

## The Social Justice Center Assesses the Human Rights Situation in 2023

### Introduction

The year 2023 proved crucial for the country's path toward European Integration. By the year's end, the European Commission's recommendation to grant the country the candidacy deserves a positive assessment. However, behind this decision, it is significant to note that democratic and legal standards have deteriorated. The increased pressure on the civil sector and the media complicates unrestricted work. Notably, the accountability of state agencies and democratic control over them are further weakened. In this context, the expectations for the Institute of the Public Defender of Georgia to have precise positions on human rights issues and actively advocate for protecting the rights of vulnerable groups are growing.

At the institutional level, the politicization of state agencies, especially justice and law enforcement agencies, and their instrumentalization for party goals remain acute challenges. Simultaneously, in 2023, the practice of the past years was maintained, indicating the low transparency of state agencies and lack of accountability. The insufficient involvement of civil or professional groups in the law-making process in the Parliament of Georgia is problematic. The Parliament of Georgia continues to be a place where personal offense and aggressive rhetoric towards opponents instead of political and ideological confrontation occurs, further deepening political polarization in the country. In the legislature, the severe practices of bullying, violence, and abuse against women politicians were already standardized by leaders of the ruling party.

In 2023, people residing near the borderline encountered numerous challenges. The tragic case of Tamaz Ginturi, brutally killed by Russian soldiers near the Lomisi church at the occupation line, deeply shook our society. In Abkhazia, individuals such as Irakli Bebuia, Kristine Talakandze, and Asmat Tavadze remain imprisoned, with their release yet to be determined. Despite ongoing military and political transformations in the region, including the wars in Ukraine and Karabakh and subsequent escalations, Abkhazian society is concerned with uncertainty about its future, coupled with dissatisfaction regarding Russia's forced annexation and economic policies. Yet, effective government measures for conflict transformation and a peace-oriented approach are absent.

This year, a noticeable conservative shift in human rights policy and government rhetoric has been witnessed. In this context, the difficulty of political recognition of LGBT(Q)I rights and homophobia, which complicates the protection of the rights of LGBT(Q)I people, is becoming increasingly acute. It should be emphasized that the 2022-2030 National Human Rights Protection Strategy adopted by the government in late March 2023 does not include the issues of protecting the rights of LGBT(Q)I people. The same approach is taken in the 2024-2026 national action plan for the protection of

human rights initiated by the government, contradicting the principles of human rights and the recommendations of the European Commission. As in previous years, the event organized by Tbilisi Pride in a closed territory became the subject of raids and violence by extremist movements. The leaders of the mentioned movement remain unpunished, which is a clear indicator of the government's political loyalty towards them.

Although policies to combat violence against women have been strengthened, effective response to cases of forced marriage remains a challenge. The investigation is usually terminated, and plea agreements are signed with the accused. Coordination between the police, social security, and education systems is weak. Most fragile are social services, which have a shortage of human resources.

This year, the tragic case of Aitaj, a 14-year-old victim of the so-called "Case" murder by her husband due to forced marriage, exposed the failure of the system, community, and family in protecting the child. Beyond the inadequate prevention of this specific crime, it underscores broader challenges in preventing violence against children, revealing systemic issues in state agencies operating in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities.

In the context of an increasingly conservative government rhetoric and approach, a concerning practice towards religious inequality is emerging. This bias persisted from discriminatory provisions in the Forest Code, favoring the Orthodox Church in transferring forest massifs, and continued in the Defense Code adopted this year. The proposed human rights action plan foresees potential risks of a significant deterioration in legislation related to freedom of religion. This concerning practice merits heightened attention from society. Regrettably, an evident decline in standards towards freedom and equality of faith is noticeable in court decisions, exemplified by cases like the Batumi mosque and the discriminatory budget financing of religion groups in Marneuli.

Mass bilingual education programs were initiated this year in the direction of the protection of ethnic minorities. However, because the Ministry of Education and Science has not developed a strategy and action plan for the reform, measuring its resources and capabilities is complicated. A study conducted this year by the Social Justice Center and other partner organizations shows the severe extent of social exclusion of ethnic minorities, which, unfortunately, is not addressed by the current social policy of the state, related to both geographical and linguistic accessibility of state services.

