

GEORGIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

A new constitution took effect in December and provides for “absolute freedom of religion,” the separation of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the state, and equality for all regardless of religion. It also prohibits persecution based on religion. Previously, in March the ruling party withdrew proposed amendments to the then draft constitution that generated controversy after critics said the amendments appeared to allow the limiting of freedom of religion on national security grounds. Laws and policies continue to grant the GOC privileges not accorded to any other religious group, including legal immunity for the GOC patriarch and a consultative role in education. In July, however, the Constitutional Court declared both the tax and property privileges of the GOC unconstitutional and mandated legislative changes by December 31, although parliament missed this deadline. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to report a lack of effective investigations into crimes motivated by religious hatred, but they said the quality of investigations was improving. The Public Defender’s Office (PDO) reported it received 19 cases of violence based on religious intolerance during the year, compared to five cases the previous year. Authorities registered seven new religious organizations as legal entities during the year. They suspended the application for registration of one organization due to legal issues with its application. 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. After negotiations with the local government about mosque construction in Batumi broke down, Muslim representatives continued to state government delays and opaque decision-making prevented them from building a new mosque. Some religious organizations and NGOs criticized the State Agency on Religious Issues (SARI, also known as the State Agency for Religious Affairs) for functioning opaquely, 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. The Armenian Apostolic Church petitioned SARI for ownership of 37 churches it operated.

Restrictions continued on religious activities in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remained outside the control of the central government. According to the GOC Patriarchate, GOC clergy were unable to conduct religious services in South Ossetia or Abkhazia. De facto authorities in these occupied territories

continued to ban Jehovah's Witnesses, classifying the Church as an extremist organization.

During the year, there were eight reported cases of religiously motivated physical assaults on 12 Jehovah's Witnesses. There were reports of vandalism against religious minorities, such as graffiti on Armenian churches in Adjara and an attack on a Kingdom Hall building in Gori. Representatives of minority religious groups continued to report widespread societal beliefs that minority religious groups posed a threat to the GOC and the country's cultural values. The NGO Media Development Foundation (MDF) documented at least 140 instances of religiously intolerant remarks in national media, up from 92 the previous year.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet regularly with senior government officials, including SARI leadership, the prime minister's adviser for human rights and gender equality, the president's adviser for minority issues, and officials at various ministries to encourage dialogue between the government and minority religious groups, support government-led efforts to reform the investigative arm of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (responsible for assessing whether crimes were motivated by religious hatred), and promote religious freedom as provided in the new constitution. The Charge d'Affaires met with the GOC Patriarch several times to stress the importance of the GOC's role in promoting religious diversity and tolerance. The Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, and other embassy officials traveled throughout the country to meet with minority religious groups, and the embassy sponsored the participation of various representatives from different faiths in programs 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 2018 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.

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 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 Samtskhe-Javakheti. Ethnic Armenians belong primarily to the AAC and constitute the majority of the population in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

According to a census reportedly conducted in 2016 by the de facto government of Abkhazia, there are 243,564 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 listed 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

A new constitution went into effect in December and provides for “absolute freedom of religion,” the separation of the GOC and the state, and equality for all regardless of religion. Like the previous constitution, it prohibits persecution based on religion and prohibits compelling anyone to express his or her opinion about religion. It also continues to prohibit 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 previous and new constitutions recognize the GOC's special role in the country's history, but stipulate 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 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 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, religious groups 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.

Until a July Constitutional Court ruling, the GOC was exempt from several requirements applicable to other religious groups, including the payment of taxes on the construction, restoration, and maintenance of religious buildings and the payment of taxes on property. Moreover, the Law on State Property states that no religious organization registered as an LEPL, except the GOC, could acquire nonagricultural state property through a direct sale. The law also states a denomination registered as a nonprofit organization could purchase state property and only grants the GOC the right to acquire state-owned agricultural land free of charge.

