, where the majority of teachers and pupils are Muslim, Orthodox clergy blessed the teachers' lounge and classrooms, placed stickers with cross images on the walls, sprinkled holy water on the pupils (including Muslim pupils), and performed anointing rituals. The Public Defender prolonged the case review for 10 months and made the final decision of closing the case.

During the reporting period, the Ministry of Education stopped the textbook approval process and the involvement of human rights experts in it. The ruling Georgian Dream party developed a new document outlining the national goals of general education, which substantively reflects the value changes frequently expressed in its narrative.

In 2024, collaboration between the Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarchate and the Ministry of Education was intensive. The Patriarchate actively met with teachers, and meetings of the "Value Club" project were held in 20 pilot schools.

## ANTISEMITISM

During the reporting period, the mother of Vitaly Safarov, Marina Alanakian, filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights regarding the murder of her son, which had been committed with motives of ethnic intolerance and antisemitism.

During the reporting period, antisemitic messages were present in the statements of various public figures, including propagandists affiliated with "Georgian Dream," as well as in materials circulated on social media.

# 1. STATE POLICY IN THE AREA OF RELIGION IN 2024

## 1.1. THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY AND THE STATE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The year 2024 in Georgia was marked by the complete dismantling of democratic institutions by the ruling party, Georgian Dream, accompanied by repression, gross violations of fundamental human rights, and a deliberate rejection of the country's European integration path.<sup>1</sup> The government's authoritarian tendencies were evident in the blatant violations of the core democratic principles during parliamentary elections,<sup>2</sup> the suppression of political competition and persecution of opponents,<sup>3</sup> the infringement on freedoms of assembly and expression,<sup>4</sup> as well as the torture, inhumane, and degrading treatment of protesters.<sup>5</sup>

- 1 On November 28, 2024, the Prime Minister of Georgian Dream, Irakli Kobakhidze, announced that the Georgian government was refusing to open negotiations with the European Union until the end of 2028. This statement triggered an immediate public outcry, followed by continuous daily demonstrations in Tbilisi and various regions of Georgia. "GD Aborts EU Accession," Civil.ge, November 28, 2024. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/638801>
- 2 Georgia, Parliamentary elections, 26 October 2024: Final Report of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR). Available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/584029>
- 3 "Our delegation was particularly alarmed by the public statements made during the campaign by the ruling party calling for a ban on key opposition," Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Observation Report of the 26 October 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia, Par. 76, available at: <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33924/html>
- 4 "Human Rights Crisis in Georgia Following the 2024 Parliamentary Elections," a joint special report of NGOs, Chapter 2.1., available at: [https://admin.gyla.ge/uploads\\_script/publications/pdf/HUMAN%2520RIGHTS%2520CRISIS%2520IN%2520GEORGIA%2520-%2520final.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1748856844078056&usg=AOvVaw0Uy-qltks46eLlcOFja\\_Uf](https://admin.gyla.ge/uploads_script/publications/pdf/HUMAN%2520RIGHTS%2520CRISIS%2520IN%2520GEORGIA%2520-%2520final.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1748856844078056&usg=AOvVaw0Uy-qltks46eLlcOFja_Uf)
- 5 Ibid., Chapter 2.2.

The Georgian Dream government passed multiple laws aimed at restricting the activities of independent civil society and media and destroying these institutions.<sup>6</sup> Particularly noteworthy is the 2024 law “On Transparency of Foreign Influence” (known as the “Russian law”), which aims to discredit, control, and interfere with the work of civil society and media organizations.<sup>7</sup> The government responded to peaceful civic protests against this law with unjustified and disproportionate force and deliberately hindered the country’s European integration through undemocratic steps.<sup>8</sup>

These developments further solidified the already existing trend that the goal of the Georgian Dream government is to destroy democracy in Georgia, gain full control over state institutions, and alter the course of the country’s Western integration. In the context of such repressive processes, the issue of freedom of religion or belief, which already lacked proper attention in political and public circles, was effectively left out of public discussions and adequate evaluation. For example, the Russian law adopted by the Georgian Dream also applies to religious organizations, yet it has not been adequately addressed either locally or internationally (see the following subsection for details). A persistently tense, polarized, and problem-ridden political environment creates favorable conditions for an authoritarian-leaning government to increase pressure on religious organizations and individuals, and to remove the issue of protecting freedom of religion or belief from the political agenda.

## 1.2. THE LAW ON TRANSPARENCY OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE (“RUSSIAN LAW”) AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

The Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (commonly referred to as the “Russian Law”), adopted by the Georgian Dream government in May 2024, alongside other fun-

6 “The Path to Dictatorship: Review of Georgian Dream’s Recent Repressive Legislative Initiatives,” Transparency International Georgia, available at: <https://transparency.ge/en/post/path-dictatorship-review-georgian-dreams-recent-repressive-legislative-initiatives>

7 Georgia, Urgent Opinion on the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, Venice Commission, 21 May 2024, available at: [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI\(2024\)013-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI(2024)013-e) Urgent Opinion on the Law of Georgia “On transparency of Foreign Influence”, OSCE/ODIHR, 30 May 2024, available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/d/569922.pdf>

8 Human Rights Center, State of Human Rights in Georgia, 2024 report, chapter 1, available at: <https://www.hrc.ge/files/381annual2024geo.pdf>

damental rights, infringes on freedom of religion or belief and poses a threat to the activities of religious organizations.

The law provides for the creation of a discriminatory and stigmatizing registry for non-profit (non-commercial) legal entities and media organizations. Any organization that receives more than 20% of its annual funding from foreign sources is required to register as an “organization serving the interests of a foreign power” and to submit relevant declarations to the state. The law imposes heavy financial penalties, monitoring, and control, and obliges any individual or legal entity to provide the state, upon request, with any information, including personal data (including special category personal data).

The law makes exceptions only for the Georgian National Sports Federation and blood bank establishments. All other types of non-profit (non-commercial) legal entities, including religious organizations, are required to register as organizations serving the interests of a foreign power.

### **Which Religious Organizations Are Affected by the Law**

According to Article 1509<sup>1</sup> of the Civil Code of Georgia, religious communities may choose their preferred legal form: 1. A non-profit (non-commercial) legal entity; 2. A legal entity of public law; 3. Or operate without registration, as an unregistered association. Accordingly, the Russian Law applies unconditionally to all religious organizations registered as non-profit (non-commercial) legal entities if more than 20% of their annual funding comes from foreign sources. The fate of religious organizations registered as legal entities of public law is also ambiguous as under civil legislation, despite their designation, they are essentially private legal entities: the Law of Georgia “On Legal Entities of Public Law” does not apply to them, and their rights and responsibilities are defined by the provisions of the Civil Code that regulate private legal entities. Therefore, under the current undemocratic governance, the authorities may decide to extend the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence to religious organizations registered as public legal entities as well.

There is no official data on the number of religious organizations that hold the status of a non-profit (non-commercial) legal entity. According to the National Agency of Public

Registry, the agency does not maintain records based on this criterion.<sup>9</sup> However, according to TDI, at least several dozen religious organizations of various denominations in Georgia hold the status of a non-profit (non-commercial) legal entity.

In addition, a large number of religious communities have affiliated social, charitable, and educational organizations that are registered as non-profit legal entities. International grants and donations are critically important for their social work. However, the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence classifies these organizations as “serving the interests of a foreign power” and imposes heavy and stigmatizing obligations on them.

### **What Threats the Law Poses to Religious Organizations and Freedom of Religion**

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) protect freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including its collective aspect, which allows people to exercise this freedom in community with others. Additionally, articles 22 of the ICCPR and 11 of the ECHR also protect the right to freedom of assembly and association. These fundamental rights are likewise guaranteed by the Constitution of Georgia. Access to financial resources is part of these rights. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief affirms that freedom of religion includes the right of individuals and organizations to solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions (Article 6). The European Court of Human Rights has explained that economic, financial, or fiscal measures imposed against religious associations may violate rights protected under Article 9 of the Convention, especially if such measures obstruct access to essential resources or hinder the association’s religious activity.<sup>10</sup>

9 Letter No114285 of May 28, 2024, from the LEPL National Agency of Public Registry.

10 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints v. the United Kingdom, 2014, § 30; Cumhuriyetçi Eğitim ve Kültür Merkezi Vakfı v. Turkey, 2014, § 41

## The Law on “Transparency of Foreign Influence”:

- **Leads to stigmatization and reputational damage**, since the designation “organization serving the interests of a foreign power” implies being an “agent” acting against one’s own state. In the Georgian context, the term carries a particularly negative connotation, as since Soviet times, an “agent” is regarded as a person engaged in espionage and hostile activities against his or her homeland. For years, religious minorities have faced discrimination, persecution, and hate speech, often framed by populist and pseudo-religious narratives that depict so-called Western religions as agents of the West, and Islamic religious groups as agents of Turkey or Iran. Registering religious organizations as “organizations serving the interests of a foreign power” will therefore disproportionately affect religious minorities who are already often targets of persecution and stigmatization in Georgia.
- **Threatens the existence of religious and related charitable and educational organizations**, since those organizations that refuse to register under the law may face large financial penalties, which will make their operations impossible. On the other hand, organizations that do register in the Public Registry may struggle with the stigmatizing and degrading treatment by the state, as well as with direct interference in their autonomy and the religious freedom of their members.
- **Undermines the freedom of religion or belief** and the right of individuals to express their faith freely and without fear or stigma, both individually and in association with others.
- **Interferes with religious activities and autonomy**, as the law allows the state to inspect the organization’s finances and demand any information, including personal data of a sensitive or special category. Religious organizations typically rely on donations from their members.
- Through such monitoring and information gathering, the state gains a tool **to intrude on individuals’ protected right to belief and religion, their private lives, and collect sensitive personal data of a special category regarding their religious beliefs.**

Furthermore, the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence is primarily aimed at persecuting and dismantling civil society organizations working on human rights. For years, these NGOs, including TDI, have been supporting vulnerable groups, religious organizations and individuals in defending their rights; they monitor, document, and advocate against state policy failures, discrimination, and hate-motivated crimes; they provide free legal aid to victims and help foster civic awareness and a culture of tolerance. The weakening or elimination of these human rights organizations would leave religious minorities and other vulnerable groups even more defenseless.

### 1.3. THE GEORGIAN DREAM'S INITIATIVE TO DECLARE ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY THE STATE RELIGION

In August 2024, the ruling party, Georgian Dream, announced a constitutional amendment initiative aimed at declaring Orthodox Christianity the official state religion of Georgia. The ruling party presented this proposal as a step toward “protecting national values and traditions,” and part of their election promises to strengthen the role of the Orthodox Church in society. The party’s founder and oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili, stated that Christianity, alongside the homeland and language, formed the pillar of Georgian identity.<sup>11</sup> In reality, however, the initiative posed the risk of limiting the independence of the Orthodox Church, subordinating it to the state, and weakening its institutional strength.<sup>12</sup>

In his speech during a Georgian Dream campaign event in Ambrolauri on August 25, Ivanishvili said that “there is one more issue of existential importance for our country and faith.”<sup>13</sup> The next day, on August 26, media outlets reported that the Georgian Dream aimed to declare Orthodox Christianity the state religion and that discussions were already taking place within the Patriarchate.<sup>14</sup> Over the following days, several high-ranking clergy and representatives of the Patriarchate confirmed the existence of such discussions. On August 29, a meeting was held at the Patriarchate, attended exclusively by bishops.<sup>15</sup>

11 Ivanishvili Says the Role of Orthodox Church to Strengthen, civil.ge, August 31, 2024, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/622173>

12 “This will be a step against the church” - Talks about the state religion ahead of the elections, Radio Liberty, August 28, 2024, available at: <https://bit.ly/4k7J73j>

13 “Bidzina Ivanishvili Drops “Faith” Hint About the Planned Constitutional Change,” civil.ge, August 25, 2024, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/621542>

14 “Georgian Dream’s Unorthodox Offer on ‘State Religion’ Scares Church”, civil.ge, 30 August 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/622020>

15 Ibid.

Many Orthodox clergy and theologians responded critically to the initiative. They argued that the government's attempt sought to undermine an independent institution and revoke its autonomy.<sup>16</sup>

On August 30, a final meeting took place between representatives of the Patriarchate and government officials, after which, instead of declaring Orthodox Christianity the state religion, different agreement terms were released. According to Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze, the state and the church agreed that the Constitution would include language stating that "Orthodoxy is the pillar of the state." Attendees reportedly included Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, along with Zviadadze himself, Patriarchal Locum Tenens Shio Mujiri, Archbishop Teodore Chuadze, the Patriarch's secretary Mikael Botkovieli, and Andria Jaghmaidze, head of the Patriarchate's public relations office.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, Ivanishvili and his government failed to gain the full support of the Church, and their populist attempt to subordinate the Orthodox Church to the state proved unsuccessful.