Alongside equality concerns, issues related to social inequality and the associated human rights were prevalent. In 2023, the number of people receiving the social allowance was at a historic high of 676,641 in March. In addition, according to the data of May 2023, in 32 out of 64 municipalities of the country, the percentage of social allowance exceeded 25% of the population, and in 5 municipalities of Georgia (Kedi, Oni, Tsageri, Lentekhi, and Mestia), the allowance recipients exceeded half of the population. It should also be taken into account that people who are homeless and vulnerable cannot receive an allowance from the state.

Throughout the year, numerous labor rights violations were reported, encompassing neglect of fair, safe, and healthy working conditions, inadequate wages for a decent living, excessive working hours, and unpaid overtime. Workplace fatalities and injuries continue to be a persistent issue. The lack of awareness and willingness among employers to adhere to basic labor standards, coupled with weak state supervision and a dearth of effective mechanisms to enforce labor rights, contribute to critical systemic failures that the state neglects to address. The fact is evident in mass protests organized by workers in various sectors, including mining, heavy industries, the medical sector, education, and delivery services. Another concerning practice in 2023, consistent with previous years, was the persecution and dismissal of employees expressing dissenting and critical views.

The right to proper housing and the fight against homelessness were not priorities for the Georgian government and local authorities. One of the most pressing issues was the current situation in social housing. The government failed to comprehensively study the extent, forms, and causes of homelessness and neglected to include the minimum obligations regarding the right to adequate housing in the national strategy for protecting human rights. The rights of people with disabilities and their challenges were also disregarded. To date, the state has not developed a rights-based system that would consider the individual needs of people with disabilities and ensure the protection of the dignity, autonomy, and freedom of choice of community members.

The year 2023 proved to be particularly difficult for Georgia due to disasters caused by climate change. About 40 people lost their lives due to landslides in Shovi and Guria. Many questions remain unanswered about the role and responsibility of the state in this process, including why early warning systems were not implemented in the landslide-prone area, how adequate the state's response was, especially in the first hours of the disaster, and whether such a large number of victims could have been avoided. In 2023, the government continued to make environmental decisions without considering the participation and interests of the population, disregarding the local community by transferring the Baldi Canyon natural monument to a private investor for 40 years, which was met with protest by the residents of the Martvili municipality. Another example of an undemocratic and illegal decision was the transfer of the Racha forests to a Russian-linked oligarch for 49 years, sparking continuous protests by the Racha population and the "Rioni Valley Defenders."

### **1. The Decline in the State of Democracy and the European Integration Process.**

The year 2023 was exceptionally difficult for democratic institutions and civil organizations. In the early months, the initiation of the "[Agents of Foreign Influence](#)" draft law in the Parliament underscored the government's intent to curtail critical opinions within the country. The "Georgian Dream" sought to marginalize independent civil organizations, labeling them as adversaries and "Foreign Agents." Unprecedented international criticism and protests from local organizations were insufficient to withdraw the draft law. Despite substantial international criticism and protests from

the civil sector and local organizations, the draft law remained in place, prompting the government to concede only after several days of sustained demonstrations outside the Parliament. Physical clashes between the police and demonstrators posed a significant threat to civil peace and security.

Notably, legal proceedings were initiated against the participants following these events. However, [the use of illegal and disproportionate force](#) by the police against peaceful civil protests, which later escalated into confrontations between participants and law enforcement authorities, has yet to be adequately addressed and acknowledged.

The year 2023 was marked by the excessively aggressive rhetoric of the government towards civil organizations and critical media. Despite the introduction of the "Agents of Foreign Influence" draft law, [attacks on civil society organizations](#) continued unabated, and the campaign to denigrate or insult individual and human rights activists took on an organized form. Even though a [Memorandum of Cooperation](#) was signed between the Parliament and the union of civil society organizations - the National Platform of Georgia - in October, the government's attitude towards civil society organizations has not changed. Therefore, it remains a critical challenge to the government to receive and respect independent civil society actors' critical opinions.

Deteriorating the law-making process serves as a clear indicator of democratic backsliding. In the legislative body, leaving unexamined draft laws initiated by opposition parties became common practice. Conversely, draft laws introduced by the Parliamentary majority were expedited, limiting the opportunity for interested civil or professional groups to participate in the reviews adequately. Furthermore, in September, the Speaker of Parliament approved a new security rule. According to the adopted law, visitors are prohibited from displaying banners, distributing informational materials, or affixing any materials intended for demonstration (posters, banners, inscriptions, etc.) in Parliament. This new security rule disproportionately restricts the freedom of expression of Parliamentary visitors and impedes citizens' involvement in [Parliamentary activities](#).

