

# GEORGIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution recognizes equality for all regardless of religion, subject to considerations of public safety or health or the rights of others, and it stipulates the independence of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) from the state. The constitution recognizes the “outstanding role” of the GOC in the history of the country. It prohibits persecution based on religion. Laws and policies continue to grant the GOC unique privileges. On June 27, a court convicted and sentenced two men to 15 years in prison for the 2018 killing of a human rights activist who had Jewish and Yezidi roots, but ruled it was not a hate crime. The government approved the registration application of one religious group while rejecting six others. Parliament held hearings with civil society and religious groups about legislation to comply with a court order to amend the law granting the GOC exclusive tax and property privileges, but failed to take action. Some religious groups advocated legislation that would address a broader range of religious issues, while others expressed concerns about the potential impact of such a law on smaller groups. Some Muslim community leaders said the government continued to influence and favor the state-funded religious group All Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG). Religious groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and others said Muslim communities faced government resistance to issuing construction permits for places of worship. The Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) and some Muslim groups reported difficulties in obtaining government recognition of their ownership claims of religious properties. NGOs cited concerns that bias in public schools favored GOC religious teachings.

According to religious leaders, de facto authorities in the Russian-occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remained outside the administrative control of the central government, continued to restrict or prohibit the activities of some religious groups. De facto South Ossetian authorities permitted GOC religious services but said they were illegal, and NGOs reported Russian guards impeded access of residents to some churches and cemeteries. De facto Abkhaz authorities prohibited GOC clergy from entering the occupied territory. De facto authorities in both occupied territories continued to ban Jehovah’s Witnesses. According to a U.S NGO, de facto authorities in South Ossetia pressured Orthodox churches to merge with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) investigated 44 cases involving crimes reported as religiously motivated, notably including 10 cases of unlawful interference with the performance of religious rites, 10 cases of persecution, and eight cases of damage or destruction of property. The Public Defender's Office (PDO) received 19 complaints of religiously based crimes or discrimination as of year's end, 10 of which involved violence. This equaled the 19 total complaints in 2018. Jehovah's Witnesses reported 20 incidents against the group or its members, including 11 involving violence. The PDO and religious minorities continued to state there was a widespread societal perception that religious minorities posed a threat to the GOC and the country's values. Unknown individuals twice vandalized a chapel used by Armenian Apostolic and Catholic parishes in Akhalkalaki, breaking icons and damaging portraits. The NGO Media Development Foundation (MDF) documented 55 instances of religiously intolerant remarks in national media, compared with 148 in 2018. Some religious figures in Abkhazia reportedly continued to advocate the establishment of an autocephalous Orthodox Church in the territory or a merger with the ROC. Both the GOC and ROC formally recognized Orthodox churches in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as belonging to the GOC, but the ROC did not always respect this in practice.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet regularly with senior government officials, including the leadership of the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARI), the public defender, the prime minister's adviser on human rights, and officials at various ministries, to encourage dialogue and tolerance between the government and minority religious groups. The Charge d'Affaires met with GOC Patriarch Ilia II and other senior GOC leaders to stress the importance of the GOC in promoting religious diversity and tolerance. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials met with minority religious groups throughout the country, and the embassy and its regional information offices sponsored events in Tbilisi and elsewhere in the country to encourage religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2014 census, GOC members constitute 83.4 percent of the population, followed by Muslims at 10.7 percent and members of the AAC at 2.9 percent. The remaining 3 percent includes Roman Catholics, Yezidis, Greek Orthodox, Jews, growing numbers of "nontraditional" religious groups such as Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and individuals who profess no religious preference.