Accordingly, the government revised its messaging the next day. On August 31, during a campaign event in Ozurgeti, Bidzina Ivanishvili stated that "the mission of Orthodox Christianity as a pillar of the Georgian state identity will be clearly reflected in the Constitution. The special role of the Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia and in the contemporary life of our country will also be emphasized." He described the purpose of the constitutional change as further strengthening the constitutional status of Orthodoxy and the Orthodox Church.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that Article 8 of the Constitution of

Georgia already governs the relationship between the state and the Orthodox Church, recognizing "the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia, and its independence from the state."

16 "GOC Dissatisfied with GD's Alleged Plans to Recognize Orthodox Christianity as State Religion," civil.ge, August 28, 2024, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/621777>

17 "Protopresbyter: we agreed on the wording that Orthodoxy is the pillar of the state," Formula, September 1, 2024, available at: <https://formulanews.ge/News/116389>

18 Ivanishvili Says the Role of Orthodox Church to Strengthen, civil.ge, August 31, 2024, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/622173>



#### 1.4. THE STATE AGENCY FOR RELIGIOUS ISSUES - A REPRESSIVE INSTRUMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT

During the reporting period, the role and activities of the State Agency for Religious Issues remained problematic, as instead of protecting human rights and freedoms, the agency is viewed as a mechanism for controlling non-Orthodox religious organizations.

The State Agency for Religious Issues, a Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL), was established by the Georgian Dream government in 2014 under the authority of the Prime Minister. From the outset, its mandate was vague. Formally, according to its statute, the agency is tasked with informational, research, academic-educational, and advisory activities in the field of religion for the Government and the Prime Minister of Georgia.<sup>19</sup> Over the years, in government action plans on human rights protection, the agency has been specified as the entity responsible for fulfilling numerous obligations, particularly in the areas of ensuring religious freedom and supporting religious organizations. These included reviewing relevant legislation to ensure full enjoyment of freedom of religion and belief, providing legislative recommendations when needed, working to eliminate inequality in the law, determining historical ownership of religious buildings, and facilitating property transfers, etc. However, in the ten years of its existence, the agency has failed to fulfill any of these obligations. On the contrary, it has consistently created obstacles to improving legislative standards on freedom of religion or belief and to eliminating discrimination. The agency's activities and rhetoric are entirely disconnected from human rights and view religious minorities through the illusory lens of "security protection."<sup>20</sup>

In addition, the agency often claims that it facilitates the transfer of religious buildings to religious communities. These statements are misleading and inaccurate. First, the agency systematically avoids returning historic religious buildings confiscated during the Soviet era to their rightful owners, who have been requesting their return since the

19 Ordinance of the Government of Georgia No 177, On the Establishment of the Legal Entity of Public Law – the State Agency for Religious Issues and the Approval of Its statute," February 20, 2014, available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/2253315?publication=0>

20 For detailed evaluation of the mandate and activities of the State Agency for Religious Issues see TDI's 2010-2019 report, "Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia," chapter 1.2, available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi-report-freedom\\_of\\_religion\\_in\\_georgia\\_2010-2019.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi-report-freedom_of_religion_in_georgia_2010-2019.pdf)

restoration of independence. As for property “transfers,” unlike the Orthodox Church, minority religious communities are granted only temporary usage rights, not ownership. The “returned” properties, which continue to be owned by the state, typically are buildings already in the de facto possession of religious communities and already in use for worship. Since these buildings are transferred only for temporary use and not ownership, religious communities are unable to manage them fully. This allows the state to retain the right to reclaim the property and to exert control and influence over the religious organizations.

In 2024, the problematic role of the agency became evident on several occasions. According to its statute, one of the agency’s functions is to draft legal acts and develop recommendations for addressing the problems of religious communities. However, similar to previous years, the agency did not take a stance on any fundamental issues of religious freedom, including the 2024 law on the “Transparency of Foreign Influence” that obliges religious organizations to register in a stigmatizing registry as “organizations serving the interests of a foreign power” and subjects them to monitoring, severe financial penalties, and the disclosure of special category personal data. To find out the agency’s position on the impact of this law on religious freedom and religious organizations, TDI submitted a written question to the agency, but the agency did not respond.

The agency’s negative and anti-human rights role was evident in the persecution and rights violations against Muslims in Adigeni during 2023–2024 (see section 6.2 for more details on the persecution of Muslims in Adigeni). The State Agency for Religious Issues and the local government in Adigeni referred to the process as “negotiations.” In reality, the agency actively participated in coercing the Muslim community to relinquish property and cease religious activities. The agency facilitated impunity for alleged crimes motivated by religious intolerance and legitimized discrimination. Even more disturbingly, it placed responsibility on the victims themselves.<sup>21</sup>

21 Chairman of the State Agency for Religious Issues, Zaza Vashakmadze: “Unfortunately, the proposal did not go through, and it was rejected by their side, which neither I nor the state expected. We believe that any possible responsibility that may arise from this situation in the future will theoretically fall on Merab Mikeladze [a representative of the Muslim community who has been subjected to systemic persecution and threats]. Therefore, this step taken by them may be considered an act of obstruction and a potential path toward escalation.” Samkhretis Karibche, April 3, 2024. Available at: <https://sknews.ge/ka/news/40796>

Thus, the State Agency for Religious Issues does not fulfill its mandated role and, in practice, functions as a government instrument for controlling minority religious communities and restricting their rights. Its work is not grounded in the protection of human rights, exceeds its advisory mandate, and instead contributes to the normalization of discrimination, impunity, and persecution.

### 1.5. ILLEGAL SURVEILLANCE, WIRETAPPING, AND BLACKMAIL

In 2021, more than 50,000 files allegedly documenting illegal surveillance and wiretapping by the State Security Service were anonymously leaked and disseminated. These leaked classified materials are evidence of large-scale and grave crimes committed by the authorities, pointing to systemic and ongoing unlawful practices. The files contained personal data, private communications, and information reflecting the private lives of specific individuals.<sup>22</sup> The vast majority of the materials were related to religious themes. The leaked materials reveal that for years, the government allegedly has been illegally eavesdropping on and surveilling representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church and other religious organizations, including high-ranking clergy, human rights defenders, members of NGOs working on issues of religion and religious freedom, diplomats, politicians, and journalists.

According to information provided to TDI by the Prosecutor's Office, as of February 5, 2025, a total of 118 individuals, including 14 clergymen, had been granted the status of victim in connection with the investigation into this crime. However, no criminal prosecution has been initiated against any individuals, and no one has been held accountable for this offense. The Prosecutor's Office states that the investigation is still ongoing.<sup>23</sup>

In July 2024, the Social Justice Center filed a case with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) regarding the mass illegal surveillance. Among the applicants are clergy members - Evangelical-Baptist Church Bishops Malkhaz Songulashvili and Rusudan Gotsiridze, Orthodox Church Deacon Giorgi Mamaladze, and nun Sidonia. The applicants

22 Statement of the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia, September 18, 2021, available at: <https://pog.gov.ge/news/https-pog-gov-ge-1-2?lng=eng>

23 Letter No 13/6254 of the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia, February 5, 2025.

claim that their right to respect for private life, protected under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, was violated.<sup>24</sup>

Given the Georgian Dream government's increasingly anti-democratic and repressive policies, it is reasonable to assume that illegal surveillance, eavesdropping, and blackmail continue on an even larger and more intensive scale.

## 1.6. THE GEORGIAN DREAM'S JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND ITS IMPACT ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION

An independent judiciary is the primary guarantee for the protection of human rights. In Georgia, alongside the regression of democracy, the degree of bias in the judicial system is deepening, and it is experiencing a significant crisis of public trust. According to the European Commission's report, the systemic challenges in terms of independence and impartiality remain unresolved.<sup>25</sup> Various international and local organizations identify informal influences within the judiciary as the main problem, and selective justice is cited as one of the proofs of such informal influence.<sup>26</sup> The U.S., the United Kingdom, and EU member states have imposed sanctions on influential judges suspected of carrying out political orders, due to "involvement in significant corruption."<sup>27</sup>

Against the backdrop of the Georgian Dream government's total control over democratic institutions, rapid democratic backsliding, and mass violations of human rights, significant regression is also observed in court rulings related to freedom of religion and religious discrimination. According to the existing trend, favorable decisions issued by lower courts are often overturned by higher courts to the detriment of human rights and freedoms; and in most newly initiated cases, unfavorable decisions are issued from the outset. To illustrate, here is a brief overview of trends from 2023–2024 in this regard:

24 "Social Justice Center files a complaint to the Strasbourg Court against mass illegal wire-tapping," July 09, 2024, available at: <https://bit.ly/3FaCbU1>

25 European Commission, Georgia 2024 Report, SWD(2024) 697 final, 2024

26 "Accessibility of Judicial Acts in cases of high public interest," The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), May 5, 2025, available at: <https://idfi.ge/en/accessibility-of-judicial-acts-in-cases-of-high-public-interest>

27 "Sanctioned Georgian Judges," Georgian Court Watch, December 19, 2024, available at: <https://courtwatch.ge/articles/sanctioned-judges>

- In the case of **building a new mosque in Batumi**, which concerns the Batumi City Hall's unsubstantiated and discriminatory refusal to issue a construction permit, hearings in the general courts have been delayed since 2017. The decisions of the first and second instance courts, which found discrimination by the municipality against Muslims, were overturned in 2023 by the Supreme Court with a new decision that was detrimental to fundamental rights to freedom of religion or belief and equality, and the case was returned to the Court of Appeals for reconsideration. (See Chapter 4.2 for details.)
- **In the case of the Evangelical Church of Georgia**, in 2022 the Tbilisi Court of Appeals reversed the decision of the first instance court and ordered Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili to pay back years' worth of church donations to the defendant. These donations were intended to complete construction of the church's first and only house of worship. The Supreme Court upheld the appellate court's unlawful decision in 2024. (See Chapter 4.3 for details.)
- **In the Jehovah's Witness blood transfusion case**, in 2023 the Georgian Supreme Court overturned a ruling of the Court of Appeals, which was precedent-setting in terms of the legality of a medical institution administering a blood transfusion to a Jehovah's Witness patient and the resulting violation of the patient's rights.<sup>28</sup> In 2022, the Court of Appeals held that administering the transfusion against the patient's clearly expressed will violated the patient's rights. However, the Supreme Court found the interference with the patient's right to personal autonomy proportionate, asserting it served the protection of life, personal autonomy, and the public interest. Therefore, the court concluded that no culpable violation of personal autonomy had occurred.<sup>29</sup>
- **In the case concerning the Marneuli Municipality's funding of religious organizations**, on December 8, 2022, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals annulled a lower court's ruling that found the provision of budgetary resources to a single religious organization to constitute religiously discriminatory treatment. On June 7, 2023, the Supreme Court of Georgia dismissed the cassation appeal as inadmissible, thereby

28 Decision of the Supreme Court of Georgia, Case No as-970-2022, Tbilisi, November 16, 2023, available at: <https://www.supremecourt.ge/ka/fullcase/73170/1>

29 See case details in 2022 report "Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia," TDI, 2023, pg. 28-29, available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi\\_forb\\_report\\_2022\\_eng.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi_forb_report_2022_eng.pdf)

leaving in force the appellate court's unlawful decision. (See Chapter 5 for more details.)

- **In the case of Muslim MP Taniel Nakaidze**, who in 2023 allegedly faced religious discrimination from Parliament, the Tbilisi City Court did not satisfy the lawsuit in 2024. (See Chapter 3.4 for details.)