Remarkably, the practice of public agencies in generating and disseminating general information and statistical data has deteriorated. In exceptional cases, public agencies provide the requested information within the legally required time frames. The opacity of these agencies and the absence of information on their activities make democratic governance impossible and substantially diminish trust in their operations.

## **2. Fragmented Judicial Reforms and Trust Crisis**

Fragmented judicial reforms persisted throughout the year, overshadowing the negligence of [fundamental problems](#) within the court system. The European Commission's recommendations, urging the state to undertake comprehensive judicial reform, including addressing concerns related to the High Council of Justice, were inadequately implemented. The scarcity of political discretion for

systemic reform led to increasingly severe and precise [international assessments](#) of the current state of the judicial system and legislative changes.

The severity of the problems in the court was indicated when the US Department of State imposed personal sanctions on entry into the country on members of an influential group of judges due to their involvement in significant corruption. The sanctions were imposed on current and former judges: Mikheil Chinchaladze, Levan Murusidze, Valerian Tsertsvadze, and Irakli Shengelia. According to the US Embassy, this decision was based on [reliable information](#) about the engagement of judges in alleged corrupt activities.

Another missed opportunity to enhance the judicial system was evident in the High Council of Justice after staffing [individuals](#) loyal to the influential group within the court and the government. Specifically, the Parliament appointed five non-judge members to the Council, none of whom demonstrated a critical or objective attitude toward the current state of affairs within the court.

The problem of informal influences and corporatism in the judicial system is indicated by replacing the independent inspector with Shota Kadagidze, loyal to the influential group of judges, who was previously a High Council of Justice member. The independent inspector plays an essential role in the disciplinary process of judges. Therefore, it is critically important that the person elected to this position holds a decisive professional reputation and is unconfined from any influences.

Among other factors, informal influences in the court and the formation of privileged and underprivileged groups of judges are also facilitated by unfair rules on workload and remuneration. To this day, privileged judges in the system do not hear or see only a handful of cases. On the other hand, the Georgian legislation assigns essential powers to the High Council of Justice in the process of determining the remuneration for representatives of the judiciary, which increases the dependence/loyalty of representatives to the Council and directly increases the [risks](#) of clan culture and undue influence on individuals in the court.

The suppression of critical, dissenting opinions in the judiciary system is the 1st November [decision](#) of the High Council of Justice, by which, after the expiration of the 3-year probationary period, the judge - Nino Giorgadze, was not appointed to the position for life tenure. With this decision, the Council deviated from the existing practice of appointing judges on probationary terms for life, which is likely explained by the fact that Nino Giorgadze publicly criticized and outlined problematic changes in the justice system.

Within the context of politicized justice, the effectiveness of the Constitutional Court of Georgia has progressively diminished each year, which was evident after [not considering lawsuits](#) submitted by civil society organizations or the public defender. Additionally, decisions on cases of high political interest have failed to align with the established [practices](#) of the Constitutional Court in the past and the standards for human rights protection.

### 3. Closed Security Sector and the Instrumentalization of SSSG

Throughout 2023, under the guise of protecting state interests and ensuring national security, unwarranted interference in fundamental human rights persisted. The primary challenge within the security sector remains the extensive mandate of the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG) and the operational-technical agency, coupled with their politicization, a flawed accountability system, and ineffective control mechanisms. The issue is further complicated by the secrecy surrounding agencies involved in the sector, especially in counterintelligence activities, leading to ongoing concerns regarding low accountability levels and weak judicial and Parliamentary oversight mechanisms. In addition, the composition of the Parliamentary trust group is incomplete, and the committee and sessional hearings are privately held, which leaves the public in an informational vacuum regarding security issues. Access to public information in the security sector is limited. Agencies maintain inconsistent practices and, without any basis, keep information that belongs to the public classification concealed.

