



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **85.2%**
- Muslims : **10.6%**
- Agnostics : **3.5%**
- Others : **0.7%**

3,980,000

69,700 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article nine of Georgia's constitution upholds the "absolute freedom of belief and religion"^[1] and equality for all, regardless of belief.^[2] The constitution prohibits religious persecution, forbids acts forcing individuals to express views on religion and bars public and political associations that foment religious animosity. The law provides for freedom of religious belief, denomination, and conscience, including the right to choose and change religious affiliation. Religious issues are managed by the State Agency on Religious Issues (SARI), also known as the State Agency for Religious Affairs.

Article nine of the constitution also recognises the important role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia, (the Georgian Orthodox Church) in the country's history. That said, it stipulates that the GOC should be independent from the state and that relations between the GOC and the state should be governed by a constitutional agreement, also called a concordat.^[3] The agreement grants the GOC rights which are not given to other religious groups. These include legal immunity for the GOC Patriarch, exemption of GOC clergy from military service, and a consultative role for the GOC in government, especially in education.^[4]

Article 13 of the "Law of Georgia on General Education" from 2005 states that public schools may not be used for the purposes of religious indoctrination, proselytism, or forcible assimilation.^[5] At the same time, Article five of the concordat gives the GOC the right to teach its creed in educational institutions and authorises the state to pay for GOC religious schools.^[6]

According to the US State Department International Religious Freedom Report, some NGOs and religious organisations complained that the government "inadequately address[ed] acts of religious intolerance and discrimination in favour of the GOC in public schools".^[7] The Tolerance Centre has reported that non-Georgian Orthodox Churches continued to face

government resistance when attempting to obtain construction permits for churches.^[8] NGOs reported incidents of religious discrimination in schools, including cases “involving the promotion of Georgian Orthodox theology” in religious studies courses, Georgian Orthodox prayers in classrooms, and the erection of religious symbols such as of icons in spite of the law, which prohibits proselytism.^[9]

In December 2017 the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church called for religious education at all school levels, a proposal which is now being considered by some government officials. Some have criticised the proposal for being a disguised attempt at religious indoctrination in the spirit of Georgian Orthodoxy.^[10]

Jehovah’s Witnesses have continued to face discrimination from the de facto governments of the two secessionist republics. In South Ossetia they are not recognised as an official religious group. The authorities in Abkhazia meanwhile continued to impose a ban on the group. In October media sources reported the South Ossetian government as saying that up to 1,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses were in the territory and that it was considering legislation to ban the distribution of Jehovah’s Witnesses literature because of its “extremist” content.^[11]

According to the US State Department religious freedom report, in the Gali district of Abkhazia the de facto authorities “reportedly did not permit GOC clergy to travel to [the region] to conduct religious services and ethnic Georgians were unable to attend services in their own language”.^[12] According to a SARI report, the ethnic Georgian population in the district reportedly travelled to Georgian-controlled territory to mark major religious holidays. The GOC clergy were not permitted to conduct services in Abkhazia.

In Abkhazia SARI reported – in the words of the US State Department religious freedom report: “GOC churches were in a ‘deplorable state’ and that local authorities had erased frescoes in almost all of them.”^[13] However, lately there have been promising signs of rapprochement between the Orthodox Churches of Georgia and Russia on the question of Abkhazia. Church leaders from both sides vowed to jointly resolve the difficult situation.^[14]

| Incidents

Some Jehovah’s Witnesses complained about interference in their religious activities. In some cases, people were physically assaulted. In one incident, in July 2016, “two female Jehovah’s Witnesses were sharing a Bible verse [in a public] square when a passer-by began kicking and verbally attacking them, ripping their clothes. In another incident unknown attackers threw stones at members of the group.”^[15]

The following October, media described a protest rally that took place during the Pope’s visit to the country. The group, which included some GOC clergy, called Pope Francis a “heretic”, “the greatest enemy of orthodoxy, greater than Islam” and “a wolf in sheep’s clothing”. When the GOC Patriarch greeted the Pope on his arrival, he criticised the priests opposed to the Pontiff’s visit.^[16]

The GOC is divided on its attitude towards the small but growing Protestant communities. There is a radical faction that wants harsher measures against all non-Orthodox denominations and religious groups, especially Catholics, Evangelicals, Baptists and the Salvation Army, as well as Jews. In early 2017, the Georgian Orthodox Patriarch appeared to be the target of a plot to assassinate him with poison. The main suspect, a GOC archpriest, was close to the ultra-orthodox faction within the GOC, which had been feuding with the Patriarch.^[17] He was eventually tried and convicted by a Georgian court for trying to kill the Patriarch’s secretary.^[18]

| Prospects for freedom of religion

The prospects for freedom of religion in Georgia depend to some degree on the relationship between the GOC and other religious denominations. Some GOC officials have pledged to support ecumenism and cooperation with religious minorities, while more radical followers of Georgian Orthodoxy seem to champion the idea of religious uniformity. Another

problem is the ramifications for religious freedom resulting from the continued conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. During the period under review, the status of religious freedom has remained for the most part unchanged.

Endnotes / Sources

- [1] Georgia's Constitution of 1995 with Amendments through 2013, constituteproject.org, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Georgia_2013.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [2] Op. cit. Article 14
- [3] Op. cit. Article nine
- [4] Constitutional Agreement between State of Georgia and Georgian Apostolic Autocephaly Orthodox Church, Freedom of Religion and Belief, <https://forbcaucasus.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/concordat.pdf>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [5] Law of Georgia on General Education, Legislative Herald of Georgia, <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/29248/56/en/pdf>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [6] Freedom of Religion and Belief, op. cit.
- [7] US State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016' – Georgia country report – 'Executive Summary' <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper> (accessed 18th April 2018)
- [8] 'Working Meeting of Council of Religions', Tolerance Centre (Public Defender of Georgia), 14th April 2016, <http://www.ombudsman.ge/en/news/working-meeting-of-council-of-religions.page>, (accessed 5th April 2018).
- [9] US State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016' – Georgia country report – 'Executive Summary' <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [10] Otto Kobakhidze, 'Preaching or Teaching?', [Civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge), 23rd February 2018, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30893>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [11] US State Department, Op. cit.
- [12] Ibid
- [13] Ibid
- [14] Bradley Jardine, 'Georgian and Russian Orthodox Church vow to jointly resolve "Abkhazian Schism"', [Eurasianet](http://eurasianet.org), 9th November 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/s/georgian-and-russian-orthodox-church-vow-to-jointly-resolve-abkhazian-schism>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [15] US State Department, Op. cit.
- [16] Ibid
- [17] Hein Gstrein and Fritz Imhof, 'Der Heilsarmee in Georgien droht das Verbot', [jesus.ch](http://www.jesus.ch), 27th February 2017, http://www.jesus.ch/magazin/international/305604-der_heilsarmee_in_georgien_droht_das_verbot.html, (accessed 23rd March 2018).

[18] 'Georgian Archpriest Convicted Of Planning To Poison Patriarch's Aide', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 5 September 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-priest-convicted-planning-kill-patriarch-secretary/28717886.html>, (accessed 5th April 2018).