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

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

According to a 2015 census conducted by the de facto South Ossetian authorities, there were 53,000 residents of Russian-occupied South Ossetia. The majority of the population practices Orthodox Christianity; other minority groups include followers of Islam and the Right Faith, a revival of the pre-Christian ethnic Ossetian religion.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

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

The constitution recognizes the GOC's special role in the country's history but stipulates the GOC shall be independent from the state and that relations between the GOC and the state shall be governed by a constitutional agreement (concordat). The concordat grants rights not given to other religious groups, including legal immunity for the GOC patriarch, exemption of GOC clergy from military service (though by law, clergy from all religious groups are exempted), and a consultative role in government, especially in education. The concordat states some of its provisions require additional legislation before they may be implemented, including the GOC's right to a consultative role in state education policies.

A religious group may register with the National Agency of the Public Registry (NAPR) as a Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) or as a nonprofit organization, both of which offer benefits, including legal recognition, tax exemptions for donations and other "religious activities," and the right to own property and open bank accounts. The civil code defines the activities and rights of denominations registered for LEPL status. Unregistered religious groups may conduct religious activities but do not receive the legal status or benefits conferred on registered groups.

To register as a LEPL, the law specifies that a religious group must have a historical link with the country or be recognized as a religion "by the legislation of the member states of the Council of Europe." A religious group must also submit to the NAPR information regarding its objectives and procedures and a list of its founders and members of its governing body. Groups registering as nonprofit religious organizations do not have to demonstrate historic ties to the country or recognition by Council of Europe members but must submit to the NAPR similar information on their objectives, governing procedures, and names of founders and members of their governing body.

The law grants the GOC exceptions from several requirements applicable to other religious groups, including payment of taxes on the construction, restoration, and maintenance of religious buildings and the payment of taxes on property. It exempts the GOC Patriarchate, but not other religious groups, from taxes on "profit from the sale of crosses, candles, icons, books and calendars used...for religious purposes." In addition, the law states that only the GOC, and no other religious organization, may acquire nonagricultural state property through a direct sale by the government. Should other religious groups wish to acquire this type of property, they must participate in public tenders. Only the GOC has the right to acquire agricultural state property free of charge; all others must pay a fee.

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

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

By law, the Prosecutor General’s Office (PGO), which is separate from the MOIA, prosecutes human rights violations involving religious intolerance, while the PDO serves as the country’s human rights ombudsman and monitors complaints of restrictions on religious freedom. The PDO’s Tolerance Center carries out educational activities and monitors and analyzes cases of religious and ethnic discrimination. It also coordinates the PDO’s Council of Religions and Ethnic Minorities, which has a mandate to protect religious freedom; facilitate a constructive multilateral dialogue between various religious groups; promote a tolerant, fair and peaceful environment for religious groups; and engage religious minorities in the process of civic integration.

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

SARI distributes government compensation to the GOC, and Islamic, Jewish, Roman Catholic, and AAC religious organizations registered as LEPLs for "the material and moral damages inflicted upon them during the Soviet period." SARI's mandate is to promote and ensure peaceful coexistence based on principles of equality and tolerance. Its stated responsibilities include researching the existing religious situation and reporting to the government, preparing recommendations and draft legal acts for government consideration, and serving as a consultative body and intermediary for the government in disputes arising between religious associations. SARI may issue nonbinding recommendations to relevant state institutions on approval of applications for the construction of religious buildings, determination of their locations, and transfer of such properties to religious organizations.

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

### **Government Practices**

On June 27, a court sentenced two men to 15 years each in prison for the 2018 stabbing to death of 25-year-old human rights activist Vitali Safarov, who had Jewish and Yezidi roots. The court ruled, however, the killing was not a hate crime of "racial, religious, national, or ethnic intolerance," stating hate was not the only or decisive motive in the killing. International observers and local NGOs disagreed, saying the attackers engaged in further aggression and cried out racist epithets after Safarov told them he was Jewish. According to witness testimony and materials NGOs found on the internet, including Nazi symbols and calls to violence on personal Facebook pages, the men belonged to neo-Nazi groups and held ultranationalist ideas. The Center for Participation and Development, where Vitali Safarov worked, and the Human Rights Center, both NGOs, said they supported the prosecutor's November 16 decision to file an appeal for the court to establish hate as a motive in the crime.