The [case involving the former chief prosecutor of Georgia](#) exemplifies the SSSG's utilization as a political instrument. On September 14, 2023, the US State Department sanctioned an officer of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and a Georgian-Russian oligarch, Otar Partskhaladze. The statement highlighted that Partskhaladze acquired Russian citizenship with the assistance of an FSB officer, influencing Georgian society and politics in favor of Russia. Although the SSSG initiated an investigation into the matter, details regarding the alleged crime emerged only a few months after the head of the SSSG presented a report to the Parliament. According to the report, the case is being investigated under Article 319 of the Criminal Code, indicating assistance in hostile activities to a foreign country. Despite the issue's significance and public interest, the only fact revealed is that the SSSG questioned Partskhaladze. The chronology of events suggests that state structures worked cohesively to assist the former chief prosecutor in evading sanctions.

Despite encountering security challenges, as seen in the 2022 report, the SSSG failed to specify the source of threats against the country and created the [impression](#) that operational control over civil society organizations, educational institutions, and other independent actors occurred under the framework of counterintelligence activities.

On September 18, 2023, it was exemplified in the emergency [statement](#) released by the State Security Service. The statement asserted that "destabilization and civil disturbances" were planned in Georgia from October to December, with the civil organization "Canvas" implicated in organizing a

"revolutionary scenario." Shortly after the initial announcement, the SSSG released [secretly recorded videos](#) on non-violent forms of resistance that were part of an educational purpose. However, the SSSG characterized it as preparation for the forceful overthrow of the government by "Canvas." In the weeks following this statement, the SSSG periodically questioned attendees and organizers of the lectures, leading to the [intimidation](#) of activists, civil society groups, and representatives from the cultural and artistic circles. Consequently, the troubling practices of using the SSSG as a political tool, engaging in covert and illegal surveillance, intimidation, and exerting complete control over citizens persist, all under the guise of state security interests.

#### **4. A Politicized Law Enforcement System and Inaction in Protecting Vulnerable Groups**

In 2023, as in previous years, the practice of disproportionate and unjustified use of police force during peaceful demonstrations was still relevant. On March 7-8, the protest against so-called Russian Law, the law enforcement officials [used excessive force](#) against the peaceful civil protest. Police used tear gas and water cannons in large numbers and, in some cases, without prior warning, which violates the requirements in the "Police Law of Georgia." The intensive use of special means, in addition to its disproportionate nature, had the consequence of intimidation and punishment of civilians. During the March protests, the police arrested dozens of demonstrators and started criminal proceedings against them. In this context, the ongoing criminal prosecution of Lazare Grigoriadis and the recurring usage of unethical and offensive statements by government officials has further politicized the court proceedings.

In addition to the March protests of 2023, mass administrative arrests occurred in the framework of various demonstrations. (the protest demanding the ban of direct flights to Russia - in May, the protest of human rights activists with blank pages - in June, the public protest relating to the arrival of a Russian cruise ship in Batumi - in August, actions to protect the forests of Racha - in November, etc.). In fact, in all cases, the police, along with physical obstructions, used the practice of [administrative detention](#) on protestors to prevent their expression. It should be noted that these administrative arrests, in most cases, did not protect public order or prevent law violations but were an attempt to interfere with the protest and exert pressure on the protestors participating in it. In addition, the increasing practice of involving administrative detentions, especially fines, to people participating in gatherings and demonstrations is highly alarming, which worsens the background regarding freedom of expression in the country.

Simultaneously, the law enforcement agencies displayed inaction in July concerning the security of the closed event "Tbilisi Pride, which was not due to an improper assessment of threats or lack of preparation but rather a lack of appropriate political intention. Before the event, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was aware of the counterdemonstration by radical groups intending to disrupt "Tbilisi Pride." however, they deployed insufficient police forces to the gathering place and, by acting

ineffectively in preventing incidents, failed to protect the "Tbilisi Pride" event which resulted in participants [exiting](#) the area. Given the challenging experience of July 5-6, 2021, the deficient protection of the gathering area raises concerns that law enforcement officials deliberately neglected to protect the participants.

In October 2023, the Parliament precipitously adopted the "Law of Georgia on Assemblies and Demonstrations," unreasonably [restricting](#) the placement of temporary structures such as tents and stages. As emphasized in the OSCE/ODIHR [report](#), the draft law did not comply with European standards of freedom of expression. In addition, if the President vetoed the adopted draft law, the Parliamentary majority could override the veto at any time, further [deteriorating](#) the standards for protecting freedom of expression in the country.

