

Georgia 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

Notable negative human rights developments in Georgia during the year included the entry into force of the so-called law On Transparency of Foreign Influence that credible nongovernmental organizations stated restricted freedom of expression and of association, and the so-called law On Family Values and Protection of Minors that criminalized certain types of expression, and a campaign of intimidation and coercion and abuse of administrative resources that restricted freedom of expression, particularly in connection with the October parliamentary election.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest and detention; and serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence and threats of violence against citizens and journalists, unjustified arrests and prosecution of journalists, and the chilling impact of the so-called laws on transparency and on family values.

The government took steps to investigate and punish some officials who committed human rights abuses, but impunity remained a problem.

Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained outside central-government control, and de facto authorities were supported by

Russian forces. Significant human rights issues in the occupied regions included credible reports of arbitrary arrest and detention. Russian and de facto authorities in both regions committed abuses with impunity.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

In December 2023, de facto police forces in Russian-occupied Gali, Abkhazia, severely beat Temur Karbaia, a Georgian citizen, age 43, while checking his identity documents, resulting in Karbaia's death. In February, the "prosecutor's office" of occupied Abkhazia arrested and prosecuted three security personnel for murder in connection with the beating death of Karbaia. The three men were found not guilty but instead convicted on charges of "indifference." They were released from custody and ordered to pay a fine of 50,000 Russian rubles (\$564).

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media; however, journalists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the international community raised serious concerns regarding the government's respect for freedom of expression. These concerns focused on the worsening environment and legislation for media pluralism, as well as violence and threats of violence against journalists. The Foreign Influence law (FIL), which was enacted on May 28, required civil society organizations (CSOs) and media that received at least 20 percent of their funding from abroad to register as "objects of foreign influence." Restrictions on access to information also continued to be a concern. NGOs reported previous criminal investigations of illegal government surveillance of journalists remained pending.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

There were continued reports of physical attacks, intimidation and threats of violence, coercion, and harassment against citizens, journalists and others throughout the year. There was also a lack of accountability in such cases.

While covering the large-scale protests in Tbilisi against the FIL from April to June and pro-EU demonstrations from November 28 through December,

several journalists reported being attacked, harassed, hit with pepper spray, or having their equipment damaged by police. On December 7, more than 30 *titushki* (unidentified assailants typically dressed in all black with their faces covered) physically assaulted protesters and then turned to attack TV Pirveli journalist Maka Chikhladze and camera operator Giorgi Shetsiruli, who were filming them. After beating Chikhladze and Shetsiruli to the ground, they took away all Shetsiruli's belongings. According to Chikhladze and witnesses, patrol police standing nearby did not react or intervene to stop the attack. A video posted by *civil.ge* (the Tbilisi-based daily news website run by Georgian NGO UN Association of Georgia), allegedly taken minutes before *titushki* attacked journalists, showed signs of coordination between police and assailants. Social media also documented several reported instances of patrol police not intervening when alleged *titushki* assaulted media and demonstrators, and in some cases appeared to direct or cooperate with *titushki*.

Journalists and activists reported receiving harassing and threatening telephone calls and instances of vandalism against their homes and offices, including offensive posters and damage to vehicles. The government investigated unauthorized access to citizens' telephone numbers linked to these events. The media ombudsman identified 15 cases of rights violations and restrictions involving 15 journalists covering protests against the FIL in front of and surrounding parliament in April and May. Several international media watchdogs, along with the media ombudsman and the Council of

Europe's Platform for the Safety of Journalists, reported at least 30 violations of media freedom during October 26 elections, including damage to equipment, verbal or physical attacks, and intimidation. The government had not investigated these reports by year's end.

In late November and throughout December, authorities or unidentified assailants believed to be acting on behalf of the ruling Georgian Dream party violently targeted dozens of media professionals covering protests. The attacks included beatings and exposure to pepper spray, tear gas, and water cannons. Reported severe injuries included fractured vertebrae, facial fractures, and chemical burns; several journalists required hospitalization. Media professionals reported authorities or unidentified assailants destroyed their equipment to obstruct reporting.