In July, however, the Constitutional Court declared both tax and property privileges of the GOC unconstitutional in a case brought by NGOs on behalf of nine religious groups. The court's ruling mandated legislative changes that would either abolish the privileges or grant them to all religious organizations no later

than December 31. As of the end of the year, parliament had taken no action to implement legislation on the court's ruling.

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 public officials are considered abuses of power and are punishable by fines or longer terms of imprisonment if committed by force of 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 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. Interference with 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, 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 government 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 approval of 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. As of December, however, the GOC had not taught any religious studies classes in public institutions. 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. 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. In practice, however, NGOs and non-GOC organizations report that GOC clergy often visit classes during academic hours, sometimes at the initiative of teachers or school administrators. The law includes no special regulations for private religious schools.

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

Government Practices

In March the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party withdrew a draft constitutional amendment that critics said would have allowed the government to interfere in religious affairs based on national security grounds. The Council of Europe’s European Commission for Democracy through Law (known as the Venice Commission), as well as NGOs and local religious organizations, criticized the draft amendment. Parliament revised the language and introduced a new amendment that did not include the provision on national security as a justification for interference in religious affairs. The Venice Commission positively assessed the revised language and parliament passed the new amendment.

In April a member of parliament from the Alliance of Patriots political party introduced a draft of a “blasphemy law” that would criminalize “insults to religious feelings.” Although the draft generated significant discussion about religious sentiment, free speech, and the “defense” of Georgia’s traditions and history, parliament ultimately did not pass the legislation.

The introduction of the draft bill followed an incident in March, when protesters attacked two Rustavi 2 journalists after one “insulted [their] religious feelings” with an on-air joke that involved Jesus Christ. Authorities arrested six individuals on charges of group hooliganism and an investigation of threats against the journalist was ongoing at year’s end.

In April the government fined a condom production company for including on its products a design of medieval Queen Tamar, whom the GOC considers a saint. The judge said the design was “unethical” and charged the firm with an administrative offense under the “Law on Distribution of Advertisement.”

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

The PDO reported it received 19 accounts of violence on the ground of religious intolerance during the year, 14 more than in 2017. The PDO also noted that cases from previous years remained largely unresolved. The 2018 cases all pertained to Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Church members accused the relevant authorities of lacking the will to investigate these cases.

During the year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) investigated 23 cases involving alleged religiously motivated hate crimes. The CPO, however, investigated none of these cases during the year, as compared to seven such cases in 2017. Of the MoIA investigations, one concerned unlawful interference with the activities of a religious association; one, damage or destruction of property; one, damage or destruction of property together with persecution; five, unlawful interference with the performance of a divine service; 14, persecution; and one, abuse of official authority.

The NGO Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) assessed that the MoIA was correctly applying proper articles of the criminal code and the quality of investigations of crimes motivated by religious hatred had improved since 2017. TDI reported, however, that several cases from previous years remained pending.

Authorities registered seven new religious organizations as legal entities during the year: Christian Church Spring of Life, Armenian-language Christian Church of Gospel Faith, Evangelical-Christian Centralized Religion Organization First Nazareth Church, International Orthodox Laz-Khalibian Kharibian Catacomb Church, Salvation Army in Georgia, the Light of the Evangel, and Multinational Church of Marneuli. Authorities suspended the registration of the Georgian Christian-Evangelical Church New Life due to legal issues with its application.

Most prisons reportedly continued to have GOC chapels but no areas for nondenominational worship. According to SARI, Catholic, AAC, Baptist, Muslim,

and Jewish groups, services remained available upon request in the military and in prisons.

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 the Batumi mosque. 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. TDI previously stated municipalities issued construction permits, although religious minorities often faced obstacles due to the municipalities' discriminatory approaches. 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.

In January the AAC appealed the National Agency of Public Registry's decision to register as GOC property a church the AAC has claimed ownership of since the collapse of the Soviet Union. As of the end of the year, the appeal remained under review by the courts. The AAC continued to request restitution of five churches in Tbilisi and one in Akhaltsikhe, all of which the GOC also claimed and authorities registered as state property. 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.