The NGO Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) again stated the MOIA was generally correctly applying the appropriate articles of the criminal code and the quality of investigations of crimes motivated by religious hatred continued to improve.

The NAPR registered one new religious organization as an LEPL during the year: the Georgian Christian Evangelical Protestant and Lutheran Church – Bible Care. It rejected the registration applications of six other groups on the grounds that they either did not demonstrate historic ties to Georgia or were not recognized as a religion by Council of Europe countries. The NAPR declined registration to the Georgian Christian Evangelical Protestant and Lutheran Church – Bible Care for People; Georgian Christian Evangelical Protestant and Lutheran Church – Bible Care Visit the Prisoner; Georgian Christian Evangelical Protestant and Lutheran Church for Bible Care; Georgian Christian Evangelical Protestant and Lutheran Church – Bible Support; Church for All Nations – Georgia; and Georgian Christian Religious Organization Gideon.

Most prisons continued to have GOC chapels but no areas for nondenominational worship. According to SARI and Catholic, AAC, Baptist, Muslim, and Jewish groups, prisons could provide religious counseling services if requested by members of the military or prisoners.

Parliament held several hearings during the year with civil society, government officials, and religious representatives on changes to the law granting the GOC tax and property privileges not available to other religious groups. The Constitutional Court ruled in 2018 that the GOC's exclusive privileges were unconstitutional and mandated legislative change that would either abolish the privileges or grant them to all religious organizations no later than December 31, 2018. Parliament did not meet the deadline nor amend the law by year's end. SARI and some religious representatives, including members of the Jewish community and the Armenian Apostolic Church, favored drafting a new and broader "law on religion" to define which groups would be eligible for these and other benefits and to address issues pertaining to the registration and legal status of religious groups and the teaching of religion in public schools. Many civil society representatives and other religious groups, including some members of the Muslim community, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Baptist Church, however, were opposed, arguing that such legislation would allow the government to discriminate against smaller religious communities and increase the government's leverage over them. They advocated instead making benefits available to all religious groups or to none.

NGOs and some Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to influence the state-funded AMAG, including by influencing the selection of the AMAG religious leader and the selective transfer of land to AMAG. The groups said AMAG was a "Soviet-style" organization that served as a tool of the state to monitor and control religious groups. Following the December 25 election of a

new AMAG leader, several staff members left the organization, stating the State Security Service had unduly interfered with the process. A number of Muslim groups also were critical of AMAG for insisting it represented all Muslim communities in the country within one organization.

At year's end, the Tbilisi City Court did not rule on the AAC's January 2018 appeal of the NAPR's decision to register as GOC property a church of which the AAC claimed ownership since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The AAC continued to petition SARI for restitution of five churches in Tbilisi and one in Akhaltsikhe, all of which the GOC also claimed and authorities registered as state property. At year's end, SARI had not responded to any of the AAC's 57 petitions, 20 of which it filed in 2015 and 37 in 2018, for ownership or right-of-usage status. The AAC reported it operated all 57 churches in the country but did not own any of them. SARI said the issue was a lack of evidence provided by the AAC itself, but said it was in communication with the AAC and expressed willingness to cooperate in the future.

According to the PDO's Tolerance Center, non-GOC religious organizations continued to face government resistance when attempting to obtain construction permits for houses of worship, as was the case with a mosque in Batumi. The center continued to attribute the resistance to what it termed a general societal bias in favor of the GOC. According to TDI, although the law provides for equal treatment for applicants seeking construction permits, municipalities often discriminated against representatives of religious minority groups. TDI also cited what it described as the "problematic role" of SARI in the process, which "without a legitimate purpose and legal basis" interfered with the authority of local self-governance.

Muslim community members continued to state there was a lack of transparency in government decisions on mosques and their construction. The Muslim community continued to dispute the government's ownership of mosques in Kvemo Kartli, Adigeni, and Adjara. The government owned the land as a legacy from the Soviet period, and in some cases said the existing mosques were former GOC houses of worship or were erected in their place.

