

# GEORGIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for “complete freedom of religion,” separation of church and state, and equality for all regardless of religion. It prohibits persecution based on religion. Laws and policies grant the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) privileges not accorded to any other religious group, including legal immunity for the GOC patriarch and a consultative role in education. Ruling party amendments to the constitution generated controversy for appearing to limit freedom of religion on national security grounds. Parliament later re-amended the controversial amendments to the constitution’s religious freedom language to address civil society and international expert concerns of potential limitations on freedom of religion. The government investigated seven cases involving alleged crimes committed due to religious intolerance. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the Public Defender’s Office (PDO) continued to report a lack of effective investigations into crimes motivated by religious hatred, which remained a problem. The PDO reported, however, it only received three cases of violence based on religious intolerance during the year, representing a downward trend. Some NGOs and minority religious groups continued to report both national and local government resistance to minority religious groups’ construction of buildings for religious purposes. For example, Muslim representatives cited delays and a lack of transparency involving local government decisions about mosque expansion or construction in Batumi. Some religious organizations and NGOs criticized the State Agency on Religious Issues (SARI, also known as the State Agency for Religious Affairs) for functioning nontransparently, failing to promote the separation of church and state, practicing favoritism toward the GOC in restitution of buildings confiscated by the state in the Soviet era, and inadequately addressing acts of religious intolerance and discrimination in favor of the GOC in public schools. SARI dispensed the government’s compensation for “the material and moral damages inflicted upon religious groups during the Soviet period” and functioned as its consultative body on religious property issues.

Restrictions continued on religious activities in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remained outside the control of the central government. According to a SARI report, GOC clergy were unable to conduct religious services in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In January, while clearing the way for a training ground in Abkhazia, Russian troops bulldozed a church and a nearby cemetery in Tsebelda Village. On October 17, South Ossetia’s de facto “Supreme Court”

banned Jehovah's Witnesses as an extremist organization. The ban on Jehovah's Witnesses continued in Abkhazia.

There were reports of vandalism and violence against religious minorities. Jehovah's Witnesses reported 10 physical assaults on its members. Representatives of minority religious groups continued to report widespread societal belief that minority religious groups posed a threat to the GOC and to the country's cultural values. The NGO Media Development Foundation (MDF) documented at least 92 instances of religiously intolerant remarks in national media.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to meet regularly with senior government officials, including SARI leadership, the prime minister's adviser for human rights and gender equality, and the president's adviser for minority issues, to encourage dialogue between the government and minority religious groups. The Ambassador met with the GOC Patriarch several times to stress the importance of the GOC's role in promoting religious diversity and tolerance. The Ambassador and other embassy officials traveled throughout the country to meet with minority religious groups, and the embassy sponsored the participation of four GOC representatives in a program in the United States on religious freedom and interfaith issues.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.9 million (July 2017 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 Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) at 2.9 percent. According to the census, Roman Catholics, Yezidis, Greek Orthodox, Jews, growing numbers of "nontraditional" religious groups such as Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and individuals who profess no religious preference constitute the remaining 3 percent of the population.

There is a strong correlation between ethnicity, religious affiliation, and region of residence. 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 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, originally from Adjara, migrated to Samtskhe-Javakheti in the 1980s. Ethnic Armenians belong primarily to the AAC and constitute the majority of the population in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

According to a census reportedly conducted in 2011 by the de facto government of Abkhazia, there are 241,000 residents of Abkhazia. A survey reportedly 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 list no preference.

According to a 2015 census reportedly conducted by the de facto government of South Ossetia, there are 53,000 residents of South Ossetia. Estimates indicate the majority of the population practices Christianity, followed by 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 prohibits persecution based on religion and prohibits compelling anyone to express his or her opinion about religion. The constitution also prohibits public and political associations that create religious animosity. The law provides for freedom of religious belief, denomination, and conscience, including the right to choose and change religious affiliation.

The constitution recognizes the special role of the GOC in the country's history, but stipulates the GOC shall be independent from the state, and relations between the GOC and the state shall be governed by a constitutional agreement (also called a 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, 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 consultative role in education.

A religious group may register with the government's National Agency of the Public Registry (NAPR) as a Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) or as a nonprofit organization, both of which offer essentially the same benefits, including legal recognition when conducting activities, partial tax exemptions, and the right to

own property and open bank accounts. Unregistered religious groups may conduct religious activities but do not receive the legal status or benefits conferred on registered groups.