As for the Constitutional Court, numerous cases concerning religious discrimination in legislation have remained pending for years without resolution, which contributes to the continued and systemic discrimination against religious minorities. (See Chapters 3.2 and 3.3 for more information on cases submitted to the Constitutional Court.)

## 2. PRE- AND POST-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT IN TERMS OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION, EQUALITY, AND SECULARISM

During the period before and after the 2024 parliamentary elections, the Georgian government and the Georgian Dream party actively employed anti-democratic and anti-Western propaganda against human rights, with the central themes being the protection of the Orthodox Church, “family values,” and “traditions.” On the other hand, many sermons and public speeches by Orthodox clergy included rhetoric supportive of the Georgian Dream government and hostile toward civil society, human rights, and the West. A positive trend is the emergence of statements from some Orthodox clergy and representatives of other religious denominations condemning violence against pro-European demonstrators, calling for the release of political prisoners, and supporting Georgia’s European course.

### 2.1. PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

#### **Promises to Declare Orthodox Christianity as the State Religion and Enshrine Its “Outstanding Role” in the Constitution**

In the pre-election period, the government made an attempt to declare Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, thereby to limit the independence and autonomy of the Orthodox Church and subject it to state control. However, many Orthodox clergy expressed skepticism and criticism toward this initiative, characterizing it as an attempt

to weaken the religious institution and abolish its independence.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, despite negotiations with the Patriarchate, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili and his government failed to gain the Church's support for this populist pre-election proposal to declare Orthodoxy as the state religion. Nevertheless, the ruling party continued to exploit the themes of the Church and Orthodoxy, pledging to enshrine the "outstanding role of Orthodox Christianity" in the constitution if they secured a constitutional majority.

### **Discrediting Civil Society, the Political Opposition, and Western Partners in an Anti-Western, Pseudo-Religious Context**

During the campaign, leaders of the Georgian Dream, under the guise of protecting the Church and "faith," portrayed human rights defenders, NGOs, political opponents, and critical media as Western "spy ring," "fighters against the Church," "blasphemers," "anti-national, anti-Church radical groups," and "hostile forces."

The government's anti-Western messaging and manipulation of religious themes were amplified by pro-government propaganda media. For example, a news anchor on Imedi TV referred to the political opposition as "enemies of the Church" and the ruling party as the "defender of the Church."<sup>31</sup>

In its election campaign banners and videos, the ruling party used footage showing bombed Ukrainian cities and destroyed churches by Russian occupation forces. In this case too, the Georgian Dream manipulated religion to hint to voters that electing the opposition would lead to war and the destruction of churches.<sup>32</sup>

30 "This will be a step against the church" - Talks about the state religion ahead of the elections, Anton Kokaia, Radio Liberty, August 28, 2024, available at: <https://bit.ly/4k7J73j>, also Nini Gabritchidze, "Georgian Dream's Unorthodox Offer on 'State Religion' Scares Church," Civil Georgia, August 30, 2024, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/622020>.

31 "The ruling team plans to protect another important institution for Georgia through the Constitution," Kronika report, TV channel Imedi, September 2, 2024, available at: <https://imedinews.ge/ge/politika/351091/mmartveli-gundi-saqartvelostvis-mnishvnelo-vani-kidev-erti-institutsiis-datsvas-konstitutsiit-apirebs-qronikis-siujeti>

32 Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), "Pre-Election Environment in terms of Freedom of Religion, Equality and Secularity", report covering September 25 to October 25, 2024, available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/filespreelection\\_monitoring\\_forb\\_equality\\_and\\_secularity\\_25\\_sept-25\\_oct\\_2024.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/filespreelection_monitoring_forb_equality_and_secularity_25_sept-25_oct_2024.pdf)



## The Patriarchate and Clergy of the Orthodox Church in the Ruling Party's Election Campaign

While exploiting religious themes for populist purposes, ruling party officials and government representatives actively visited churches and monasteries and appeared alongside Orthodox clergy. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze and Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili, along with other party members, visited numerous churches and monasteries.<sup>33</sup>

In parallel, many Orthodox clergy used their sermons and public statements to support the government and criticize civil society, human rights, and the West. For instance, in an October 22 statement, the Public Relations Office of the Georgian Patriarchate expressed support for both the ruling party and its propaganda initiatives.<sup>34</sup> The Public Relations Office of the Georgian Patriarchate also welcomed<sup>35</sup> the adoption of a legislative package on “family values and the protection of minors,”<sup>36</sup> which limits several fundamental human rights and legalizes censorship, and called it a step forward “for the well-being of society.” Central themes of the anti-Western messages of the majority of clergy were the Western-promoted “LGBT propaganda”<sup>37</sup> and Western interference in Georgia’s internal politics.<sup>38</sup>

33 TDI monitoring reports, “Pre-election environment in terms of freedom of religion or belief, equality and secularism,” the period [between 25 August and September 25, 2024](#), and the period between [September 25 and October 25, 2024](#).

34 Civil.ge. “Georgian Patriarchate Issues Statement Ahead of October 26 Elections.” October 22, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/629619>.

35 Marika Kartoziya, “Patriarchate: Enactment of Law On Family Values and Protection of Minors Positive Step Forward,” 1TV, October 4, 2024, available at: <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/patriarchate-enactment-of-law-on-family-values-%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8Band-protection-of-minors-positive-step-forward/>.

36 Legislative package, No 07-3/446/10, Parliament of Georgia, available at: <https://info.parliament.ge/#law-drafting/28706>

37 Andria Jagmaidze: “In today’s reality, the Church is very actively involved in public life, and including such a provision in the Constitution would be a recognition of that fact,” TV channel Imedi, September 2, 2024, available at: <https://imedinews.ge/ge/politika/351080/andria-jagmaidze-dgevandeli-realobashi-eklesias-aqvs-dzalian-aqtiuri-chartuloba-sazoga-doebriv-tskhovrebashi-da-konstitutsiashi-aseti-CHANATSERIS-GAKETEBI-IQNEBA-PAQTIS-KONSTATATSIA>

38 Bishop Iakob: “The elections will be over, and with God’s help, everything will be fine, because this is Georgia, and we, Georgians, will decide Georgia’s fate,” TV channel Imedi, August 28, 2024, available at: <https://imedinews.ge/ge/archevnebi-2024/350492/meupe-iakobi-dasruldeba-archevnebi-da-gvtis-shetsevnit-kvelaperi-kargad-iqneba-radgan-es-saqartvelo-da-qartvelebi-gadavtskvett-saqartvelos-beds>

## 2.2. POST-ELECTION PERIOD

### Manipulation of the Orthodox Church and Religion by Georgian Dream

On election day and in the period following it, the Georgian Dream's propaganda narrative emphasized that the parliamentary election was a choice "between godlessness and spirituality,<sup>39</sup> Christianity and unbelief, foreign identity and traditional values<sup>40</sup>," and claimed the opposition lost because it fought against traditions and the Orthodox Church.<sup>41</sup> Anti-Western messages frequently suggested that the West forces us to "abandon our faith and traditions"<sup>42</sup> and that NGOs, supported by the West,<sup>43</sup> fund radicalism and extremism, and attack the Church, the Patriarch, faith, and traditions.<sup>44</sup>

Georgian Dream and its satellite groups used various manipulative tactics, such as preemptively "appropriating" terms that their opponents could accuse them of (fascism, Soviet-style tactics, repressions) and, in order to confuse values, associating these terms

- 39 Elene Dobordjginidze, "Speaker Calls on Voters to Support GD," 1TV, October 26, 2024, <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/speaker-calls-on-voters-to-support-gd/>.
- 40 Shalva Papuashvili, "Our National Interest Is Simple – We Must Unite Our Homeland and Develop Our Country – This Is Our Georgian Dream: A United, Strong, Independent Georgia," Interpressnews, November 25, 2024, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/135259-shalva-papuashvili-our-national-interest-is-simple-we-must-unite-our-homeland-and-develop-our-country-this-is-our-georgian-dream-a-united-strong-independent-georgia/>.
- 41 Shalva Papuashvili: "We have seen in recent times how the opposition has been trying to insult everything that is Georgian, traditional, and historical. And we saw the response the Georgian people gave to all of this on October 26," TV channel Imedi, November 7, 2024, available at: <https://imedinews.ge/ge/politika/361160/shalva-papuashvili-chven-vk-hedavdit-bolo-periodshi-rogori-mtsdeloba-aris-opozitsiis-mkhridan-rom-kvelapers-qartuls-traditsiuls-istoriuls-miakenon-sheuratskhkopa-vnakhet-tu-ra-pasukhi-gastsa-am-kvelapers-26-oqtombers-qartvelma-khalkhma>
- 42 Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), "Post-Election Environment: Freedom of Religion or Belief, Equality, and Secularity", October 26 – November 26, 2024, [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/post-election\\_environment\\_forb\\_equality\\_and\\_secularity\\_26\\_oct\\_26\\_nov\\_2024\\_4.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/post-election_environment_forb_equality_and_secularity_26_oct_26_nov_2024_4.pdf), p.8
- 43 Kakha Kaladze on the bullying of journalists of certain media outlets: "I don't know where the embassies are hiding - they're not saying a word," Interpressnews, November 19, 2024, available at: <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/820858-kaxa-kalaze-rigi-mediasash-ualebis-zhurnalistebis-bulingze-ar-vici-saelchoebi-sad-arian-chamzvralebi-xmas-ar-igeben>
- 44 Kakha Kaladze: "The Americans also want to know how the funds are being spent and in which direction the money is flowing," TV channel Imedi, December 3, 2024, available at: <https://imedinews.ge/ge/politika/364847/kakha-kaladze-amerikelebsats-aqvt-survili-itsoden-tu-rogor-ikharjeba-tankhebi-da-ra-mimartulebit-miedineba-puli>

with ideologies they did not like (liberalism).<sup>45</sup>

### **The Patriarchate's Recognition of Georgian Dream's "Victory" and Critical Statements from Some Clergy**

On November 16, 2024, following the Central Election Commission's approval of the final results of the October 26 parliamentary elections, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II congratulated the Georgian Dream on its overwhelming "victory." On November 25, representatives of the Patriarchate attended the first session of the one-party parliament, including Archpriest Andria Jagmaidze, Archpriest Mikheil Botkoveli, and Protopresbyter Giorgi Zviadadze. The Georgian Dream used this declared support from the Patriarchate alongside its anti-Western and anti-opposition propaganda as a source of "popular legitimacy" for the elections.<sup>46</sup>

Some clergy linked the Georgian Dream's "victory" to the protection of the Church and preservation of Christian values and traditions, while presenting the political opposition and the West as collective forces fighting against those values.<sup>47</sup>

It is noteworthy that some Orthodox clergy made critical statements regarding the alleged large-scale fraud and outcome of the parliamentary elections.<sup>48</sup>

45 Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), "Post-Election Environment Regarding Freedom of Religion, Equality, and Secularity", November 26 - December 26, 2024, [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/post-election\\_environment\\_freedom\\_of\\_religion\\_or\\_belief\\_equality\\_and\\_secularity\\_november\\_26\\_-\\_december\\_26\\_2024.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/post-election_environment_freedom_of_religion_or_belief_equality_and_secularity_november_26_-_december_26_2024.pdf)

46 Mamuka Mdinaradze: "The elections are not only legitimized by the OSCE/ODIHR and observers, but they also have popular legitimacy, the high level of which is ensured by the position of the Patriarchate and the Patriarch," Interpressnews, November 17, 2024, available at: <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/820590-mamuka-mdinaraze-archevnebs-ara-mxolod-eutoodiris-da-damkvirveblebis-mxridan-akvs-legitimacia-aramed-saxalxo-legitimaciak-akvs-romlis-magal-xarisxs-uzrunvelqops-sapatriarkos-da-patriarkis-pozicia/>

47 Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), "Post-Election Environment: Freedom of Religion or Belief, Equality, and Secularity", October 26 - November 26, [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/post-election\\_environment\\_forb\\_equality\\_and\\_secularity\\_26\\_oct\\_26\\_nov\\_2024\\_4.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/post-election_environment_forb_equality_and_secularity_26_oct_26_nov_2024_4.pdf)

48 Ibid.

## Key Narratives about the Pro-European Demonstrations

Statements by Georgian Dream and some Orthodox clergy – “externally-driven process that is fighting against the Orthodox Church, traditions, and national sovereignty.”