Authorities sought to suppress freedom of expression for candidates and voters during the parliamentary election campaign with coercion and intimidation. In its report on the October 26 election, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights stated "reports of intimidation, coercion, inducement, and pressure on voters... raised concerns about the ability of some voters to cast their vote without fear of retribution."

Government officials were not held accountable for violence and harassment. Media organizations continued to express concern regarding the judgment of the Appeals Court of Tbilisi, which reduced the sentences of those responsible for 2021 violence against peaceful demonstrators, who on

November 16, were amnestied under a bill passed by the ruling party. No organizers of those attacks were charged.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

In April, accredited online media journalists were blocked from attending a parliamentary session discussing the FIL due to internal parliament security measures that only allowed television journalists access. The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics criticized this move, urging parliament to stop discriminatory practices and allow all journalists to cover the proceedings. It noted such restrictions worsened conditions for online journalists, limiting public access to important legislative information. Following the approval of the FIL, parliament, acting on complaints from lawmakers, suspended the accreditation of various journalists from critical and opposition-aligned broadcasters Mtavari, Formula, and TV Pirveli for periods of one to six months.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law generally provided for the right of most workers, including government employees, to form and join independent unions, to legally strike, and to bargain collectively. According to the law, if a trade union or a

group of employees initiated negotiations for the conclusion of a collective agreement, employers were required to negotiate in good faith. The parties were required to provide each other with information relevant to the matters being discussed during negotiations.

Although the law provided for the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining, employers did not always negotiate in good faith. The law prohibited employers from discriminating against union members or union organizing in general terms, but it did not explicitly require reinstatement of workers dismissed for union activity. According to the Labor Inspectorate, based on inspections conducted during the year, no violations related to freedom of association or collective bargaining were detected, and no corresponding complaints were registered.

The FIL posed a significant threat to freedom of association and trade union activities, as some trade unions received Western funding. The law included provisions that granted authorities access to organizations' financial and personnel information. This undermined the operations of trade unions, threatening the confidentiality of anonymous complaints, the protection of strike leaders, and the ability to keep the formation of unions discreet, among other critical aspects.

Georgian Progressive Forum reported the legal framework of employers' obligations to participate in mediation were poorly defined, and the penalties for noncompliance were minimal. This was most evident during

the strike of online workers at Evolution Gaming, a gaming technology company, where workers presented a list of 40 demands including salary increases, improvement of working conditions, and addressing a toxic culture of abuse and harassment by management. The company refused to engage in mediation, although the Public Defender's Office (PDO) publicly called on them to do so. There were also reports of some workers having gone on hunger strikes as well as coordinated efforts to intimidate picketing workers, including through the use of "thugs" who physically assaulted workers on the picket line. Beyond this case, the mediation system was undermined by mediators having insufficient qualifications and a lack of access to crucial company information, such as profits and expenses, which hampered the ability to resolve labor disputes effectively.

The Georgian Trade Unions Confederation (GTUC) noted there were many instances when collective bargaining and freedom of association, including right to strike, was not provided for in private or state organizations.

Due to continued concerns regarding the country's respect for freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike, labor unions called upon the government to take further steps to enhance worker protections and protect workers' rights. The government, however, did not effectively enforce laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, or right to strike for workers, or prohibit antiunion discrimination. Penalties were less than those under other laws involving the denial of other civil

rights and were rarely applied against violators. Remedies to address arbitrary dismissal and legal disputes regarding labor rights were subject to lengthy delays. Employees who believed they were wrongfully terminated had to file a complaint in local court within one month of their termination. According to Progressive Forum, employers would rename roles or dissolve positions or departments following unfair dismissal of an employee. The tactic rendered court decisions to reinstate the employee unenforceable.