Muslim community members said there was a lack of 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 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. NGOs and some Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to exert influence over the NGO Administration of Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG), including through the selective transfer of land to AMAG and the appointment of AMAG religious leaders. The potential transfer of land to AMAG rather than local religious organizations continued to be a source of tension, including in Batumi. A number of Sunni Muslim groups also were critical of AMAG for its attempt to represent all Muslim communities in the country within one organization regardless of denomination.

In February Batumi City Court held its first hearing of the New Mosque Construction Fund's 2017 appeal of Batumi City Hall's decision in 2017 to deny the permits necessary to build a new mosque on land the fund owned. In April the new mayor of Batumi announced he wanted to negotiate with the fund to find a resolution. The mayor outlined several conditions to allow the construction, including that the fund retract its appeal from the courts and give the land acquired for the mosque to AMAG, which would later apply for the necessary permits. The fund rejected the requests and refused to continue negotiations. Parallel to this, the fund appealed Batumi City Hall's decision to impose a fine of 3,000 lari (\$1,100) for the construction of a temporary wooden structure built on the fund's land. As of December court hearings had not resumed on either case.

Construction continued on a new mosque promised by SARI and AMAG in the village of Mokhe in Samtskhe-Javakheti. The construction resulted from a 2017 SARI commission recommendation that the government transfer ownership of a building claimed by local Muslims and the GOC to the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation and provide the local Muslims an alternative plot for a new mosque. The disputed historical building has been fenced off and protected as a cultural heritage monument. The PDO stated the SARI commission failed to establish the origin and ownership of the building. In April the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) addressed the UN Human Rights Committee on behalf of the Mokhe Muslims and stated the government's discriminatory restitution policy towards minority religious groups constituted a violation of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and was emblematic of the government's more general restitution policy.

The government continued to pay subsidies for the restoration of religious properties it considered national cultural heritage sites, increasing funding compared to the previous year. The National Agency for Cultural Heritage, now housed within the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport, allocated 2,483,300 lari (\$930,000) during the year for the restoration of religious monuments, including 145,000 lari (\$54,300) for design drafts and 2,338,300 lari (\$876,000) for rehabilitation, conservation, and infrastructure development.

The EMC appealed to the Supreme Court a Kutaisi Court of Appeals ruling that the MoIA did not discriminate against Muslims by failing to prevent vandalism in 2014 against a planned Muslim boarding school in Kobuleti. The EMC also submitted a case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) on "the prolonged and discriminatory obstruction of boarding schools for Kobuleti Muslim students," although the Supreme Court must rule on the case before the ECHR can

accept it. As of December protests by the Orthodox community had prevented local Muslims from installing sewage infrastructure for the boarding school, which had not yet opened.

TDI 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.

The government distributed 25 million lari (\$9.36 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 (\$1.69 million) to those four religious groups in coordination with the Ministry of Finance. SARI reported compensation remained the same as the previous year and was as follows: 2.75 million lari (\$1.03 million) to the Muslim community, represented by the AMAG; 550,000 lari (\$206,000) to the RCC; 800,000 lari (\$300,000) to the AAC; and 400,000 lari (\$150,000) to the Jewish community. In making the disbursements, SARI stated the compensation was of "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. NGOs continued to criticize the exclusion of other religious groups and to question the criteria the government used to select the four denominations for compensation.

In accordance with the government human rights action plan for 2018-2020, SARI trained approximately 1,000 students, journalists, and representatives from religious organizations to raise awareness of human rights, freedom of religion, and other fundamental freedoms.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained occupied by Russia and outside the control of the central government. Reliable information from those regions continued to be difficult to obtain. According to the de facto "constitution" adopted in

Abkhazia, all persons in the region 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.

De facto authorities in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia continued to impose a ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses. According to anecdotal reports, Jehovah's Witnesses nonetheless did not encounter significant problems when renting space for Kingdom Halls in Abkhazia.