Leaders of the Georgian Dream and its satellite parties sought to discredit the peaceful, pro-European protests that began on November 28, portraying demonstrators as “externally driven,” “fighting against Christian values,” and an anti-religious force. All these narratives were embedded in an anti-Western context, depicting Europe as a space hostile to Christianity, spirituality, and national values.

The propaganda of the Georgian Dream and its affiliated political entities was amplified by the Georgian Patriarchate, parts of the Orthodox clergy, and government-aligned propaganda media. Particularly prominent were coordinated disinformation campaigns portraying peaceful pro-European demonstrations as a “Red Terror” and the demonstrators as “Bolsheviks” attacking the Orthodox Church. For example, Archpriest Shalva Kekelia spread exaggerated and false claims that demonstrators attacked his church.<sup>49</sup> However, on December 17, he retracted his statements in an interview with the online outlet Publika, admitting that there was “no physical intrusion into the church” by demonstrators.<sup>50</sup>

## Statements from Orthodox Clergy and Representatives of Other Faiths and Ethnic Groups, Condemning Violence and Supporting the Demonstrations

A positive trend that has emerged since the start of the demonstrations is a growing number of Orthodox clergy issuing statements expressing strong support for pro-European demonstrators, political prisoners, and those fighting for freedom. From a Christian perspective, they talk about human dignity, equality, and liberty, condemn political re-

49 Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), “Post-Election Environment Regarding Freedom of Religion, Equality, and Secularity”, November 26 – December 26, 2024, [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/post-election\\_environment\\_freedom\\_of\\_religion\\_or\\_belief\\_equality\\_and\\_secularity\\_november\\_26\\_-\\_december\\_26\\_2024.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/post-election_environment_freedom_of_religion_or_belief_equality_and_secularity_november_26_-_december_26_2024.pdf)

50 JAMnews, “Latest News in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan (16–20 December 2024),” JAMnews, December 20, 2024, <https://jam-news.net/latest-news-in-georgia-armenia-azerbaijan-summary-live-16-20-december-2024/>.

pression, and endorse Georgia's European path.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, numerous statements condemning violence and expressing support were issued by leaders and representatives of various religious and ethnic communities. For example, religious organizations in the Council of Religions under the Public Defender condemned the violence against demonstrators and highlighted the importance of the constitutional course of European integration.<sup>52</sup> On December 7, clergy from different faiths<sup>53</sup> held a march in support of those tortured and in opposition to violence against demonstrators, and issued public statements.<sup>54</sup> On December 25, a "Unity March" took place in Tbilisi,<sup>55</sup> involving ethnic Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Jews, Kists, Kurds, and others. At the march's conclusion near Parliament, participants celebrated Hanukkah together with the Jewish community.

51 In this regard, notable are the public statements and sermons of the Diocese of Belgium and the Netherlands, Metropolitan Grigol Berbichashvili of the Diocese of Poti and Khobi, Archpriest Zaza Tevzadze, Archpriest Giorgi Tserodze, Archimandrite Dorothe Kurasvhili, Bishop Saba Intskirveli of North America, Archbishop Zenon Iarajuli of Dmanisi and Agaraki-Tashiri, Bishop Melkisedek Khachidze of Margveti and Ubisa, Archimandrite Shio Kvaratskhelia of the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi, Archimandrite Ilia Jinjolava, Bishop Svimeon Tsakashvili of Surami and Khashuri, Priest Leon Gelovani, Priest Ieronime Katamadze, the priest of Poti Cathedral Kirion Ugrekhelidze, and others. See TDI monitoring reports on post-election environment in terms of freedom of religion or belief, equality and secularism, [November 26 – December 26, 2024](#), pg. 18-20 and [December 26, 2024 – January 31, 2025](#), pg. 10-12.

52 Council of Religions: "We categorically condemn the violence against demonstrators," Tabula, December 1, 2024, available at: <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/726672-religiata-sabcho-kategoriulad-vgmobt>

53 "Clergy from various denominations joined the protest rally on Rustaveli," Formula TV, December 7, 2024, available at: <https://formulanews.ge/News/121289>

54 Among them were Metropolitan Malkhaz Songulashvili of the Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia, Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze of the Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia, Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili of the Evangelical Church, Imam Mamuka Nakaidze of the Batumi "Freedom Mosque," and others. See TDI monitoring reports on Post-Election Environment in terms of Freedom of Religion or Belief, Equality and Secularism, [November 26 – December 26, 2024](#), pg. 20-21.

55 OC Media, "Georgia Live Updates: A Subdued Holiday Spirit as Protests Continue," OC Media, December 25, 2024, <https://oc-media.org/georgia-live-updates-a-subdued-holiday-spirit-as-protests-continue/>.

## 3. DISCRIMINATION IN GEORGIAN LEGISLATION

Discriminatory norms in legislation remain a problem, as they establish differentiated approaches toward religious minorities and grant exclusive privileges and rights only to the Georgian Orthodox Church. To this day, legislative and executive bodies have taken no steps to eliminate this discrimination from the legal framework. On the contrary, during the reporting period, the government continued to adopt new discriminatory and human rights-violating legislation, an example of which is the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (often referred to as the “Russian law”) adopted in 2024. This law requires religious organizations, like other non-profit legal entities, to register in a stigmatizing registry as “serving the interests of a foreign power” if more than 20% of their annual funding comes from foreign sources (see Chapter 1.2 for details).

### 3.1. DISCRIMINATION IN THE DEFENSE CODE

With the adoption of a new legislative defense package in September 2023, a new instance of religious discrimination was introduced into Georgian legislation. Specifically, while Georgian Orthodox Church clergy are fully exempted from any military obligations (as stipulated by Article 4, Paragraph 1 of the constitutional agreement between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the state), non-Orthodox clergy lost the possibility of deferring military service (which in practice equated to an exemption) and were subjected instead to non-military, alternative labor service. Additionally, non-Orthodox clergy are enrolled in the Defense Forces reserve, whereas Orthodox clergy are exempt from this obligation as well. Beyond this discriminatory regulation, the Defense Code introduced a new regulation (Article 97, Paragraph 5, Subparagraph “j”), according to which, for the registration purposes of mobilization reserve, special categories of personal data,

including a person's religious belief and affiliation, are to be entered into the electronic mobilization reserve system.<sup>56</sup>

TDI requested public information from the relevant government bodies regarding the enforcement practices of these regulations.

The Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia was asked how many conscripts in 2024 utilized the option of non-military, alternative labor service (including service within religious organizations operating in Georgia) as provided by the Georgian Law on Non-Military, Alternative Labor Service. Additionally, they were asked how many individuals were assigned to such service based on freedom of religion, belief, and conscience (conscientious objection), and how many were assigned based on their clerical status; furthermore, in the case of the clergy, how many clergy were conscripted and which religious denominations those clergy belonged to.

According to the information<sup>57</sup> provided by the LEPL State Employment Support Agency under the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs, 275 clergy members were assigned to non-military, alternative labor service during the reporting period. However, despite the request, the agency did not provide information on which religious denominations those individuals represented.

The agency also informed us that due to legislative changes in 2024, conscripts no longer had the opportunity to perform non-military, alternative labor service within religious organizations operating in Georgia. This means that clergy assigned to alternative labor service were not able to fulfill this service within their own religious institutions. This is noteworthy given that during the discussion stage of the new defense legislation, representatives of the Ministry of Defense had assured religious associations that the

56 For a detailed review of the new defense legislation in relation to the fundamental rights to freedom of religion and belief and equality on the grounds of religion, see Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia, 2023 report, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), 2024, pp. 8-9. Available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb\\_in\\_georgia\\_2023\\_tdi.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb_in_georgia_2023_tdi.pdf)

57 LEPL State Employment Support Agency's letters SESA 4 25 00182644 of February 18, 2024 and SESA 4 25 00221956 of February 27, 2024.

abolishment of the exemption from military service and their clergy's conscription into alternative labor service would not disconnect them from their religious communities, since they would still be able to perform non-military, alternative labor service within their religious organizations - an option the previous legislation allowed. Specifically, according to Georgian Government Decree No. 391 of December 30, 2013, non-military, alternative labor service could be performed through "construction, repair, and agricultural works conducted by religious organizations legally operating in Georgia."

This decree was repealed by Georgian Government Decree No. 120 of April 2, 2024, which no longer provides for the possibility of performing non-military, alternative labor service through works organized by religious organizations operating in Georgia.

Regarding the collection of information on a person's religious affiliation for the purpose of mobilization reserve registration (as per Article 97, Paragraph 5, Subparagraph "j" of the Defense Code), the Ministry of Defense of Georgia informed<sup>58</sup> TDI that such data collection is not currently being implemented. Furthermore, based on correspondence with the Ministry of Defense,<sup>59</sup> it can be said that the method for collecting this information is not defined by the current legislation. Among the procedures outlined in Article 98 of the Defense Code for mobilization reserve registration, which detail the sources and methods for obtaining information to be entered into the electronic system, there is no provision defining a procedure for collecting data on a person's religious affiliation.

### 3.2. DISCRIMINATION IN THE LAW ON STATE PROPERTY

The discriminatory regulations set out in the Law of Georgia on State Property remain unchanged. Specifically, Articles 3 and 4 of the law restrict religious organizations from acquiring and/or exchanging<sup>60</sup> state-owned property, or privatizing<sup>61</sup> religious buildings and their ruins under state ownership. The only exception is the Georgian Orthodox

58 Letter from the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, MOD 7 25 000 38627 of January 20, 2025.

59 Letter from the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, MOD 7 3 25 000167855 of February 12, 2025.

60 See the constitutional complaint No. 1440 submitted in 2019 by nine religious organizations. Available at: <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=1410>.

61 See the constitutional complaint No. 1640 submitted in 2021 by seven religious organizations. Available at: <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=12279>.



Church. Article 3, Paragraph 6 of the law also remains unchanged, which, in 2020, granted the Orthodox Church the exclusive right to acquire ownership of state-owned forests.

The norms that restrict religious organizations from acquiring or exchanging state property have been challenged by TDI at the Constitutional Court since 2019. The provision restricting privatization has been under challenge since 2021. However, the court has not issued a ruling on either matter yet.<sup>62</sup>

### 3.3. DISCRIMINATION IN THE TAX CODE

Discriminatory norms based on religion also remain in Georgia's Tax Code. Specifically:

- Religious organizations are taxed on land they own and use for non-commercial purposes (Article 201, Paragraph 1, Subparagraph "a"). Based on the Constitutional Agreement, however, the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church is exempt from this tax.<sup>63</sup>
- Religious organizations must pay import taxes when importing religious items (Articles 159 and 195), whereas the Georgian Orthodox Church is exempt from these taxes under the Constitutional Agreement.<sup>64</sup>

TDI has challenged the norm in Article 201 at the Constitutional Court since 2019, and Articles 159 and 195 since 2021. However, similar to the contested provisions in the Law on State Property, the court has not yet ruled on these cases.<sup>65</sup>

62 For a detailed review of discriminatory provisions in the law on state property, see Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia, 2023 report, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), 2024, pp. 10. Available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb\\_in\\_georgia\\_2023\\_tdi.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb_in_georgia_2023_tdi.pdf)

63 See the constitutional complaint No. 1422 submitted in 2019 by nine religious organizations. Available at: <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=1430>.

64 See the constitutional complaint No. 1593 submitted in 2021 by nine religious organizations. Available at: <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=11126>.

65 For a detailed review of specified norms in the Tax Code, see Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia, 2023 report, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), 2024, pg. 10-11. Available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb\\_in\\_georgia\\_2023\\_tdi.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb_in_georgia_2023_tdi.pdf).