Some employers interfered with unions. The GTUC reported the government did not directly interfere with unions, but there were violations of trade union rights by state organizations and companies. Progressive Forum reported the persistent problem of yellow unions – those that colluded with employers in large organizations – eroded workers’ rights. Employers used threats targeting union leaders and members at the Georgian National Opera and Ballet Theater of Tbilisi; workers were subjected to direct threats of dismissal if they continued their involvement in the strike. In these cases, the striking workers were fired.

In November, the trade union LABOR won UNI Global Union’s Freedom from Fear Award, recognizing “workers’ bravery and determination in the face of violence, intimidation, and intransigence” from Swedish-owned gaming technology company Evolution. LABOR reported that workers continued to protest even though masked “thugs” acting as security at Evolution threatened and beat workers. LABOR chair Giorgi Diasamidze stated that

Evolution Georgia management tried to intimidate protesters through violence and harassment, silence them with lawsuits, and threatened them with demands for arrest. The GTUC reported the government did not investigate the allegations.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The minimum wage for both state- and private-sector employees, unchanged since 1990, and was below the official subsistence income level. Employers did not apply the official minimum wage, however, since the lowest paid jobs in the private sector were typically significantly higher than the minimum wage. CSOs and the GTUC criticized the government for not updating the minimum wage rate.

The law provided for a 40-hour workweek and a weekly 24-hour rest period unless otherwise determined by a labor contract. Overtime was defined as work by an adult employee in excess of the regular 40-hour workweek, based on an agreement between the parties. An executive order established essential services in which overtime pay could not be approved

until employees worked more than 48 hours a week. Pregnant women or mothers with newborns could not be required to work overtime. There was no explicit rate for overtime; the law stated overtime “be reimbursed at an increased rate of the normal hourly wage...defined by agreement between the parties.” A 2021 court ruling, however, found in one case that a 125 percent rate qualified as meaningful overtime pay. The law did not explicitly prohibit excessive overtime.

The NGO Social Justice Center (SJC) reported that although the right to an increased remuneration for overtime work was recognized in legislation, it was rarely applied. The SJC’s research revealed that violations related to overtime work were due to both gaps in the legislation and challenges in implementation. One of the main obstacles was the failure of employers to keep a comprehensive record of the number of hours performed by employees.

The GTUC reported violation of rules of wage or overtime mainly occurred in the retail, service, health care, trade, and construction spheres.

Occupational Safety and Health

According to labor rights groups, occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were appropriate for the main industries and OSH experts proactively identified unsafe conditions in addition to responding to workers’ complaints.

Workers could not remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardizing their employment. Workers hired on fixed-term contracts frequently feared that calling attention to situations that endangered their health or safety would be cause for the employers not to renew their contracts.

The SJC reported the construction, manufacturing, and mining industries were among the employment sectors in which the highest number of workers died or were injured. The PDO considered the mining industry – especially coal and lignite mining – and the construction industry to be especially dangerous. The Labor Inspectorate found the following industries to be especially dangerous: mining and quarrying; electricity; gas, steam, and air conditioning supply; construction; manufacturing; transportation; and storage.

The GTUC reported systemic violation of labor and trade union rights in the postal operator, Georgian Post. In 2023, the Labor Inspectorate sanctioned Georgian Post 3,000 lari (\$1,130) for labor rights violations. According to the Labor Inspectorate, it had conducted inspections at Georgian Post facilities since 2021 to provide for compliance with OSH standards. These inspections identified violations in both areas, resulting in the imposition of administrative sanctions and penalties. The inspection process for Georgian Post was scheduled to continue until all detected violations were fully addressed.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The government effectively enforced minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws in the public sector. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for similar crimes, and the number of inspectors was sufficient to conduct inspections. Penalties for violations were sometimes applied against violators.

The Labor Inspectorate, part of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health, and Social Affairs, was responsible for enforcement. The Labor Inspectorate had authority over all sectors of the economy and could make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. The Labor Inspectorate's mandate to conduct inspections covering all aspects of labor law took effect in 2021. Inspectors conducted unannounced visits to workplaces and monitored OSH and labor violation cases. The number of labor inspectors was sufficient to enforce compliance.