To acquire LEPL status, the law requires religious organizations to register with the government. To register, organizations must have historic ties to the country and recognition from Council of Europe member states as a religious organization. In addition, an organization registering for LEPL status must submit to the NAPR information regarding its objectives and procedures and a list of its founders and governing body. The civil code defines the activities and rights of denominations registered under LEPL status. 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 tax code does not consider religious activities to be economic activities, and grants registered religious groups' partial tax exemptions for donations. Religious groups other than the GOC, however, pay profit tax on the sale of religious products, value added taxes on the provision or importation of religious products, and taxes on activities related to the construction, restoration, and maintenance of religious buildings.

Religious groups, except for the GOC, also pay property tax. According to the law on state property, no religious organization registered as an LEPL, except the GOC, may acquire nonagricultural state property through a direct sale. A denomination registered as a nonprofit organization may purchase state property. The law also grants the GOC the right to acquire state-owned agricultural land free of charge, while other religious groups must pay for land.

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 provides no definition for "establishment." Violations are punishable by fines, imprisonment, or both. Violations committed by a public official are considered abuses of power and are punishable by fines or longer terms of imprisonment if committed by force or arms or by insulting the dignity of a victim. In cases of religious persecution, the perpetrator may face imprisonment for up to three years depending upon the use or threat of violence, his or her official position, and damages caused. In cases of unlawful interference in 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. Interference in the establishment of a religious organization is punishable by fine, correctional work for up to one year, or imprisonment for up to two years.

By law, the Chief Prosecutor's Office (CPO) prosecutes human rights violations involving religious intolerance. The CPO's human rights unit monitors the protection of religious freedom, while the PDO serves as the country's human rights ombudsman and monitors complaints of restrictions on religious freedom. The PDO's Tolerance Center coordinates the PDO's Council of Religions and Ethnic Minorities, carries out educational activities, and monitors and analyzes cases of religious and ethnic discrimination and xenophobia.

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

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 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" to receive religious education, but only after school hours. The law includes no special regulations for private religious schools. Outside instructors, including clergy, may only attend or direct student religious education or activities if students invite them to do so; school administration and teachers may not be involved in this process.

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

## **Government Practices**

*Summary paragraph:* During the year, the ruling party passed amendments to the constitution that generated controversy for appearing to limit freedom of religion on national security grounds. Parliament later re-amended the controversial amendments in response to civil society and international expert concerns of potential limitations to freedom of religion. The changes were expected to go into effect in 2018. Although the CPO reported it had investigated seven cases involving crimes potentially based on religious intolerance, similar to previous years, NGOs and the PDO stated the government was ineffective in its investigation of crimes motivated by religious hatred. NGOs and minority religious groups continued to express concern over government actions, at both the national and local levels, including resisting the construction of places of worship for minority religious groups and showing what they said was favoritism toward the GOC in the restitution of buildings confiscated by the state in the Soviet era. They also criticized SARI's distribution of compensation funds for Soviet-era damages. Despite reported government resistance, there were some court rulings favoring the right of minority religious groups to build places of worship and schools. The GOC continued to be the only religious group allowed to have chapels in prisons. As part of the government's human rights action plan, SARI organized activities and taught courses on religious nondiscrimination for members of the national and local governments and law enforcement. Some NGOs and the PDO said the government inadequately addressed acts of religious intolerance and discrimination favoring the GOC in public schools.

During the year, the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), proposed a series of constitutional amendments that included changes to the constitution's article on the freedom of belief and conscience. The proposed amendments allowed the government to "interfere" in religious affairs based on national security. In its review of the draft amendments, the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) stated that, according to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), "the State cannot use the need to protect national security as the sole basis for restricting the exercise of the right of a person or a group of persons to manifest their religion." NGOs and local religious organizations also said the amendments posed a potential threat to religious freedom. In September parliament adopted the amendments, in a one party vote, to the constitution's article on freedom of religion and belief. In November parliament reinitiated a new constitutional amendment process, including a correction to the language on freedom of religion more in line with the constitution's language prior to the September amendments. NGOs approved of the new language that removed permission for the government to interfere in

religious affairs based on national security. Parliament held its first two votes on the November amendments in December and was expected to hold its final vote in 2018. Similar to the initial amendment process, parliament approved the changes without opposition support.