On September 30, the Batumi City Court ruled Batumi City Hall had discriminated against the New Mosque Construction Fund (an entity representing members of the Batumi Muslim community seeking to establish a new mosque) by denying the permits necessary to build a new mosque on land the fund owned. The court ordered the mayor's office to reconsider its decision. The Muslim community said

it needed a second mosque in the city because the only mosque currently operating there was too small to accommodate the local population. The mayor's office argued in court that the plot of land was located in a high-density residential zone and was therefore not suitable for a religious building. According to media, there were already several churches in the same area. The NGOs Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) and TDI brought the case to court on behalf of the fund. They criticized the court decision for not requiring the mayor's office to issue the permit. The mayor outlined several conditions for allowing the construction, including that the fund retract its appeal to the courts and give the land acquired for the mosque to AMAG, which would later apply for the necessary permits. On December 4, Batumi City Hall appealed the Batumi City Court's September 30 decision, leading the New Mosque Construction Fund to submit its own appeal seeking the court obligate the city to issue the construction permit rather than simply "reconsider." At year's end, the appeals were ongoing. According to a report by the TDI, Muslims in Batumi told the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18 that AMAG backed the state in its refusal to grant the permits for the second mosque, while the Georgian Muslim Union, which did not receive state funds, supported the plans for a second mosque.

Parallel to the mosque permit issue, the construction fund appealed Batumi City Hall's decision to impose a fine of 3,000 lari (\$1,000) for the construction of a temporary wooden structure built on the fund's land. The appeal was ongoing at year's end.

Construction continued on property surrounding the main building of a new mosque AMAG built in late 2018 in the village of Mokhe in Samtskhe-Javakheti. The community was already conducting prayers at the mosque. A local Muslim donated the land for the new mosque to AMAG after a SARI commission transferred the original, disputed building the local Muslim community had planned to use as a mosque to the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation in 2018. At the time, SARI told reporters that the commission's decision and AMAG's subsequent steps to build the mosque on the new plot were acceptable to the local Muslim community. EMC, however, said that the commission's decision was not representative of local Muslims because no trustees of the local community were represented on the commission. They reported at the time that some local Muslims refused to pray at the new mosque and instead prayed temporarily outside the property of the old mosque. EMC appealed to the UN Human Rights Committee on behalf of some local Muslims, stating that the state had violated their rights to equality and freedom of religion, among others. The Human Rights Committee had not responded to the appeal as of year's end.

The government continued to pay subsidies for the restoration of religious properties it considered national cultural heritage sites. The National Agency for Cultural Heritage, housed within the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport, allocated 2.3 million lari (\$801,000) during the year for the restoration of religious monuments, a decrease of approximately 200,000 lari (\$69,700) from 2018.

There was no movement on a 2018 EMC appeal to the Supreme Court of a lower court ruling that the MOIA did not discriminate against Muslims by failing to prevent vandalism against an Islamic boarding school. The boarding school had not opened by year's end. According to a 2018 TDI report, religious education in public schools persisted, although the law provided for religious neutrality and nondiscrimination. TDI continued to report cases of religious discrimination in schools, including incidents involving the promotion of GOC theology during general courses on religion, GOC prayers conducted in classrooms, and the display of icons and other religious symbols in schools, despite the law's prohibition of proselytizing. The GOC did not offer any formal religious studies classes in public institutions. Although the GOC had the right to do so under the concordat, the government did not define the requisite legal structures for direct GOC involvement in public institutions. Nevertheless, NGOs and non-GOC organizations, such as EMC, reported GOC clergy often visited classes during the regular school day, sometimes at the initiative of teachers or school administrators, despite the law restricting such visits to after hours.