During the year, labor inspectors received and reviewed complaints related to possible violations of labor norms, conducted inspections in response, and conducted inspections on the violation of the norms established by the Law on Occupational Safety. Those in violation of labor norms were issued warnings, fines, or suspended from conducting their work until reinspection confirmed violations were solved. Based on the code of conduct for labor inspectors, the inspector was obliged to promote the elimination of any kind of discrimination and comply with all laws and regulations. The labor

inspector was required to respect and take into account the needs and characteristics of vulnerable groups.

According to National Statistics Service data from 2021, the share of informally employed persons in the nonagricultural sector in the labor force was 27 percent. The GTUC stated that the highest levels of informality, except agriculture, were in the following sectors: domestic workers (100 percent), construction (72.4 percent), accommodation and food service activities (50.3 percent), industry (41.5 percent), administrative and support service activities (38.5 percent), transportation and storage (38.5 percent), and wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles (35.9 percent).

Nonstandard and informal work was common in sectors where physical safety was a major concern of employees, such as in mining operations in Tkibuli or Chiatura, as well as construction in large cities. The tourism industry was also identified as a sector of physically dangerous labor practices, since drivers and guides often performed long, physically demanding, and largely unregulated work. There were frequent cases involving drivers in the tourism sector driving for more than 15 consecutive hours. The law did not adequately provide for the safety of those involved in informal and nonstandard work, and the Labor Inspectorate did not possess the mandate or resources to adequately cover informal and nonstandard employment sectors.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

More than 2,300 individuals remained missing from the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia and the 2008 Russian invasion, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of arrest or detention in court. The government's observance of these prohibitions was uneven, and there were significant reports of selective or arbitrary arrests including cases that led to prolonged detention without clear charges.

The administrative detentions systems under the soviet Code of Administrative Offenses remained a parallel system for the criminal justice system. Although the Administrative Offenses Code allowed authorities to arrest individuals and the court to fine or sentence offenders to up to 15 days of imprisonment for minor offenses, the administrative proceedings provided many fewer due process protections than the criminal ones. According to NGOs, the system was usually utilized during protests as an

easy solution for silencing opposing opinion without the constraints of due process afforded by the criminal justice system. During the pro-EU demonstrations, up to 450 protesters were detained based on the code of administrative offenses. Some individuals were arrested either in the streets after the protest had ended or during the following days near their houses. In April and May, more than 210 individuals were detained in the country during a violent police crackdown on mass peaceful protests against the reintroduction of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (FIL).

Some individuals were held in administrative detention for 24 hours or more without being charged with a specific offense while authorities gathered evidence related to their cases. The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) and the SJC reported excessive and unjustified use of the maximum 48-hour detention period without adequate judicial oversight.

GYLA reported numerous arrests, including of several individuals held for extended periods without clear legal grounds. Many detainees in need of medical assistance were not taken to a medical facility. The Special Investigation Service responsible for investigating crimes committed by law enforcement officers had not delivered any result of an investigation by year's end.

There were frequent reports of prolonged detentions of Georgians along the administrative boundary lines of both the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia

reported that as of December 5, 15 individuals remained unlawfully detained in the occupied territories, 10 in occupied South Ossetia and five in occupied Abkhazia. The European Court of Human Rights found in 2021 that the Russian Federation was legally responsible for arbitrary detentions on the occupied territories.

Lengthy and unjustified pretrial detention was a serious problem. The constitution defined a maximum of nine months for pretrial detention, which was usually respected. While maximum limit for pretrial detention was usually respected for routine cases, NGOs highlighted that defendants in politically sensitive cases were often kept in pretrial detention without clear justification.