During the reporting period, pressure on public officials and restrictions on freedom of expression in agencies were also identified. Goga Razmadze, an employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs who spoke about censorship, discrimination, and forced explanations by management, was fired in November 2023. The coordinated work of the agencies facilitates the suppression of critical opinion within the system. The Special Investigation Service did not start the investigation of the alleged crime; the public defender stopped the proceedings and did not establish the fact of discriminatory treatment. In the end, Goga Razmadze's complaint was reviewed by the General Inspection Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, whose deputy head was accused by Razmadze of psychological pressure, insults, and improper treatment, which once again confirms the need for institutional reform in law enforcement entities.

On June 27, 2023, an unprecedented investigation was conducted by the Special Investigation Service on the violence committed against Misha Mshvildadze, one of the founders of the "Formula" TV. After the attack, "Formula" TV journalists obtained video evidence of the incident, which revealed the presence of State Security Service representatives at the scene of the crime. The reasoned assumption was raised about their potential participation in the attack. The State Security Service confirmed that Giorgi Mumladze, who can be seen in the video depicting the attack on Mshvildadze, is their employee. Despite this, only one person was charged under Article 126 of the Criminal Code (violence) during the investigation, and a state representative's participation in the attack was [not identified](#). Nevertheless, the investigation carried out by the Special Investigation Service failed to dispel the victims and the public's interest in the involvement of the security service employee in the incident.

The cases of Goga Razmadze and Misha Mshvildadze raise inquiries about the autonomy of the Special Investigation Service. The politicization of the law enforcement system remains the principal challenge of the country, which impairs the investigative process while also affecting the public trust in law enforcement agencies.



## 5. Legal Status of Conflict-Affected Population in 2023

The year 2023 was still associated with harsh security and legal challenges for the population affected by the conflict. The gruesome murder of Tamaz Ginturi by Russian soldiers near the occupation line, as well as arrests in these areas, once again demonstrated the harm and vulnerability of the occupation.

After the war in Ukraine, a new tendency appeared in Georgia's foreign policy. Compromise in relations with Russia (Soft rhetoric, Restoration of flights, Visa-free travel, Increased trade with Russia, increasing migration from Russia, etc.), negative statements made against the Ukrainian government, strategic cooperation with China, and growing anti-Western messages created the "conceptual ambiguity" in countries foreign policy.

In the background, when the conflict between Russia and the West deepened, Georgia's foreign policy changed from normative to pragmatic, raising serious questions about its feasibility. In the most critical period of rapprochement with the European Union, Georgia's compliance with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the European Union is low (43%), in contrast to Moldova (78%) and Ukraine (89%).

Despite significant changes in the regional context, including the war in Ukraine, the second Karabakh war, and subsequent developments, there is a growing sense of fear and dissatisfaction about the future within Abkhazian society. Unfortunately, the government has not adopted new conflict transformation and peacebuilding approaches. Notably, there has been no effort to introduce new strategic documents for de-occupation or peace policy. Additionally, there is a lack of progress in international negotiations in Geneva, and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) mechanism in Gali's direction has not been restored.

Official [data](#) reveal that in nearly 40% of cases, the government denies applicants from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions seeking Georgian citizenship. This citizenship acquisition process could serve as a crucial opportunity for peacebuilding, especially given the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions against Russia, creating a potential route for fostering alternatives in these isolated regions. The current neutral identity documents available to residents in these areas do not have social benefits. In 2023, a court ruled that denying pension benefits to a disabled person from Abkhazia [was illegal](#), emphasizing an obligation for the state to provide care and social protection to individuals living in the occupied territories.

The fulfillment of the obligations by the state concerning the population of Gali and Akhgori is also a problematic issue because Georgian citizens living in the region are still facing severe challenges, including access to quality [healthcare](#) and the right to [education](#) in their native language, which has been entirely restricted since 2022.