In the context of religious discrimination, Article 170 of the Tax Code is also noteworthy, as it provides for tax exemptions. According to Paragraph 1, Subparagraph “s” of this article, “restoration and/or painting of cathedrals or church buildings” is VAT exempt (without the right of deduction). It is important to note that under the previous version of the Tax Code, Article 168, Paragraph 2, Subparagraph “b” exempted only construction, restoration, and painting of churches and temples commissioned by the Patriarchate from VAT (without the right to claim the deduction). In 2018, the Constitutional Court of Georgia ruled that this provision was unconstitutional and discriminatory on the basis of religion.<sup>66</sup> Since the Parliament of Georgia failed to amend the provision within the six-month timeframe given by the court to ensure its equal application to all religious organizations, the norm was declared null and void (which meant the Georgian Orthodox Church also lost this specific tax benefit).

However, on July 14, 2020, Parliament reintroduced a similar tax exemption into the Tax Code. Unlike the repealed norm in Article 168, Paragraph 2, Subparagraph “b”, which exclusively exempted construction, restoration and painting of cathedrals and churches commissioned by the GOC Patriarchate, the new provision introduced in 2020 (Article 170, Paragraph 1, Subparagraph “s”) no longer applies exclusively to the Patriarchate; however, the terminology used in the provision, specifically “cathedrals” and “church buildings,” remains problematic and non-neutral. It is unfortunate that even after the Constitutional Court had ruled a similar provision unconstitutional, Parliament reintroduced a new version using religiously non-neutral terms.

### 3.4. OBSERVANCE OF REST DAYS AND RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

During the reporting period, members of religious minorities continued to face difficulties in taking days off to observe their religious holidays, as the legislation regulating this issue remained unchanged.

According to the Labor Code of Georgia, 18 days are designated as public holidays, only seven of which are related to secular events. The remaining 11 are exclusively tied to Orthodox Christian holidays. The cultural and religious holidays of non-Orthodox people living in Georgia, including those of ethnic minority communities, are ignored.

66 See the Decision No. 1/2/671 of the Constitutional Court of Georgia dated July 3, 2018. Available at: <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=924>.

The Labor Code of Georgia stipulates that an employee may request alternative days off instead of the officially recognized public holidays, but only if this is specified in the employment contract. Religious minorities can only benefit from this general provision. In such cases, the ability to observe alternative religious holidays depends on the employment contract and the goodwill of the employer, which does not provide adequate guarantees for employees.<sup>67</sup>

### Case of MP Taniel Nakaidze

In the context of religious holidays and the right to observe them, the case of Member of Parliament Taniel Nakaidze is significant.<sup>68</sup> In 2023, he became the victim of alleged religious discrimination by Parliament. Specifically, on June 28, 2023, Nakaidze missed a plenary session in order to observe Eid al-Adha, one of the most important Islamic holidays. As a result, Parliament classified his absence as unjustified and withheld 10% of his salary. In October 2023, Taniel Nakaidze filed a lawsuit seeking recognition of indirect discrimination.<sup>69</sup>

On April 30, 2024, the Administrative Chamber of the Tbilisi City Court rejected his claim, arguing that since the plaintiff was challenging the discriminatory nature of normative regulations defined by the Parliament's Rules of Procedure, the matter fell within the jurisdiction of the Constitutional Court.<sup>70</sup>

On June 10, 2024, TDI appealed the abovementioned decision of the Administrative Chamber of Tbilisi City to the Tbilisi Court of Appeals. The first hearing was scheduled for September but was unexpectedly postponed. No further hearings were scheduled during the reporting period.

67 For details, see Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia, 2023 report, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), 2024, pp. 11-12. Available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb\\_in\\_georgia\\_2023\\_tdi.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb_in_georgia_2023_tdi.pdf).

68 The interests of Taniel Nakaidze, a member of the 10th convocation of the Parliament of Georgia, are represented by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI).

69 See details of Taniel Nakaidze's case in "Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia," 2023 report, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), 2024, pg. 12. Available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb\\_in\\_georgia\\_2023\\_tdi.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb_in_georgia_2023_tdi.pdf).

70 For details, see the April 30, 2024, decision of the Administrative Chamber of the Tbilisi City Court on case No. 3/7909-23.

## Case of Seventh-day Adventist Applicants

The case of alleged religious discrimination against Seventh-day Adventist university applicants continued during the reporting period. In February 2024, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals found that the applicants had been subjected to indirect discrimination based on religion and ordered the National Assessment and Examinations Center (NAEC) to pay symbolic compensation of 1 GEL for moral damages. NAEC appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. As of the reporting period, the cassation complaint had not passed the admissibility stage, and the proceedings remained ongoing.<sup>71</sup>

TDI has been representing the interests of two members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 2020. These applicants contacted NAEC on June 30, 2020, requesting to reschedule an exam set for July 18, as their religious beliefs prevented them from taking the test on a Saturday. NAEC unlawfully and unjustifiably denied their request, violating their rights to freedom of religion and belief, education, and equality. On July 15, 2020, TDI filed a request with the Tbilisi City Court to impose interim measures, asking the court to instruct NAEC to allow the applicants to sit the exam on July 17 or 19, or any other non-Sabbath day. The court granted this request, enabling the applicants to take the exam on an alternative date.

Subsequently, on July 24, 2020, TDI filed a lawsuit in the Tbilisi City Court on behalf of the applicants, seeking recognition of religious discrimination, elimination of discrimination by annulling the contested refusal order, and symbolic compensation of 1 GEL for moral damages. On April 20, 2022, the City Court partially upheld the students' lawsuit. It nullified the contested NAEC order that had denied the exam rescheduling. However, the court did not satisfy the claims seeking recognition of discrimination on religious grounds and obliging NAEC to pay symbolic compensation for moral damages.

In August 2022, TDI appealed the City Court's decision to the Tbilisi Court of Appeals. In February 2024, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals upheld the appeal, recognized the applicants as victims of indirect discrimination based on religion, and ordered NAEC to pay them symbolic compensation of 1 GEL for moral damages.

<sup>71</sup> The interests of two university applicants who are members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are represented by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI).

## 4. PROPERTY RIGHTS OF MINORITY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

For minority religious communities, one of the most pressing issues continues to be problems related to religious property and places of worship. Religious communities face obstacles both in reclaiming property confiscated during the Soviet era and in the process of constructing new houses of worship. The legislation is also discriminatory, as, unlike the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church, it restricts other religious organizations in terms of property restitution and acquisition rights. An example tied to the property and independence of a religious community is the case of the Evangelical Church of Georgia, which in 2022 faced the threat of losing its only prayer house due to the Tbilisi Court of Appeals' unsubstantiated ruling (which the Supreme Court refused to review).

### 4.1. THE PROBLEM OF RETURNING HISTORICAL PROPERTY

As in previous years, the issue of restituting historical religious property to minority religious communities remained unresolved during the reporting period. This matter has been on the agenda since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Georgia's independence. To date, only the Georgian Orthodox Church has succeeded in restituting property. Unlike the Orthodox Church, most properties confiscated from other religious communities during Soviet times have not been returned. Some of this property remains under state ownership, while other parts have been transferred to the Georgian Patriarchate. For example, the Patriarchate has appropriated seven Catholic churches. In 2017, the state transferred ownership of the historically Armenian Tandoyants Church in Tbilisi to the Patriarchate. In 2019, a portion of the Evangelical-Lutheran

church located in the village of Asureti in Tetrtskaro Municipality, which is also a cultural heritage monument, was transferred to the Georgian Patriarchate with the right of use.<sup>72</sup>

It is noteworthy that many of these religious buildings are cultural heritage monuments. In cases where property is not returned to its historical and confessional owners, these structures fall into disrepair, despite the state's obligation to maintain and protect them. Furthermore, the historical buildings of some religious communities handed over to the Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarchate are losing their authenticity and original character.

The issue of returning property confiscated during the Soviet era is most acute for the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, Evangelical-Lutheran churches, and for Muslim and Jewish communities.<sup>73</sup>

### **Obstruction of Catholics' Access to Historical Churches**

In addition to being unable to reclaim their confiscated religious buildings, non-dominant religious communities also face obstruction by the Orthodox Church when attempting to visit these sites for religious celebrations.<sup>74</sup> One such example is the historically Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Kutaisi, whose feast day is celebrated on December 8. On this day each year, Catholic believers would visit the church and hold prayers. However, in October 2022, during the arrival of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima in Georgia, Orthodox clergy cordoned off the church with tape and denied access to the papal nuncio and Catholic worshippers.

In May 2023, the Orthodox Church's eparchy installed a gate and fenced off the church premises.<sup>75</sup> On December 8, 2023, during the church's feast day, representatives of the Kutaisi-Gaenati eparchy of the Orthodox Church again prevented Catholic worshippers

72 For details, see the 2020 parliamentary report of the Public defender of Georgia, pg. 169, available at: <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2021070814020446986.pdf>

73 For detailed information on the issue of religious property restitution in Georgia, see TDI's report "Restitution Policy in Georgia," available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/restitution\\_policy\\_in\\_georgia.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/restitution_policy_in_georgia.pdf)

74 For more details, see the news section of the Catholic Church's information agency, Catholic.ge, available at: <https://bit.ly/43dxm5o>

75 Ibid.

from entering the church, citing various reasons.<sup>76</sup> Catholics were also unable to pray in the church on December 8, 2024. The entry to the church was again blocked for Catholic believers on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>77</sup>

A similar situation exists in Buzmareti, a historic Catholic church located in the Turkey-Georgia border zone, where Catholic believers go annually for the celebration of the Feast of the Ascension. Orthodox clergy prevent them from holding the liturgy both inside the church and in the churchyard. As a result, Catholic clergy and worshippers are forced to hold services outside the church grounds. In 2023, Orthodox clergy attempted to obstruct even this by occupying the area where Catholic worshippers had previously conducted services.<sup>78</sup> On May 9, 2024, Catholics once again faced interference during prayer. They were forced to relocate the altar after they found the area they had used in 2023 filled with piled tree branches and law enforcement officials instructed them to move the altar to another location so as not to disturb the Orthodox clergy.<sup>79</sup>

## 4.2. THE CASE OF CONSTRUCTING A NEW MOSQUE IN BATUMI

During the reporting period, the issue of constructing a new mosque in Batumi by the Muslim community remained unresolved.<sup>80</sup> In a legal dispute initiated in 2017 by the non-commercial legal entity Batumi New Mosque Construction Fund, which challenged the Batumi City Hall's unlawful denial of a construction permit, the Supreme Court of Georgia issued a decision in 2023 that undermined fundamental rights to religious freedom and equality and returned the case to the Kutaisi Court of Appeals for reconsideration. The Supreme Court overturned the favorable ruling by the Kutaisi Court of Appeals (which had upheld the Batumi City Court's judgment recognizing the discriminatory nature of the permit denial for the construction of the mosque) and ruled that the City

76 For more details, see the news section of the Catholic Church's information agency, Catholic.ge, available at: <https://bit.ly/3HqaRS8>

77 For more details, see the news section of the Catholic Church's information agency, Catholic.ge, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Kd9AY1DDu/>

78 For more details, see the news section of the Catholic Church's information agency, Catholic.ge, available at: <https://bit.ly/4mx4qwM>

79 For more details, see the news section of the Catholic Church's information agency, Catholic.ge, available at: <https://bit.ly/3SpqThw>

80 The interests of the fund for the construction of a new mosque in Batumi are being represented by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) and the Social Justice Center.

Hall's refusal to allow the construction of a new mosque did not constitute discrimination against the Muslim community.<sup>81</sup>

During the reporting period, the case continued to be reviewed by the Kutaisi Court of Appeals. At one of the hearings, the parties discussed the terms of a potential settlement. However, Batumi City Hall failed to present its position on the settlement terms within the one-week deadline set by the court on December 19, 2023 (or at any time thereafter).

Subsequently, in November 2024, the Kutaisi Court of Appeals informed TDI that the next hearing had been scheduled for November 26 of the same year. However, on the morning of November 26, the hearing was postponed indefinitely due to the judge's health condition, and no new hearing date has been set yet (as of May 2025).