According to GYLA's December 25 report, "At the initial stage, the court imposed the most severe preventive measure – detention – for all activists detained during the protests against the Foreign Influence Law and during the rallies in November. The prosecution justified the use of detention by citing generalized risks, such as the possibility of absconding, destruction of evidence, or committing another crime – none of which appeared to be substantiated by the individual circumstances of the defendants." Of 48 defendants criminally charged in relation to pro-European demonstration, 45 remained in pretrial detention as of year's end. NGOs also reported arbitrary and unjustified delay of court proceedings in criminal cases against pro-European demonstrators.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports government officials employed them. The public defender's report for 2023, published in April, noted that while there were investigations into crimes committed by police officers, the Prosecutor's Office refused to prosecute the cases. The report also noted isolated incidents of alleged physical and psychological violence against prisoners by the staff of closed prison facilities and some incidents of what the report termed "psychological violence" by prison staff in such facilities.

The public defender reported that of 260 detainees his office visited during

the pro-EU demonstrations, 188 claimed they were subjected to violence and inhuman treatment by police before or during detention. On December 3, the PDO stated most of the “severe injuries” were “obtained in the face, eye and head area,” which “practically excluded the likelihood that police used proportional force at all times.” The statement continued, “The location, nature, quality of the injuries gives a credible idea that police use violent methods against citizens for punishing. Intentional, grave violence for punishment is an act of torture.” The PDO called on the minister of internal affairs to “publicly condemn each (act of) violence by police and ensure effective measures to prevent any illegal actions by police officers.” Through year’s end, authorities reported investigations continued, and no law enforcement officials had been charged with abuse.

The National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) identified a systemwide practice of body inspections. Body scanners were available only at four prisons as an alternative means of full body inspections. According to the NPM’s 2023 report, prison administrations used the practice of “squatting” to examine inmates’ body parts and conducted full nude inspections.

During the year, several former officials remained on trial in absentia at Tbilisi City Court in various cases of torture and other crimes allegedly committed under the former government. The officials included former Deputy Chief of the General Staff Giorgi Kalandadze and former Director of the Gldani No. 8 Prison Aleksandre Mukhadze.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

Child Marriage

The legal minimum age for marriage was 18, but this requirement was not effectively enforced by the government. Conviction of forced marriage of an individual younger than 18 was punishable by two to four years' imprisonment. The PDO reported the harmful practice of childhood marriage or engagement remained a significant problem in the country, noting that government agencies often failed to identify cases of forced marriages. Early marriages were a particular concern in the Kvemo Kartli Region. The Ministry of Internal Affairs organized an information campaign against early marriages called "Do Not Deprive Childhood," although there was no unified communication strategy for the prevention of child marriages.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum

seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees. The PDO and NGOs, however, alleged executive and judicial authorities made politically motivated decisions in response to some asylum requests. There also were credible reports that government officials denied some Russians fleeing incarceration or abuse access to asylum procedures at the border and that the system appeared to lack procedural safeguards for those seeking such protections.

According to UNHCR, from January to July, 1 percent of asylum-claim rejections were based on national security grounds.

The backlog of asylum cases led to significant delays, although processing times improved in recent years. According to UNHCR, the average time from registering an appeal to receiving a final decision decreased from 23 months in 2023 to 12 months during the year, primarily due to the increased specialization of judges. On November 28, Tbilisi City Court ordered the extradition of Azerbaijani journalist Afghan Sadigov, who fled to Georgia to escape alleged political persecution. On December 3, Sadigov's lawyers appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, and on December 4, with the help of United Kingdom NGO European Human Rights Advocacy Center,

applied for interim measures under Article 39 to the European Court of Human Rights. Local and international human rights NGOs including the SJC highlighted the alarming speed with which Savigov's case was adjudicated - within two months, as opposed to the usual 12- to 23-month period.

Resettlement

The government offered a path to naturalization for refugees residing on its territory that included required language and history tests. Authorities purportedly denied naturalization to some applicants based on national security concerns. The law required 10 years of residency to qualify for citizenship, further complicating the ability for refugees to receive Georgian citizenship.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

Observers estimated the Jewish community to be no more than 6,000 persons. There were no reports of antisemitic incidents during the year.

The case of the 2018 killing in Tbilisi of human rights activist Vitali Safarov, who was of Jewish and Yezidi origin, remained pending with the European Court of Human Rights at year's end.