In this tumultuous political environment, populations affected by conflict continued to grapple with severe security risks. Throughout 2023, the pattern of arrests and borderization persisted, exemplified by the attempted kidnapping of [Mevlud Kharazishvili](#) and his wife in Chvrinisi village. During this incident, Russian "border guards" fired shots at a Georgian citizen and assaulted him with a weapon, resulting in severe injuries. In November 2023, another distressing incident unfolded as Russian "border guards" killed [Tamaz Ginturi](#) in Kirbali village and unlawfully detained Levan Dotiashvili, who was accompanying him. These grave instances of rights violations represent a decade-long continuation of practices encompassing bordering, illegal detentions, killings, and numerous other human rights abuses. From 2016 to 2022, 624 individuals were arrested in the [Tskhinvali region](#) and 337 in Abkhazia. The absence of a warning system, the dearth of notice signs along the dividing line, the scarcity of surveillance cameras, and the inadequate performance of patrol guards exacerbate the pervasive threat faced by the population living near the dividing line. A staggering 63% of villages in the Tskhinvali region lack a police building, and 39% do not benefit from regular patrolling, leaving the residents vulnerable.

In 2020, [Irakli Bebu](#) was unlawfully imprisoned and continues to be held in the de facto penitentiary institution of Abkhazia with severe health conditions. Similarly, unlawfully detained [Georgian women citizens](#) Kristine Talakandze and Asmat Tavadze also remain in custody.

## 6. The State of Religious Freedom and Equality

**Regrettably, in 2023, the tendency to legitimize religious discrimination at the legislative level persisted.** Following the [amendments to the Forest Code](#) in 2020, which entailed transferring a significant amount of forest land exclusively to the ownership of the Georgian Patriarchate, authorities introduced a distinct and more detrimental provision for the conscription of church from other religious organizations in the recently enacted Defense Code. Under the [new defense code](#), the environments for deferring military service no longer consider priestly service and theological institute studies as valid reasons. Consequently, individuals pursuing such roles must undergo military or alternative labor service. As known to the public, based on the constitutional agreement, the Orthodox Church is entirely released from this obligation, and the existing arrangement before the implementation of the new defense code negates the situation of other religious organizations through the postponement mechanism.

It appears that these practices will persist in the forthcoming years. The **3-year action plan** for human rights protection, prepared by the Government of Georgia, indicates that legislative changes/additions will be implemented in the regulatory norms on the construction of religious buildings and the rules for registering religious associations. The plan also outlines the introduction of the special law on "Ensuring Freedom of Religion." Specific groups have long advocated these legislative changes, and such initiatives seek to complicate the existing liberal order concerning the construction and

registration of religious organizations. They also define religious organizations through the special law and encroach upon their freedom. Notably, the same document outlines the implementation of changes in Resolution N117 of the Government of Georgia dated January 27, 2014. Additionally, it proposes symbolic and partial compensation for the damage caused to other religious associations during the Soviet period alongside four religious associations. Given that this financing practice takes the form of a subsidy, there is a prevailing sentiment that the government utilizes it to exert greater control over religious organizations. This initiative, therefore, appears to be a tool aimed at further increasing control over religious organizations.

Ongoing investigations into significant religious-related cases remained flawed and predominantly formal. The effective investigation of violations regarding the personal lives and communication security of religious organizations and leaders continued to be problematic this year. **On September 13-14, 2021**, within the ongoing investigation into the **SSSG collection of recordings**, multiple church members were defined as victims. However, the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia has yet to identify the perpetrators and initiate criminal prosecution. The current investigation exhibits apparent flaws, as outlined below:

1. The prosecutor's office has not provided the criminal case materials to individuals known to be affected.
2. The questioning of SSSG employees was primarily formal, and they frequently evaded fundamental questions under the guise of protecting state secrets.
3. Several investigative actions, such as searches and seizures of phones and official computers, were conducted belatedly, allowing potential influence on the evidence. Additionally, the investigation has not determined the legal grounds for the mass hearings of church members and others.

This year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia and the Prosecutor's Office also did not ensure the investigation of the facts of the **systematic violation of human rights and the initiation of criminal prosecution of the former beneficiaries of Ninotsminda boarding school**. The investigative/procedural actions conducted in the case and the information given in the media by former beneficiaries of the boarding school point to a serious offense. Physical punishment methods, verbal abuse, and psychological violence were allegedly used against the children, and these actions, in some cases, even amounted to improper treatment in terms of intensity. Nevertheless, the prosecutor's office does not grant the status of a victim to more than one former beneficiary of the boarding house, does not ensure timely conduct of procedural actions in the case, and deliberately delays the investigation.