The ECtHR ruled the government violated a religious freedom clause of The European Convention on Human Rights during a religiously motivated mob's violent raid on a Jehovah's Witnesses annual convention in 2001. After negotiations failed, the case was brought to the ECtHR in 2005. The ECtHR ruled there had been a breach of the right of the Jehovah's Witnesses to practice their religion freely in meetings. The government agreed to pay 800 euros (\$960) per plaintiff and 2,000 euros (\$2,400) collectively to the Jehovah's Witnesses as a group.

The CPO investigated seven cases involving alleged religiously motivated hate crimes during the year. Of the seven cases, one involved beating, four persecution, one damage or destruction of property together with persecution, and one abuse of official authority. According to the CPO, three of the cases of persecution were prosecuted for crimes based on religious intolerance; none of the seven cases was terminated.

As part of the government's human rights action plan, SARI developed and taught courses on religious tolerance to more than 200 participants from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and local law enforcement and civil service officials.

The NGO Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) again stated there was a lack of effective investigation into crimes motivated by religious hatred. The PDO's December report stated it received three accounts of violence on the ground of religious intolerance during the year, which the PDO said showed a downward trend in such crimes. The PDO noted, however, that cases from previous years remained largely unresolved.

According to NAPR's website, it approved two religious organization registration requests and denied two other requests submitted during the year. NAPR stated it denied the registration requests because they did not comply with the regulations. NAPR's website did not specify how many registration requests it received and which religious organizations it denied registration. According to NAPR's website, 46 religious organizations were registered as LEPLs.

Most prisons reportedly continued to have GOC chapels but no areas for

nondenominational worship. According to SARI, Roman Catholic, AAC, Baptist, Muslim, and Jewish groups, services remained available upon request in the military and in prisons. According to the Tolerance Center, non-GOC religious organizations continued to face government resistance when attempting to obtain construction permits for churches. 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, representatives of religious minority groups were often subject to discrimination. Construction permits are issued by local self-governing bodies, and according to TDI, “often due to the discriminatory approaches of municipalities toward religious minorities, the latter face obstacles.” TDI also noted the “problematic role” of SARI in the process, which “without a legitimate purpose and legal basis” interfered with the authority of local self-governance.

The AAC continued to request restitution of five churches in Tbilisi and one in Akhaltsikhe, all of which had been registered as state property and claimed by both the AAC and the GOC. The AAC reported it operated 57 churches in the country but did not own any of them. The AAC petitioned SARI for ownership and/or right of usage of 20 of the churches in 2015 and for the remaining churches during the year. SARI’s response remained pending at year’s end.

NGOs and some Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to exert influence over the NGO All Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG), including the appointment of AMAG religious leaders.

Muslim community members said there was a lack of government transparency around 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. Muslim community leaders and local and central government authorities remained unable to reach a mutually agreeable solution to address overcrowding in the state-owned mosque in Batumi.

In February a local Adjara organization called the New Mosque Construction Fund petitioned Batumi City Hall for permission to build a new mosque. According to the NGO Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), some members of the Batumi Muslim community began raising funds for the construction of a mosque in 2016 and purchased a piece of land from a private owner in installments. The fund also paid for architectural plans for the mosque. In May

the Mayor and Batumi City Hall refused to issue the first construction permit (approval of the terms of use of land for the construction), stating that it was a predominantly residential area and that the area's future development must be residential. The EMC responded the city hall's decision was "illegal, unjustified, and gives ground to assume discrimination," and in June filed a lawsuit over the city hall's refusal to issue a permit. The court admitted the case; however, as of December, the court had not held a hearing on the complaint. In May some members of the Muslim community began conducting prayer services on the purchased piece of land and erected a temporary structure on the site. The same month Batumi City Hall ordered an immediate suspension of construction, imposed a 3,000 lari (\$1,100) fine, and ordered the land be returned to its initial condition. EMC and TDI appealed city hall's order to demolish the temporary structure; as of December the local court had not held a hearing on the appeal. Some members of the Adjara Muslim community opposed expansion of the existing mosque in Batumi (as opposed to building a new one), which they claim would still be too small to accommodate the local Muslim population. In December the PDO said building of a new mosque in Batumi remained unresolved.

In May the SARI commission, created in 2014 to resolve the ownership dispute over a religious building in the village of Mokhe in Samtskhe-Javakheti, recommended transfer of ownership of the building to the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation and the provision to the local community of an alternative plot of land to construct a mosque. Local Muslims claimed ownership of the building as a 20th century mosque, while the GOC also claimed ownership as the site of a former GOC church. At year's end construction of the new mosque continued; however, according to a SARI report, the disputed building had been fenced off and protected as a cultural heritage monument. The PDO stated the SARI commission failed to accomplish its goal of establishing the origin and ownership of the building.