In October EMC called upon the Ministry of Education's General Inspection Department, responsible for dealing with complaints of inappropriate teacher behavior, to "ensure the ... protection of religious neutrality" in education after a video surfaced of GOC clergy meeting with professors and teachers emphasizing the importance of Christianity in Adjara, a majority ethnic-Georgian, Muslim region. After the meeting, one high school principal declared that educational professionals had a "duty to convert [students] to their ancient faith." By year's end, authorities did not respond to EMC's complaint.

The government paid compensation to five religious groups for "material and moral damages" they sustained during the Soviet period. It distributed the same amounts as in 2018: 25 million lari (\$8.7 million) to the GOC; 2.75 million lari (\$958,000) to the Muslim community, represented by the AMAG; 550,000 lari (\$192,000) to the Catholic Church; 800,000 lari (\$279,000) to the AAC; and 400,000 lari (\$139,000) to the Jewish community. SARI's position was that the

payments were of “partial and of symbolic character,” and that the government continued to take into account levels of damage and “present day negative conditions” of religious groups in determining compensation. NGOs continued to criticize the exclusion of other religious groups in the legislation designating the five groups eligible to receive compensation and to question the criteria the government used to select them.

Media reported that on May 8, by a vote of 96-0, parliament approved a change to the labor code making May 12 a holiday marking the country’s consecration to the Virgin Mary and allocating 890,000 lari (\$310,000) to celebrate it. May 12 was already a public holiday marking St. Andrew’s Day. Sopho Kiladze, head of parliament’s human rights committee, told Maestro Television, “It is important for Georgia to be officially declared as the domain of the Virgin Mary.” Beka Mindiashvili, head of the PDO’s Tolerance Center and a former GOC theologian, denounced the measure.

The MOI Department of Human Rights, in cooperation with the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, conducted 10 training programs on discrimination and hate crimes during the year, and commissioned research on the victims’ attitudes toward investigations of the crimes against them, with a focus on religious minorities, among others.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

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

De facto authorities in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia continued to ban the Jehovah’s Witnesses. According to anecdotal reports, however, Jehovah’s Witnesses could continue to rent space for Kingdom Halls in Abkhazia.

Representatives of the GOC remained unable to travel to or conduct services in Russian-occupied Abkhazia, including in the majority-ethnic Georgian Gali District. According to SARI, the district's ethnic-Georgian population had to travel to Tbilisi-administered territory to celebrate religious holidays.

The government continued to say the de facto authorities damaged historical Orthodox religious buildings in an attempt to erase Georgian cultural heritage. In September the head of the National Agency of the Protection of Georgian Cultural Heritage expressed concern over the state of the Bedia Cathedral, a 10th century Orthodox complex in Abkhazia, as a result of "Russian vandalism."

De facto authorities allowed the GOC to conduct services in South Ossetia. There were GOC churches in the ethnic-Georgian-majority district of Akhagori. SARI again reported it was not allowed to enter the occupied territory. It said it was unable to monitor houses of worship in South Ossetia and that the status of most properties in the territory was unknown. According to a report from Amnesty International released in July, residents in and outside of South Ossetia were impeded from visiting a number of churches and cemeteries within South Ossetia located near the administrative boundary line with the rest of Georgia because of the threat of detention by Russian guards. The report said residents were unable to visit the village cemetery in Kveshi and were impeded from visiting eight other cemeteries in South Ossetia near the administrative boundary line.

According to the South Ossetian news agency "RES," Sonia Khubaeva, the de facto South Ossetian "representative for religious issues," said in November that religious groups could function in the territory only if they were registered. She said this "law" applied to the GOC, "which has been operating illegally in the territory of South Ossetia for 11 years."