As a result, the legal proceedings remain delayed, which is yet another clear indication of the discriminatory strategy employed by the authorities in this case. Specifically, the government continues to systematically and severely violate the fundamental rights of the Muslim community. For years, Muslims have been unable to construct a place of worship in Batumi due to unlawful barriers created by the authorities and are still forced to gather and pray outdoors. The state has used all available levers to prevent the timely and substantive resolution of the case, dragging the legal process out for over eight years through repeated appeals. The Supreme Court's aforementioned decision, along with the repeated indefinite postponements of the lawsuit in the Kutaisi Court of Appeals, contributes to both the protraction of the case and the ongoing systemic violation of Muslim rights.

### 4.3. THE CASE OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF GEORGIA

During the reporting period, the case of the Evangelical Church of Georgia remained ongoing,<sup>82</sup> in which serious violations of freedom of religion or belief and other fundamen-

81 For more details on the decision made by the Supreme Court regarding the construction of a new mosque in Batumi, see Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia: 2023 Report, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), 2024, pp. 15–16. Available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb\\_in\\_georgia\\_2023\\_tdi.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb_in_georgia_2023_tdi.pdf).

82 The interests of the Evangelical Church of Georgia and its pastor are being represented by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI).



tal rights of the Evangelical Church's congregation were disguised as a controversial civil law dispute.<sup>83</sup>

On November 9, 2022, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals ordered Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili (the defendant) to pay the claimant the church donations received over several years that were designated for the completion of the church's first and only prayer house. On November 20, 2023, the Supreme Court of Georgia dismissed the cassation appeal of Pastor of Evangelical Church, Zaal Tkeshelashvili, as inadmissible, thereby upholding the Tbilisi Court of Appeals' unlawful decision. On February 3, 2024, the National Bureau of Enforcement issued a written notice demanding that the pastor deposit USD 94,000 into the state treasury account within seven days, or else the entire property of the Evangelical Church would be auctioned off. The congregation of the Evangelical Church decided to mobilize the unjustly imposed amount in the shortest possible time and transfer it to the treasury account. As the church's statement noted, "Although the Evangelical Church's prayer house was spared from falling into the hands of fraudsters via auction this time, the enormous financial liabilities still pose a significant risk to the Evangelical Church of losing its only house of worship... The Church continues its struggle to establish justice and equality in the country, to defend its fundamental rights, and to seek compensation for the damage caused to it unlawfully and deliberately."<sup>84</sup>

The claimants in the case are Byung Chan Park, a U.S. citizen, and his U.S.-registered organization, 12 Baskets. In 2019, Park filed a lawsuit against Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili in the Tbilisi City Court, seeking repayment of donations he had allegedly collected from Christian believers abroad over the years on behalf of the church.

Based on a detailed study and analysis of the case materials, there is a reasonable suspicion that Park acted in bad faith and exploited religious organizations for questionable financial activities. The case includes copies of allegedly falsified documents submitted by the claimant that bear the seal of a U.S. notary public. However, the Court of Appeals not only failed to order a forensic examination to determine the authenticity of these

83 Report on the case against the Evangelical Church of Georgia, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), February 9, 2023. Available at: [http://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/sakartvelos\\_evangelisturi\\_eklesiis\\_sakme.pdf](http://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/sakartvelos_evangelisturi_eklesiis_sakme.pdf).

84 See the October 1, 2024 statement of the Evangelical Church of Georgia. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=871265295139299&set=a.436896068576226>

documents, but also relied on them to impose a USD 70,000 payment obligation on Zaa-la Tkeshelashvili. Specifically:

1. As evidence of his right to claim the USD 70,000, Byung Chan Park submitted copies of two contracts to the court but failed to present the originals. Despite the defendant's request, the court did not order an expert examination of these copies;
2. The court's refusal to conduct an expert examination raises further concerns of bias, particularly because the document copies exhibited multiple inconsistencies. Specifically, the contract listed the serial number of Byung Chan Park's passport that was issued in 2015, while the contract execution date was stated as 2014; the contract lacked several notarial elements (for example, a notary's signature, a notarial deed, attestation date, and others) that are required in notarized documents under Washington State notary law.

In November 2019, Pastor Tkeshelashvili filed a request with the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia to launch an investigation into the suspected forgery of documents. More than five years have passed since then, but no results have been achieved.

Communication with the Washington State Department of Licensing (the authority overseeing the activities of notaries public) revealed that the notary, whose seal appears on the disputed documents, was unable to provide any proof that the documents had been notarized. Under state law, a notary is required to retain such documentation for ten years after the notarial act is performed.

This information obtained from the Department of Licensing was submitted to the Georgian Prosecutor's Office as additional evidence. However, the investigation has still yielded no results.

As for Park's organization, 12 Baskets, it is noteworthy that it has been repeatedly dissolved in the U.S. corporate and nonprofit registration system due to its failure to file annual reports over multiple years. This raises reasonable suspicions that Byung Chan Park uses the organization and its charitable status to evade taxes and conduct questionable transactions.

This contradictory and unsubstantiated civil case, and the reversal of decisions at the appellate level, raises serious concerns that the case may be part of a broader repressive strategy by the authorities aimed at silencing the Evangelical Church of Georgia and Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili, and at stripping the church of its property and independence.<sup>85</sup>

85 On the case against the Evangelical Church of Georgia, see also the 2023 report, “Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia,” Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), 2024, pp. 16–17. Available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb\\_in\\_georgia\\_2023\\_tdi.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/forb_in_georgia_2023_tdi.pdf).

## 5. STATE FUNDING AND PROPERTY TRANSFERS TO RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

As in previous years, the state continued to fund the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in 2024. The GOC Patriarchate once again received GEL 25 million from the central state budget.<sup>86</sup> Although both the state and the Patriarchate cite the damage caused to the Church by the Soviet regime as justification for the transfer of this money and other material resources, it is evident that such funding is not a form of compensation for damages, but rather constitutes state subsidization of the Patriarchate.

In 2024, the Government of Georgia issued 28 decrees exclusively in favor of the GOC Patriarchate. Based on these decrees, the Georgian Orthodox Church received substantial additional financial and material benefits from the state.

In addition to the aforementioned GEL 25 million, in 2024 the Government of Georgia allocated a total of GEL 39,364,180 to institutions under the authority of the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church, including higher educational institutions, vocational and general education institutions, and charitable foundations affiliated with it. This includes GEL 35 million transferred by Government Decree No. 375,<sup>87</sup> of which GEL 12,843,000 was allocated to the Church's educational institutions, while GEL 22,157,000 was transferred to the "LEPL Fund for the Development of Educational and Cultural Events of the Patriarchate of Georgia," established on August 5, 2022.<sup>88</sup>

86 Law of Georgia, "On the State Budget of Georgia for 2024": (Program Code 45 00).

87 Georgian Government Decree No. 375, March 15, 2024.

88 Excerpt from the Register of Entrepreneurs and Non-Entrepreneurial (Non-Commercial) Legal Entities, Application Registration Number B22097682, Preparation Date: 05/08/2022, Available at: <https://bs.napr.gov.ge/GetBlob?pid=400&bid=boVlyOwlsX3qmYsntmLmFF-ShUJJbyi2ERUHEDZZ6ZAmgfVCrdVy1YWvhHpf5EFt5>

These same decrees also granted the Georgian Orthodox Church large-scale real estate from the state - land plots and buildings on them. In 2024, the state transferred to the Georgian Orthodox Church, through symbolic sale for GEL 1, a total of 45,290 square meters of land located in the municipalities of Ozurgeti, Chokhatauri, Tkibuli, Mtskheta, Gurjaani, Khelvachauri, Tetritskaro, Tskaltubo, Marneuli, Chkhorotsku, Khobi, Borjomi, Kutaisi, and Tbilisi. Additionally, the Church was granted the right of free usufruct for a period of 99 years for a total of 220,885 square meters of land in the municipalities of Gori, Khobi, and Lanchkhuti, and for 15 years for 28,451 square meters of land in the Akhmeta municipality.

Analysis of these decrees indicates that the increase in the scale of real estate and financial resource transfers to the Patriarchate coincides with the approach of the October 2024 parliamentary elections and ongoing political developments.

In addition to the central budget, the Georgian Orthodox Church also receives funding from local self-governments. Typically, this annual funding amounts to GEL 5-7 million. In 2024, TDI requested public information from 64 local self-governing entities (59 municipalities and 5 self-governing cities) regarding municipal budget allocations to religious organizations. As only 30 municipalities provided TDI with complete data, it is not possible to determine the precise amount of municipal funding in 2024 or the appropriateness of its distribution.<sup>89</sup>

Since 2014, four other religious organizations (Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Armenian Apostolic) have received annual state funding as symbolic compensation for the damage they suffered under the Soviet regime. The distribution of these funds is overseen by the State Agency for Religious Issues. According to information provided by the LEPL State Agency for Religious Issues,<sup>90</sup> in 2024 the following amounts were allocated: GEL 4,150,000 to the Muslim community of Georgia; GEL 1,100,000 to the Armenian Apostolic Christian community of Georgia; GEL 700,000 to the Roman Catholic community of Georgia; and GEL 550,000 to the Jewish community of Georgia. As a result, the total annual funding for these four religious organizations amounted to GEL 6.5 million. The state's recognition of only these four religious communities as victims of Soviet repres-

89 Eleven of these municipalities did not allocate any funds to religious organizations from the municipal budget during 2024.

90 Letter No. 1/21 of January 27, 2025, from the LEPL State Agency for Religious Issues.

sions must be regarded as a discriminatory approach, since many other religious associations were also subjected to persecution under the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, the list of beneficiaries was not expanded by the state in 2024.

### **Court Case on Discriminatory Municipal Funding**

On February 20, 2024, the case “Supreme Religious Administration of Muslims of All Georgia against Georgia” entered the substantive hearing phase at the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>91</sup> The case concerns a discriminatory practice established in local self-government units, expressed in the allocation of budget funding resources exclusively to one particular religious organization - the Orthodox Church. In this case, on July 1, 2022, the Bolnisi District Court issued a precedent-setting decision, recognizing such a practice as discriminatory treatment based on religion. The court found that the contested norm imposes differential treatment on the basis of religion without “sufficient, objective, and reasonable justification.”<sup>92</sup>

Following an appeal, on December 8, 2022, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals overturned the first-instance decision. The Supreme Court, by its decision on June 7, 2023, declined to review the case on the merits, thereby leaving the Tbilisi Court of Appeals’ decision intact.<sup>93</sup>

91 The European Court of Human Rights’ communication of 11 March 2024 in the case of Supreme Religious Administration of Muslims of All Georgia against Georgia. Available at: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/?i=001-231656>.

92 For details, see Freedom of Religion and Belief in Georgia, 2022 Report, Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), 2023, pp. 20. Available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi\\_forb\\_report\\_2022\\_eng.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi_forb_report_2022_eng.pdf).

93 The European Court of Human Rights’ communication of 11 March 2024 in the case of Supreme Religious Administration of Muslims of All Georgia against Georgia. Available at: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/?i=001-231656>

## 6. CRIMES MOTIVATED BY RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

This chapter presents official statistics on crimes motivated by religious intolerance and trends in the state's response to them.

As in previous years, inadequate responses to crimes motivated by religion remain a problematic issue, manifesting in failure to initiate investigations, ineffective investigations, delays in granting victim status to those affected, and a protracted process of initiating criminal prosecution.

During the reporting period, a particularly alarming pattern was the failure of law enforcement agencies to initiate investigations into obvious and systemic crimes. Consequently, this has resulted in a decrease in reports to law enforcement regarding suspected religiously motivated crimes, as well as reductions in investigation initiation, prosecution, convictions, and statistics on crimes motivated by religious intolerance.

In 2024, as in 2023, the authorities deliberately failed to initiate investigations into violent threats, hate speech, and interference in religious activities directed against Muslim believers in Adigeni. Moreover, the involvement of various government bodies in this case indicates attempts to cover up the crimes and prevent Muslims from exercising their lawful rights.