The government continued to pay subsidies for the restoration of religious properties it considered national cultural heritage sites. The Ministry of Culture and Protection of Monuments allocated 977,344 lari (\$374,000) during the year for the restoration of religious monuments, including 156,000 lari (\$59,800) for design drafts and 821,344 lari (\$315,000) for rehabilitation, conservation, and infrastructure development.

In June the Supreme Court said it would not review the Kutaisi Court of Appeal's September 2016 ruling that residents of Kobuleti had discriminated against Muslims in 2014 by nailing a pig's head to the front door of a planned Muslim

boarding school and by erecting a cross near the property. The court ruled the individuals involved in the vandalism were obligated to provide compensation. In April the Kutaisi Court of Appeals upheld the lower court's decision not to rule on whether the Ministry of Internal Affairs had engaged in discriminatory behavior toward Muslims in the 2014 incident when it did not stop the actions of the Kobuleti residents. The EMC appealed the court's decision to the Supreme Court, which had not decided whether to hear the case by year's end. At year's end, the boarding school had not opened.

NGOs continued to report cases of religious discrimination in schools, including incidents involving the promotion of GOC theology in religion courses, GOC prayers conducted in classrooms, and the display of icons and other religious symbols in schools, despite the law's prohibition of proselytization. The Ministry of Education's general inspection department continued to be responsible for dealing with complaints of inappropriate teacher behavior. According to a TDI report, while the law governing general education provides for religious neutrality and nondiscrimination, religious education in public schools persisted.

According to TDI, the Constitutional Court admitted part of a case in February submitted by a group of religious organizations alleging discrimination by the government in transferring state property to the GOC. The case was originally submitted in August 2016 by the Union of All Muslims of Georgia (an NGO), Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, Pentecostal Church of Georgia, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Georgia, and Redeemed Christian Church of God in Georgia (represented by the Tbilisi Free University Law Clinic and TDI).

In July the Constitutional Court held its main hearing on an October 2015 case submitted by the Caucasus Apostolic Administration of Latin Rite Catholics, Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, Union of All Muslims of Georgia, Pentecostal Church of Georgia, Trans-Caucasian Union of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Word of Life Church of Georgia, Holy Trinity Church, and Church of Christ to obtain equal tax status for all religious organizations. The court had previously postponed deliberations in 2016, reportedly due to the absence of a relevant expert. TDI, which represented the claimants along with the Constitutional Law Clinic of the Free University, said the court had not ruled on the case by year's end.

The government distributed 25 million lari (\$9.58 million) to the GOC in compensation for "material and moral damages" inflicted upon it during the Soviet period. In addition, in accordance with a 2014 parliamentary resolution allowing

the government to compensate Islamic, Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Armenian Apostolic religious organizations registered as LEPLs, SARI disbursed compensation funds totaling 4.5 million lari (\$1.72 million) to those four religious groups in coordination with the Ministry of Finance. NGOs continued to question the criteria the government used to select the four denominations and to criticize the exclusion of other religious groups.

SARI reported the year's government disbursements as follows: 2.75 million lari (\$1.05 million) to the Muslim community, represented by the AMAG; 550,000 lari (\$211,000) to the RCC; 800,000 lari (\$307,000) to the AAC; and 400,000 lari (\$153,000) to the Jewish community. In making the disbursements, SARI again stated the compensation was "partial and of symbolic character," and stated the government continued to take into account levels of damage and "present day negative conditions" of denominations during the selection process.

There was no progress in the government's investigation into two November 2015 shooting incidents at the Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall in Vazisubani, a Tbilisi suburb. No individuals were harmed in either incident. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, the Kingdom Hall in Vazisubani suffered damage in December 2015. Local police were notified and criminal proceedings initiated. None of these three cases were resolved by year's end.

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

Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained outside the control of the central government, and reliable information from those regions continued to be difficult to obtain. According to the de facto "constitution" adopted in Abkhazia, all persons in these regions are equal before the law regardless of religious beliefs and everyone enjoys freedom of religion. Forming associations or parties aimed at sowing religious discord is forbidden.