**The Supreme Court of Georgia has issued legal definitions that are sharply adverse to the principles of religious freedom and equality, which, in this direction, worsened legal standards.** The [Supreme](#)

[Court's decision regarding constructing a new mosque in Batumi](#) raised concerns. The decision resulted from two court instances involving the City Hall's initial refusal to issue a permit to build the mosque in Batumi— which is illegal and discriminatory. The case was subsequently remanded to the Court of Appeal for reconsideration. The Supreme Court justified its decision by asserting that there was no discrimination against Muslims, citing the Batumi City Hall's refusal to issue permits for the construction of Orthodox churches in the same "Residential Zone 6" where the new mosque's land is situated. The reasoning was based on the fact that Orthodox churches were built without permission, making the two cases incomparable. This Supreme Court decision presents a contentious interpretation of crucial legal cases and establishes a concerning precedent of discrimination. Hopefully, the Court of Appeal will not adopt this stance but will uphold its prior decision.

The Supreme Court of Georgia rendered an unfavorable decision concerning the discriminatory redistribution of the Marneuli budget and deemed the appeal from one of the religious organizations inadmissible. The Bolnisi court made a [precedent-setting decision](#) on July 1, 2022. The court invalidated a norm in the resolution of the municipal Council of Marneuli, which stipulated that the allocated amount from the municipality's budget (400,000 GEL) for financing religious activities should exclusively go to the Diocese of Marneuli and Hujab. However, on December 8, 2022, the Court of Appeals rejected the Bolnisi court's decision in a single session. During the case review, the judge made problematic remarks about religious and ethnic affiliations. The Social Justice Center expressed the hope that the Supreme Court would recognize the significance of the precedent set by this case and ensure the right to equality by overturning the troubling decision of the Court of Appeals. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court did not consider appeals of cassation. Notably, the judge of Bolnisi City Court, [Nino Giorgadze](#), who had issued a progressive decision in this case, was not appointed as a lifelong judge in the future, which was preceded by the local bishop's strongly negative statements towards her.

In 2023, a meaningful event regarding religious freedom was the [decision](#) made by the European Court of Human Rights in the case of the boarding school for Muslim students in Kobuleti. According to the decision, the European Court found a violation of Articles 8 (right to private life) and 9 (freedom of opinion, conscience, and religion) of the European Convention on Human Rights, along with Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination). The court held that the police failed to halt discriminatory actions by private individuals against a religious boarding house and, in addition, did not ensure an effective investigation into an act of harassment motivated by religious intolerance. Furthermore, the European Court found a violation of Article 1 of Additional Protocol 1 of the Convention, which pertains to the right to property. This violation was attributed to the impossibility of the boarding house administration's continued use of the house building. The Social Justice Center hopes that this case will contribute to preventing religious intolerance in similar instances and serve as the foundation for the implementation of effective measures by the state.

## 7. Legal Status of Non-Dominant Ethnic Groups

In 2023, the government started the case of introducing bilingual education programs and promised that in the following years, these programs would fully cover preschools and schools operating in minority languages. The mentioned goal is essential; however, when the concept of reform and the action plan are not designated, and there are not enough human and educational resources, there is a suspicion that this idea of ambitious reform may be preliminary. The government and other agencies also promised to build kindergartens and schools in areas densely populated by minorities. However, the data presented in the action plan does not allow for measuring and predicting the extent of these efforts.

Importantly, this year, several agencies have started translation services and communication channels into minority languages (including the Social Care Agency, Legislative Herald of Georgia, and Dmanisi Municipality). The Social Justice Center has long called for this approach to access services and participation in public life for ethnic minorities. However, this change is not systematic and does not fully cover the policies of all service providers and self-governing bodies.

Beyond the mentioned issues, no considerable approving dynamics have been recorded this year regarding protecting human rights, civil equality, and integrating non-dominant ethnic groups. **There are still no permanent consultative platforms for ethnic minorities at the level of the state or Parliament**, where community leaders and activists would raise their concerns to decision-makers. The communication of the Office of State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality with the Public Defender and the Council of Ethnic Minorities cannot be considered as an approving example. Moreover, we have been asking the Government and the Parliament for years to create inclusive and democratic platforms open to others who may not be Council members.

At the same time, despite the expected elections and the lack of representation of ethnic minorities in the Parliament, the issue of developing unique approaches and mechanisms (for example, the process of financial support to parties, quotas, or others) that would help increase **the representation of minorities in political parties and representative bodies** did not occur.