On September 19, 2024, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers once again called on the Georgian authorities to combat discrimination and hate crimes, including through zero-tolerance rhetoric and the immediate prosecution of organizers and inciters of violence. At the same time, the Committee expressed deep concern over the leg-

islative package on Family Values and Protection of Minors, initiated by the ruling party, Georgian Dream, and urged that the law not be enacted.<sup>94</sup>

## 6.1. STATISTICS ON CRIMES MOTIVATED BY RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

According to the unified 2024 report on “Crimes Committed on Grounds of Intolerance and Discrimination” issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, the Special Investigation Service, the Prosecutor’s Office, and the Supreme Court of Georgia, during the reporting period:

The Ministry of Internal Affairs initiated investigations into 17 cases of crimes motivated by religious intolerance, including one case involving intolerance based on both gender and religion, and one case involving gender and race.<sup>95</sup>

The Special Investigation Service initiated investigations into three such cases during the reporting period, of which the investigation was terminated in one criminal case.<sup>96</sup>

The Prosecutor’s Office initiated criminal prosecution in only eight cases of crimes motivated by religious intolerance during the reporting period. In two of these cases, the motive included both religion and race. The Prosecutor’s Office recognized 11 individuals as victims during the reporting period.<sup>97</sup>

Courts: According to information provided by the Supreme Court of Georgia, during the reporting period, district (city) courts received one case under Article 155 of the Criminal Code (illegal interference with religious practices) and one case under Article 156 (persecution based on religion and belief). Two cases were already under consideration in 2024, with proceedings not concluded during the year.

94 Decision of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe at its 1507th meeting held on 17–19 September 2024 – CM/Del/Dec(2024)1507/H46-9: Available at: [https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-09E](https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=CM/Del/Dec(2024)1507/H46-09E)

95 Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Special Investigation Service, Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia, Supreme Court of Georgia – Unified Report on Crimes Committed on Grounds of Intolerance and Discrimination”, 2024. Available at: [https://www.geostat.ge/media/68728/Hate\\_2024.pdf](https://www.geostat.ge/media/68728/Hate_2024.pdf).

96 Letter No. SIS 6 25 00001298 of 24 January 2025 from the Special Investigation Service.

97 Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Special Investigation Service, Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia, Supreme Court of Georgia – Unified Report on Crimes Committed on Grounds of Intolerance and Discrimination”, 2024. Available at: [https://www.geostat.ge/media/68728/Hate\\_2024.pdf](https://www.geostat.ge/media/68728/Hate_2024.pdf).



District (city) courts applied the aggravating circumstance of religious intolerance in four verdicts related to crimes motivated by religious intolerance. Of these, one verdict was guilty, one acquittal was issued, and proceedings were terminated in two cases.<sup>98</sup>

## 6.2. PERSECUTION OF MUSLIMS IN THE TOWN OF ADIGENI

Since the end of 2012, the government's superficial and inadequate response to increasing systemic violence against Muslims has encouraged new crimes. As a result, a persistent and recurring hotspot of Muslim persecution emerged in the Adigeni municipality.

During the reporting period, the persecution and threats against Muslims in Adigeni, which began in 2023, continued and intensified.<sup>99</sup> On March 8<sup>100</sup> and April 5, 2024,<sup>101</sup> local Georgian Orthodox Church clergy and groups organized by them aggressively entered privately owned Muslim property in the town of Adigeni and presented unlawful demands to the gathered Muslims. Their demands included that the Muslim community cease Friday prayers, relinquish property, and leave Adigeni. These incidents were accompanied by threats of bodily harm and physical retaliation. The main organizer of this coordinated persecution was the archimandrite of Zarzma Monastery at the time, Nikoloz Getsadze, who had previously been noted for aggression and persecution of the Muslim population in Adigeni municipality.<sup>102</sup>

During the reporting period, no investigations were initiated into any of the alleged crimes committed against Muslims in Adigeni in 2023-2024.

98 Letter No. P-13-25 of 28 February 2025 from the Tbilisi Supreme Court.

99 "Muslims in Adigeni Are Being Forced to Leave Their Prayer House and Religious School – Locals Say the Reason Is Discontent from Orthodox Clergy," Samkhretis Karibche, 31.07.2023. Available at: <https://sknews.ge/ka/news/39410>.

100 "'Get Out, Get the Hell Out' – Muslims Attacked During Friday Prayer in Adigeni" – Batumelebi, 08.03.2024. Available at: <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/519077/#gsc.tab=0>.

101 "Another Protest in Adigeni [Video]" – Samkhretis Karibche, 05.04.2024. Available at: <https://sknews.ge/ka/news/40825>.

102 According to Samkhretis Karibche, Nikoloz Getsadze was also accused of sexual harassment, which led the ruling bishop of the diocese, Theodor Chuadze, to suspend his clerical duties in January 2025. "The Patriarchate Confirms That Archimandrite Nikoloz Has Been Suspended from Clerical Duties" – Samkhretis Karibche, 30.01.2025. Available at: <https://sknews.ge/ka/news/42772>

The situation is made even more alarming by the involvement of local and central government authorities in violating Muslims' rights. State officials considered that this issue should be resolved through informal "negotiations." In March-April 2024, several closed-door meetings took place. Government representatives pressured Muslims to surrender property in Adigeni, stop prayers and religious activities, and in exchange promised budgetary funding for the purchase of other buildings in a nearby village. Moreover, the government wanted the new building to be registered not to this specific Muslim community but to a different religious organization - the Supreme Religious Administration of the Muslims of Georgia. On April 10, 2024, Mamuka Vashakmadze, the Mufti of Samtskhe-Javakheti, announced that local Muslims in Adigeni would no longer hold Friday prayers.<sup>103</sup>

Both local and central authorities took part in what the government portrayed as "negotiations," effectively forcing the Muslim community to give up their legitimate rights. The State Agency for Religious Issues under the Prime Minister's office and its chairperson, Zaza Vashakmadze, Adigeni Mayor Gocha Kimadze, and the Governor of Samtskhe-Javakheti Besik Amiranashvili were actively involved in this process. Before and during the "negotiations," Adigeni Mayor Gocha Kimadze referred to Merab Mikeladze's property as an illegally opened mosque and called for the cessation of prayers.<sup>104</sup> Zaza Vashakmadze placed full responsibility for the outcomes on Merab Mikeladze, a representative of the Muslim community.<sup>105</sup> The developments in Adigeni clearly demonstrate how authorities shield alleged perpetrators and blatantly violate legislation and human rights, indicating signs of official misconduct.

103 "Muslims Will No Longer Hold Friday Prayers in Adigeni" – Batumelebi, 10.04.2024. Available at: <https://bit.ly/43oobhk>.

104 "No More Public Muslim Prayers in Adigeni – Who Banned It and on What Grounds?" – Radio Liberty, 13 March 2024. Available at: <https://bit.ly/43stCM6>.

105 "His Action May Be Considered Destructive and a Potential Source of Escalation" – State Agency for Religious Issues on Merab Mikeladze, Samkhretis Karibche, 3 April 2024. Available at: <https://sknews.ge/ka/news/40796>.

### 6.3. THE CASE OF THE MUSLIM BOARDING SCHOOL IN KOBULETI

During the reporting period, the European Court of Human Rights' decision in the case of "Georgian Muslim Relations and Others v. Georgia" was transmitted to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe for supervision and execution, and the case was added to the "Identoba and Others" group of cases.<sup>106</sup>

The case concerns an incident that took place in 2014 in the Kobuleti municipality, where local Orthodox Christians protested the opening of a boarding school for Muslim students by blocking the entrance to the building and nailing a pig's head on its door. Despite the police being constantly mobilized near the boarding house and witnessing numerous violations, including harassment, restriction of movement, and infringements on property and other fundamental rights of the boarding house administration and students, no action was taken by police officers to address any of these violations.<sup>107</sup>

The European Court found violations of Article 8 (right to respect for private and family life) and Article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience, and religion), taken together with Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination) of the Convention in relation to the applicants.<sup>108</sup> The Court noted that the State failed to provide an adequate response to the hate speech, threats, and degrading treatment organized by the aggressive group and failed to fulfill its positive obligation to protect the applicants' rights to privacy, dignity, and religious belief from interference.

106 The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, "Identoba and Others v. Georgia," available at: <https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=004-5894>.

107 For detailed information, see TDI's 2010-2019 report on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia, p. 91-93. Available at: [https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi-report-freedom\\_of\\_religion\\_in\\_georgia\\_2010-2019.pdf](https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi-report-freedom_of_religion_in_georgia_2010-2019.pdf)

108 Final judgment of the European Court of Human Rights of 29 February 2024 in the case of "Georgian Muslim Relations and Others v. Georgia." (Application no. [24225/19](#)).

## 7. RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Indoctrination, proselytism, and violations of religious neutrality in public schools remain significant challenges to this day. Despite the existence of the problem, the Ministry of Education does not proactively detect or prevent such incidents. The rate of complaints filed by pupils or parents is still low, likely due to distrust and a fear of greater stigmatization. In 2024, Muslim teachers and pupils at the public school in the village of Artsivani became victims of violations of religious neutrality and discrimination. During the reporting period, the Ministry of Education stopped the textbook approval process and the involvement of human rights experts in it. The ruling Georgian Dream party developed a new document outlining the national goals of general education, which substantively reflects the value changes frequently expressed in its narrative. In 2024, collaboration between the Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarchate and the Ministry of Education was intensive. The Patriarchate actively met with teachers, and meetings of the “Value Club” project were held in 20 pilot schools.

### **Statistics on Violations of Religious Neutrality in Schools**

According to information provided by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Youth of Georgia, in 2024, the Internal Audit Department investigated one alleged case of religious indoctrination or proselytism or the use of religious symbols for non-academic purposes during the school lessons. According to the Ministry, the investigation determined that the principles of religious neutrality, non-discrimination, and guaranteed freedom of belief as stipulated by the Law on General Education were violated. As the Ministry informed TDI, the school was issued a written warning and was tasked to respond to the violation.<sup>109</sup>

109 Letter MES 0 25 0000067537 of January 28, 2025, from the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia.

## Textbook Approval Process and Involvement of Human Rights Experts

In 2019, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the Public Defender's Office of Georgia, involved human rights experts in the approval process of new school textbooks for all subjects. The criterion regarding human rights and prohibition of discrimination included an assessment of the textbooks' content in terms of tolerance and the culture of diversity. The approval process continued from 2019 through 2023.

Regarding 2024, TDI requested information from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Youth on whether the textbook approval process continued and if the involvement of human rights experts was planned for 2024. In response, the Ministry informed TDI that the approval process no longer continues, that a revision of existing subject standards is underway, and that after this process is completed, the issue of textbook development will be reviewed and further steps planned.

## New Document on the “National Goals of General Education”

In 2024, a new document on the national goals of general education was adopted. This document serves as a kind of value-based foundation for education policy, defining what kind of citizen the state aims to raise and what outcomes it seeks to achieve through the education system.

It is noteworthy that the new document substantively reflects the value changes frequently voiced in the narrative of the Georgian Dream.<sup>110</sup> For example, the term “liberal” and liberal values no longer appear in the document, nor does the term “discrimination,” which appeared as a means to achieve goals in the 2004 document.<sup>111</sup>

This process was preceded by a statement from the Minister of Education, Giorgi Amilakhvari, on December 12, 2023, at the presentation of the new strategy for general

110 Resolution №4261-XIVდბ-Xmp of June 12, 2024, of the Parliament of Georgia on the approval of the document “National Goals of General Education,” available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6193624?publication=0>.

111 Resolution of the Government of Georgia №84 dated October 18, 2004, “On Approval of the National Goals of General Education” (expired on August 14, 2024), is available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/11098?publication=0>.

education development: “We do not want to create a new citizen; we want a person to be a Georgian, who will be based on Georgian identity, will grow on patriotic foundations, appreciate, and know his/her culture and history.” At the same event, then-Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said that reforms implemented in 2004 under the rule of the United National Movement were an attempt “to change our national identity, our DNA, Georgian-ness.”<sup>112</sup>

### 7.1. THE GOC PATRIARCHATE’S “VALUE CLUB”

According to information disseminated in 2023, the Georgian Orthodox Church’s Patriarchate started a new project in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science, and Youth of Georgia. The value-based education project aimed at retraining clergy members who, according to available information, after retraining would conduct lessons in parish schools and, if desired, in public schools.<sup>113</sup> In June 2024, the Patriarchate’s Public Relations Service announced that the clergy retraining process had been completed,<sup>114</sup> and in September, the presentation of the Value Education Clubs took place.<sup>115</sup> The information released during the presentation stated that 20 pilot schools were involved in the project, and the initiative included the following directions: drafting an action plan, creating a value education curriculum, offering various educational and awareness-raising activities for general education institutions, and planning and proposing events for teachers in these institutions.