According to media sources in South Ossetia, the de facto "Supreme Court" issued a decision outlawing Jehovah's Witnesses, while the de facto government in Abkhazia continued to impose a ban on the group. The de facto government was also reportedly considering the introduction of legislation to impose fines from 50,000 to 100,000 rubles (\$860 to \$1,700) on individuals renting property to religious groups.

According to media and online accounts, religious figures in Abkhazia made efforts to make the region's churches autocephalous, although some local religious

officials wished to resubordinate the GOC churches in the region to the Russian Orthodox Church, while others wished to resubordinate the churches to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. In November the GOC and the Russian Orthodox Church announced a working group to address these divisions.

The de facto authorities in Abkhazia's Gali District reportedly did not permit GOC clergy to travel to Abkhazia to conduct religious services, and ethnic Georgians were unable to attend services in their own language. According to a SARI report, the district's ethnic Georgian population was obliged to travel to Georgian-controlled territory to celebrate religious holidays.

According to a SARI report, no monitoring of religious monuments in South Ossetia could be conducted, and the status of most monuments in the territory was unknown.

In January Russian military units in Abkhazia reportedly destroyed a 19th century church and cemetery in order to construct a Russian military firing range.

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

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported continued interference with their religious activity, including 10 physical assaults. On April 5, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses' country report, two Jehovah's Witnesses were sharing their religious beliefs when a man came out of his yard, verbally insulted and physically assaulted them, and threatened to rape them. The Witnesses fled the scene. After the individual followed them, swearing and shouting "sectists" and "satanists," the victims called police.

Criminal proceedings continued in connection with the 2016 attack on two female Jehovah's Witnesses who were sharing Bible verses in Alexandre's Garden in Tbilisi. Court hearings also continued at year's end.

Representatives of minority religious groups continued to report what they termed a widespread societal belief that minority religious groups posed a threat to the GOC and to the country's cultural values. Minority religious communities, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, and Protestants, continued to report resistance to their establishing places of worship and religious schools.

In July thousands of individuals marched through downtown Tbilisi to call for an end to illegal immigration, including from some predominantly Muslim countries;

greater restrictions on granting residency permits to foreigners; a ban on foreign funding of civil society organizations; and the implementation of a more restrictive immigration law. Organizers of the march were a loose alliance of leaders of several nationalist groups, including a former deputy state minister for diaspora issues under the Georgian Dream government.

From January to October, the most recent period for which data was available, the MDF documented at least 92 instances of religiously intolerant statements on television, online, and in printed media by media representatives, political parties, clergy, public organizations, and others. The instances included 49 “Islamophobic” or “Turkophobic” statements related to the construction of new mosques, four anti-Catholic statements, 24 statements against Jehovah’s Witnesses, two against the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, one against Armenians, and six against other religious groups. For instance, some statements included references to Muslims as terrorists and pedophiles.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported two cases of damage to their property and vandalism. On June 17, at a Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Hall, members found insulting inscriptions in English on a window, and also a cross painted upside down and a swastika painted on the facade of the building. The incident was reported to police, who started an investigation.

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

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials regularly met 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 advocate for freedom of religion for all. They also continued to meet with the PDO and with officials in its Tolerance Center on these issues.

Embassy staff continued to meet with NGOs concerned with religious freedom issues, including the Center for Development and Democracy, EMC, TDI, and 21st Century Union, as well as with religious community leaders, to promote religious tolerance and the integration of religious minorities into society.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with leaders from traditional and nontraditional denominations. They also visited the Pankisi Gorge, Akhalkalaki, Kvemo Kartli, and Adjara regions on several occasions to meet with local religious leaders from the Sunni Muslim, Armenian Apostolic, and Shia Muslim

communities. In the meetings, embassy officials advocated for interfaith understanding, dialogue, respect, and the peaceful coexistence of all religions.

The Ambassador met with GOC Patriarch Ilia II on multiple occasions. In their meetings, the Ambassador stressed the importance of the church's role in promoting religious diversity and tolerance.

In September the embassy sponsored the participation of four GOC representatives in a program in the United States on religious freedom and interfaith issues. The visit included topics related to U.S. laws on the separation of church and state, religious freedom, religious property ownership, and interreligious dialogue. In March embassy officials visited the Muslim community in Mokhe to learn more about the community's religious freedom concerns. In April embassy officials visited the predominantly Muslim region of Khulo and the Kobuleti boarding school to hear the communities' religious freedom concerns.