According to an annual report published in February by U.S. NGO Freedom House, the de facto authorities in South Ossetia placed increasing pressure on the Orthodox churches in the territory to merge with the ROC. The report stated that in 2018 de facto South Ossetian border guards confiscated the South Ossetian "passport" of Bishop Ambrosi of Methone when he tried to enter the region from Russia. Ambrosi helped establish the noncanonical Alania eparchy in 2005, aligning it with noncanonical Greek churches. Both the ROC and the GOC continued to recognize South Ossetia as in the canonical jurisdiction of the GOC; however, the ROC did not always respect this in practice.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

The MOIA investigated 44 cases involving crimes reported as religiously motivated, including 10 cases of unlawful interference with the performance of religious rites, 10 cases of persecution, and eight cases of damage or destruction of property. The PGO reported criminal prosecutions were launched against 14 individuals for crimes motivated by religious intolerance. Six of these individuals were convicted on the charge. By comparison, in 2018 the ministry investigated 23 incidents reported as religiously motivated crimes.

At year's end, the PDO reported it received 19 complaints of discrimination or hate crimes based on religion during the year, equal to 19 received in 2018. Ten incidents – of which eight targeted the Jehovah's Witnesses – involved violence, compared with six in the previous year. The remaining nine cases concerned complaints that authorities refused to register religious organizations, as well as of discrimination in the workplace, harassment, and the “lack of involvement of religious minorities in cultural life.” At year's end, the PDO was examining whether religious discrimination was involved when a Muslim religious organization faced difficulties importing religious literature for dissemination. The Customs Department of the Revenue Service allowed the import, saying there had been a technical issue, only after the organization raised the issue. The PDO stated cases from previous years remained largely unresolved, partly because of a lack of urgency and resources from the government.

At year's end, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported 20 religiously motivated incidents to the government, compared to 19 in 2018. Of the 20, 11 involved physical violence, five vandalism or other damage against Kingdom Halls, and four interference with religious services or damage of other property or literature. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that prosecutors investigated eight of these cases and convicted an individual in one. According to the PDO, the PGO continued to decline to classify crimes targeting Jehovah's Witnesses as religiously motivated, despite repeated PDO requests that it do so. In 2018 the Council of Europe reported that after LGBTI persons, Jehovah's Witnesses were the most likely group in the country to face discrimination.

In one case in February, an individual verbally insulted, then attacked, a Jehovah's Witness who had just left a religious service at a Kingdom Hall in Tbilisi. Patrol officers arrived on the scene and were able to restrain the attacker; the victim sought medical treatment for injuries to his eye and lip. Officials charged the attacker with “purposeful, less grave damage to health,” and, at year's end, the case was ongoing. In another incident in April, a Jehovah's Witness was verbally

insulted and attacked by a Tbilisi resident after approaching the resident's apartment to proselytize. The investigation into this case was ongoing and authorities did not press any charges at year's end.

Authorities reported no arrests or other progress in open investigations of incidents from past years against Jehovah's Witnesses or their property. Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses legal department said communication with the MOIA had improved compared with previous years, and they commended the Department of Human Rights within the ministry for increased responsiveness to their concern that crimes against members of the community should be treated as religiously motivated, even though the PGO declined to prosecute them as such.

In January the Supreme Court upheld the 2018 conviction of a man the Tbilisi City Court found guilty of harassing two female Jehovah's Witnesses. In 2016 the man kicked and insulted the two women and tore their clothes while they were sharing Bible verses in Alexandre's Garden in Tbilisi. Although the court upheld the guilty verdict, it reduced the man's fine from the original 2,000 (\$700) to 500 lari (\$170).

Representatives of the PDO's Tolerance Center and minority religious groups continued to report what they termed a widespread societal belief that minority religious groups posed a threat to the GOC and to the country's cultural values. A 2018 Council of Europe study reported 36 percent of citizens believed diversity affected the country adversely and was detrimental to its culture and traditions.

Minority religious communities, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, and Protestants, continued to report resistance from local communities to their establishing places of worship and religious schools. A Muslim boarding school in Kobuleti, near Batumi, remained closed after city officials ignored a 2018 ruling by the Batumi City Court ordering them to provide the school with sewage and water connections. On April 4 and again on November 4, unknown persons broke into a chapel used by Armenian Apostolic and Catholic parishes in Akhalkalaki and vandalized the premises, breaking icons, and damaging portraits. Authorities were investigating both incidents at year's end.