At the beginning of 2024, TDI requested information from the Ministry of Education on whether any initiative had been submitted to the Ministry regarding the teaching of religion in schools, or whether the Ministry itself had started discussions on this matter.

112 “The new education strategy focuses on national identity, values, patriotism, and family,” civil.ge, 12.12.2023, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/574134>.

113 “A new teacher retraining project has been launched under the organization of the Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia,” TV Channel “Ertulovneba” of the Patriarchate of Georgia, June 19, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=285491993948552>.

114 The Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia, June 27, 2024, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1228181728547009&ref=sharing>.

115 The Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia, September 26, 2024, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/sazupatriarchate/posts/pfbid032R27UvhykxRsFNBd8xKf-cubdbZrtktfvuh9PCWkGZYYwVLPix94oFhLZYuyRuz3nl>.

In response, the Ministry stated that “general education schools, considering pupils’ interests, may introduce religious education as an additional educational service, which may include familiarizing pupils with the history of religions, understanding the cultural, humanitarian, and social significance of religions, and respect for people of different beliefs and religions.”<sup>116</sup>

Additionally, at the beginning of 2025, TDI directly asked the Ministry about the teaching of religion in cooperation with the Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarchate; specifically, whether religion or any subject containing a religious component is taught in public schools in cooperation with the Patriarchate, and if so, in what forms. TDI also requested all documents related to the “Value Education Clubs” established in cooperation with the Patriarchate in public schools, which detail the clubs’ status, the content of their activities, the format and content of teaching in the clubs, as well as who may serve as teachers in these clubs, etc. The Ministry did not provide TDI with this information.

## 7.2. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIM TEACHERS AND PUPILS AT ARTSIVANI PUBLIC SCHOOL

On Friday, February 2, 2024, at the public school in the village of Artsivani, in the Tsalka municipality, where the majority of teachers and pupils are Muslim, Orthodox clergy blessed the teachers’ lounge and classrooms, placed stickers with cross images on the walls, sprinkled holy water on the pupils (including Muslim pupils), and performed anointing rituals. The clergy were accompanied by Pridon Davitadze, the acting principal of the school. Also involved was Koba Shonia, a teacher at Artsivani public school who is simultaneously an Orthodox clergyman.

This organized and large-scale religious ritual took place during school hours, alongside regular classes, covering nearly the entire school territory and classrooms where lessons were ongoing.<sup>117</sup> The entry of clergy into the classrooms and their actions were unexpected for the teachers and pupils. It is also noteworthy that, according to information provided to TDI, the blessing ritual had a particularly severe impact on an ethnically Azerbaijani Muslim pupil, who covered his face to avoid the holy water and recited Muslim prayers.

116 Letter MES 1 24 0000109208 of February 2, 2024, from the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia

117 The interests of five Muslim teachers from the public school of the village of Artsivani in the Tsalka municipality are being represented by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI).

This incident was met with verbal protest from Muslim teachers and parents present at the school. In response, Christian residents gathered in the schoolyard. The Muslim teachers explained to the crowd that the issue was a violation of legal requirements and that they were not opposing any religion.

The events at the public school constitute direct discrimination on religious grounds, prohibited by the “Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination,” and simultaneously violate several provisions of the “Law on General Education,” specifically, the principle of independence of public schools from religious organizations, the prohibition of religious indoctrination, proselytism, and forced assimilation during the educational process in public schools, and the prohibition of placing religious symbols on school premises for non-academic purposes.

Regarding this legal violation, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Youth (through its audit department) conducted an inspection during which 18 school staff members were interviewed; however, no pupils were interviewed, although interviewing minor victims would likely have been of decisive in assessing the scale and severity of the harmful effects of the violation.

The conducted inspection resulted in drafting a report, based on which the Ministry determined a violation of the requirements of the Law on General Education and issued a warning to the Artsivani public school.

It is also noteworthy that the Ministry refuses to provide TDI and five Muslim teacher complainants it represents with public information created as a result of the inspection, citing personal data protection.<sup>118</sup>

On February 29, 2024, TDI appealed to the Public Defender of Georgia regarding the legal violation at the Artsivani school, demanding that violations of the fundamental right

118 The Ministry sent TDI the minister’s decision (order) on the above-mentioned issue, the inspection report from the Ministry’s Internal Audit Department, and the explanations the same department obtained from interviewees in connection with the aforementioned legal violation and corresponding protocols it drew up. However, in the provided documentation, the core information is entirely redacted under the pretext of protecting personal data; specifically, the explanations given by the interviewed individuals regarding the violation that occurred at the public school in the village of Artsivani are fully concealed (the full content of the explanations is redacted, except for those provided by the complainants).



to freedom of religion and belief of non-Orthodox pupils and staff at the public school in Artsivani village, as well as discrimination on religious grounds, be determined, and corresponding recommendations be issued; also, that the legality and adequacy of the Ministry of Education's response be reviewed.

Before the Public Defender's final decision, Pridon Davitadze ceased to perform the duties of acting principal of Artsivani public school, as the position was filled by another person through a competition.

The Public Defender prolonged the case review for 10 months and made the final decision on December 9, 2024, closing the case.<sup>119</sup> The Public Defender considered that the discrimination's effects had been eliminated and that the responsible person no longer held the position of acting principal. By this decision, the Public Defender ignored the existence of a structural problem regarding violations of religious neutrality in public schools.

It is worth noting that in 2017 the Public Defender issued a general recommendation to the Ministry of Education, which, among other things, requested the Ministry to:

- Ensure the elimination of the practice of using religious attributes for non-academic purposes within school infrastructure to protect religious neutrality in public schools;
- Assess potential cases of pupil participation in religious rituals during school hours, including Christian rituals involving non-Christian pupils, initiate disciplinary proceedings, and take appropriate legal action;
- Prioritize providing training on the importance of tolerance and multicultural education for school teachers, especially in schools located in ethnically and religiously diverse regions.

119 Letter N 2024/7074 of December 2024, from the Public Defender's Office of Georgia.

Since seven years after this general recommendation was issued, the situation at Artsivani public school shows gross and obvious violations of these instructions, it means the Ministry of Education has not taken adequate measures to implement the recommendation. Therefore, it would be appropriate and possible for the Public Defender to address the Ministry of Education with a new general recommendation requiring the Ministry to fulfill the previously issued one. In this case, the Ministry would be obligated to inform the Public Defender about the measures taken.

## 8. ANTISEMITISM

### 8.1. THE CASE OF VITALY SAFAROV'S MURDER

During the reporting period, on January 17, 2024, the mother of Vitaly Safarov, Marina Alanakian, filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights regarding the murder of her son, which had been committed with motives of ethnic intolerance and antisemitism. On March 13, 2025, the case “Marina Alanakian against Georgia” moved to the substantive stage, and the Court initiated official communication with the Government of Georgia.<sup>120</sup>

On September 30, 2018, in Tbilisi, Georgian citizen and human rights defender Vitaly Safarov was killed by multiple stab wounds inflicted with a cold weapon. Based on the factual and legal circumstances of the case, the involvement of two individuals in the murder was evident, and the attackers’ clearly antisemitic and xenophobic language indicated that the crime had been committed with a motive of intolerance. Despite these circumstances and the request from the Prosecutor’s Office, all three court instances failed to recognize racial, religious, national, or ethnic intolerance as the motive for the murder. The defendants were convicted only of group murder and sentenced to 15 years in prison each.<sup>121</sup>

120 The European Court of Human Rights’ communication of 31 March 2025 in the case of “Marina Alanakian against Georgia” Application no. [2987/24](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/?i=001-242679). Available at: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/?i=001-242679>

121 Decision of the Supreme Court of Georgia — Case No. 259ap-23 City of Tbilisi K. A. 259 ap-23. September 21, 2023, <https://www.supremecourt.ge/ka/fullcase/45176/2>

## 8.2. INCIDENTS OF ANTISEMITISM IN GEORGIA

During the reporting period, antisemitic rhetoric appeared in the statements of various public figures, including propagandists affiliated with the ruling party, Georgian Dream, as well as in materials circulated on social media.

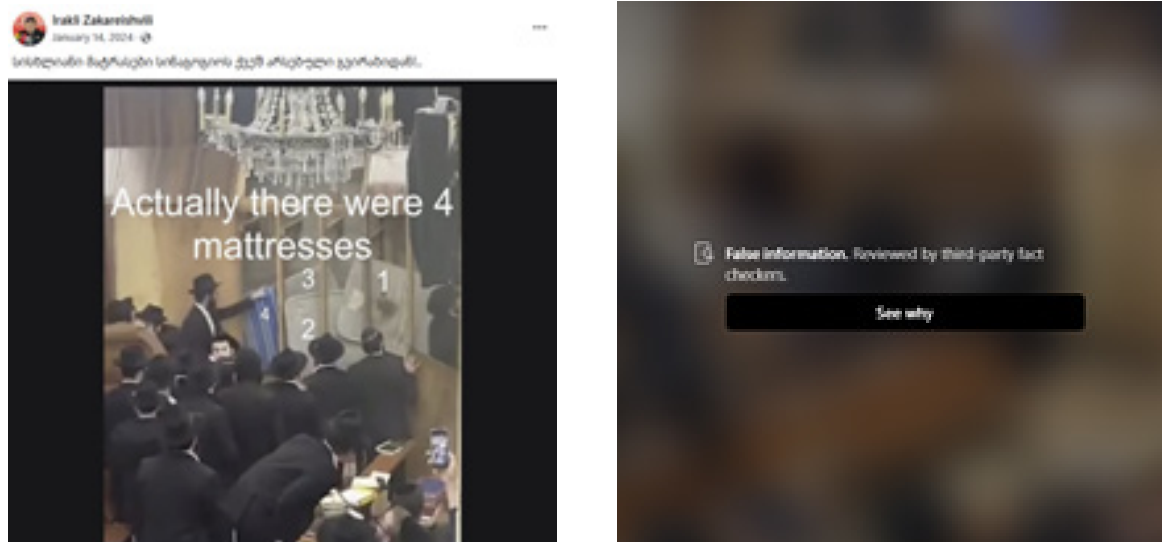
On December 27, 2024, Goga Khindrava, a propagandist for the ruling party Georgian Dream, made a disparaging remark about the Jewish people during a broadcast on POSTV, a media outlet affiliated with the government, while discussing ongoing political events. He stated: “I’ve said it before, for 35 years the Georgian society wandered in the desert, just like the Jewish people, but unlike them, the Georgian society gained wisdom.”<sup>122</sup>

On January 9 and 10, 2024, a Georgian Dream propagandist and lawyer Irakli Zakareishvili posted on his Facebook page claiming that police had discovered a secret tunnel in a New York synagogue, from which they recovered blood-stained mattresses and children’s cribs. According to him, the tunnel was used for child trafficking, abuse, and the performance of Talmudic-Satanic sacrifices and rituals. He further claimed that Jews were attempting to protect the tunnel to prevent police from entering.



122 Goga Khindrava in the Big Show, December 27, 2024, POSTV-Analytics, December 28, 2024, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jrjdqE103s&list=PLj4RPJprGmV-jseYOnC2s7J59eidpZvhqC&index=6>

The video used by Irakli Zakareishvili as supposed “evidence” is currently flagged as containing false information. He regularly disseminates antisemitic disinformation.



On January 22, 2025, a cyberattack reportedly targeted the website of the “City Mall” shopping center in Tbilisi. As a result, an antisemitic message was displayed on the website: “MURDER ALL JEWS.” “City Mall” issued a statement regarding the incident, referring to it as a cyberattack.

Following the October 7, 2023 terrorist attack on Israel by the terrorist organization Hamas, antisemitic and hate-filled rhetoric intensified in Georgia as well as across the world. During the reporting period, antisemitic comments, including religious stereotypes and conspiracy theories targeting the Jewish people, continued to appear on social media.