Representatives of the GOC remained unable to conduct services in the Russian-occupied territories, and the Georgian government has said the de facto authorities damaged historical religious buildings in an attempt to erase Georgian cultural heritage.

The de facto authorities in Abkhazia's Gali District reportedly continued not to 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 had to travel to Georgian-controlled territory to celebrate religious holidays.

SARI reported it was unable to monitor houses of worship in South Ossetia, and the status of most properties in the territory was unknown.

According to media and online accounts, some religious figures in Abkhazia continued to support turning the region's Orthodox churches, which are claimed by the GOC, into an autocephalous Abkhaz Orthodox Church, others wished to subordinate them to the Russian Orthodox Church, while yet others wished to subordinate them to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A Council of Europe report from November found that, after LGBT individuals, Georgians thought Jehovah's Witnesses were most likely to face discrimination. The PDO reported that a large number of the alleged hate crimes reported to it over the years were cases of violence or property damage committed against Jehovah's Witnesses. Despite continued requests from Jehovah's Witnesses, however, authorities generally classified such cases as cases of violence rather than persecution on religious grounds.

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported approximately eight assaults during the year, down from 10 in 2017. The attacks targeted 12 individuals, and all included physical assaults, verbal insults, and property damage, according to Jehovah's Witnesses. In one case in May, unidentified attackers shot at a Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Hall in Gori, damaging the front door, and spray-painted "Believe in our God" (in Georgian) on the outer wall. As of December the MoIA was investigating the incident. The investigation into repeated vandalism of the Vazisubani Kingdom Hall in Tbilisi in previous years was also ongoing.

In January the Tbilisi City Court found one person guilty in criminal proceedings in connection with the 2016 attack on two female Jehovah's Witnesses who were sharing Bible verses in Alexandre's Garden in Tbilisi. The Tbilisi Court of Appeals dismissed the appeal and, as of December, the trial was pending before the Supreme Court.

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. In November the Council of Europe released the results of a study it commissioned, reporting 36 percent of Georgians believed diversity adversely affected the country and was detrimental to Georgian culture and local traditions. 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 October, for example, the Batumi City Court ruled authorities in the village of Kobuleti must provide sewage and water connections to a Muslim boarding school. The mayor's office had previously refused, stating it could not connect the school because of objections from neighbors that led to it remaining closed. As of December the school remained closed and disconnected. Representatives from the AAC in Batumi mentioned repeated instances of graffiti on their properties.

As of September MDF documented at least 140 instances of religiously intolerant statements on television, online, and in printed media by media representatives, political parties, clergy, public organizations, and others, compared to 92 such incidents from January to October 2017. The instances included 90 statements which were termed Islamophobic, 35 of which were directed against Muslim migrants. MDF listed 29 statements against Jehovah's Witnesses; two each against the AAC, Baptists, and Protestants; one anti-Semitic statement; one against the GOC; and eight against other religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, Charge d’Affaires, 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 promote religious freedom as provided in the new constitution, to encourage dialogue between the government and minority religious groups, and to support government-led efforts to reform the investigative arm of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (responsible for assessing whether crimes were motivated by religious hatred). They also continued to meet with the PDO and with officials in its Tolerance Center on these issues.

In January a delegation of five representatives from civil society, government, and the Muslim community participated in an embassy-sponsored multicity trip including Washington, D.C., and New York, to study religious tolerance, interfaith cooperation, and countering violent extremism. In September seven representatives from civil society and religious communities, including the Muslim community and the GOC, met with U.S. experts on inclusivity and civil rights as part of a U.S. government-sponsored program on religious tolerance and pluralism.

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

The Ambassador, Charge d’Affaires, 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 and Charge d’Affaires met with GOC Patriarch Ilia II on multiple occasions. In their meetings, they stressed the importance of the Church’s role in promoting religious diversity and tolerance.