MDF documented 55 instances of religiously intolerant statements on television, online, and in printed media by media representatives, political parties, clergy, public organizations, and others, compared to 148 such incidents in 2018. The instances included a January statement by GOC clergyman David Isakadze in which he criticized a 2016 joint declaration from Russian Patriarch Kirill and

Catholic Pope Francis. Isakadze said, “Catholicism is the greatest deviation and heresy from Church dogmas.” Separately, the online publication “Georgia in the World” published in October a statement by Vazha Otarashvili, political secretary of the Alliance of Patriots party, in which he said, “They will build numerous mosques so quietly, so treacherously, that people will not understand that this is the Islamization of Adjara.”

The ROC and the GOC both formally recognized the Orthodox churches in Abkhazia, as well as in South Ossetia, as belonging to the GOC; however, de facto authorities continued to restrict access to GOC clergy. According to media reports from online news outlets like Netgazeti and Resonance Daily, as well as experts on the region, some religious figures in Abkhazia continued to support turning the region’s Orthodox churches into an autocephalous Abkhaz Orthodox Church, others wished to subordinate them to the ROC, and still others wished to subordinate them to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met regularly with officials from the government, including SARI, the prime minister’s adviser on human rights and gender equality, and the president’s adviser on national minorities, to encourage dialogue between the government and minority religious groups. They also continued to meet with the PDO and officials in its Tolerance Center to discuss discrimination against religious groups and stress the importance of interfaith dialogue.

Several embassy information offices sponsored outreach activities for religious minority communities. The Batumi office hosted a workshop for young Muslim girls to foster discussion of religious freedom, antidiscrimination, and human rights. The program also provided instruction on debunking fake news and propaganda centered on religious narratives. Additionally, the Batumi office supported members of the Young Muslim’s Union in community outreach projects meant to promote inclusion. The Akhaltsikhe office engaged with the ethnic Armenian community, which mostly belongs to the AAC, including by hosting roundtables and debates that included members of the AAC, GOC, and Roman Catholic Church. The office also sponsored a project that in part brought together government, civil society, and the local population to discuss religious pluralism and foster open dialogue. The Rustavi office was active with the largely Shia Muslim Azerbaijani community and hosted a quiz program on U.S. history that

brought multifaith communities, including members of the AAC and GOC, together to encourage integration and social inclusion.

In June the embassy sponsored a performance of traditional Georgian and American sacred music by a U.S. chorale at the Gelati Monastery in Kutaisi. In welcoming remarks, embassy representatives at the performance highlighted the importance of religious pluralism. The embassy awarded a small grant to the Georgian Strategic Analysis Center to support a project on increasing understanding of democracy, including respect for religious pluralism, within the GOC. In October the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and a Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs met with members of the GOC's leadership council, the Holy Synod, who were visiting the United States to mark the tenth anniversary of the GOC's North American Eparchy. The officials recognized the country's history of religious tolerance and encouraged the GOC to continue to promote interfaith dialogue. In November the embassy announced funds for a comprehensive assessment and conservation plan to restore the Jvari Monastery, one of Georgia's most iconic cultural sites.

Embassy staff continued to meet with NGOs concerned with religious freedom issues, including the Center for Development and Democracy, the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center, TDI, and the 21st Century Union, to discuss interfaith relations, the integration of religious minorities into society, and the promotion of religious freedom for all.

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials visited the Pankisi Gorge, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kvemo Kartli, and Adjara regions on several occasions to meet with local religious leaders, including from the Sunni and Shia Muslim and AAC communities. In these meetings, embassy officials advocated interfaith understanding, dialogue, and the peaceful coexistence of all religions.

The Charge d'Affaires met with GOC Patriarch Ilia II and other senior GOC members on multiple occasions. In her meetings, she stressed the importance of the Church's role in promoting religious diversity and tolerance.