In 2023, several important research papers were presented about the socioeconomic challenges of non-dominant ethnic groups. According to a [report](#) conducted by the Institute for Social Studies and Analysis, ethnic minorities have 2.7 times less access to preschool education, two times less access to upper secondary education, and two times less access to higher and technical education. 53% of the population of Georgia has income below the average, and nearly 68% is ethnic minorities. 21% of ethnic minorities derive their primary income from agriculture, compared to 7% in Georgia. Additionally, agricultural programs remain inaccessible to the majority of ethnic minority farmers.

Despite this asymmetry, the existing state policy documents on civil equality and integration do not provide for such measures (priority and accelerated development of kindergartens and schools, agricultural infrastructure, mass introduction of translation resources in the language of minorities at the self-government level, as well as in the process of providing justice, psychosocial, health services, etc.), which would increase the social inclusion and equality of these groups.

The condition of people with disabilities in the ethnic minority community is extremely tough. According to the precise requirements of international standards, the state does not collect statistical data on people with disabilities by ethnicity. The number of people with disabilities is inadequately low in all regions of Georgia, and the lowest rate in the country is in the Kvemo Kartli region, which indicates the complications of access of the population of Kvemo Kartli and abruptions in mechanisms of granting the status of a disabled person. While providing services, the deficiency of professionals speaking in minority languages is a critical barrier. The ratio of service-providing agencies in the Kvemo Kartli region and the number of children living in this area are sharply disproportional, and the current indicators are noticeably lower than in other regions of Georgia. In 4 out of 7 municipalities of Kvemo Kartli (Gardabani, Dmanisi, Tetrtskaro, and Tsalka municipalities), access to the services provided by the sub-programs of early development and day centers is impossible.

The Social Justice Center also conducted a study on the needs of ethnic minority groups in 2023. The needs of ethnically Udis, Avars, and Azerbaijanis living in [Kvareli](#) and [Sagarejo](#) municipalities (who, according to official statistics, represent 30% of the population in Sagarejo municipality) are often neglected by the local self-government, and there are consequential social challenges in these villages. At the same time, there is no multicultural policy at the municipal level that would strengthen cooperation and dialogue between different ethnic groups. Interestingly, [Abkhazians](#) and [Ossetians](#) living in the controlled territory of Georgia also have meaningful challenges that the state does not see. Abkhazians in Adjara demand a cultural center that would help preserve this small community's identity, language, and culture. For the ethnic Ossetian population, solving the issues related to the unfair land distribution in the villages and difficulties in registering real estate is essential. Also, it is vital to recognize and respect their culture in the background of the traumatic memory of the 90s. These groups are also weakly involved in the peace process, and the state does not see the extent of their participation in this process.

It is important to note that on January 19, 2023, the European Court of Human Rights issued its [decision](#) on the case of Temirlan Machalikashvili. The Court found a violation of Article 2 (right to life) in the procedural aspect, in which it was determined that the investigation conducted at the national level did not adhere to the fundamental principles of independence, effectiveness, and accountability. Sadly, following the European Court's decision on this case, the state is [unduly delaying](#) the relaunch of the investigation process, which is the sole means to enforce the ruling and restore the violated rights of the Machalikashvili family.

## 8. Legal Status of LGBT(Q)I people

The difficulty in achieving political recognition of LGBT(Q)I rights, coupled with political homophobia, poses a significant obstacle to improving the human rights situation for LGBT(Q)I individuals. In 2023, the rhetoric of the ruling team was openly homophobic, creating a challenging environment. In March 2023, authorities used offensive language against participants in mass protests opposing the draft law "Agents of Foreign Influence." Amidst the demonization of young protesters by state officials, particularly after the arrest of Lazare Grogiadis, official propaganda against him was [openly launched](#). The leader of the ruling party accused the opposition and civil society of promoting "LGBT(Q)I propaganda" and [damaging the reputation](#) of the church. Notably, during this period, pro-government media actively circulated anti-LGBT and anti-Western propaganda stories. In addition to that, on May 2023, the Prime Minister delivered a [speech](#) at the Conservative Political Action Conference, exhibiting ultra-conservative and anti-gender content.

It should be emphasized that the 2022-2030 National Human Rights Protection Strategy adopted by the government late in March 2023 does not include the issues of sexual minorities, so the rights of LGBT(Q)I people [are not mentioned in the document](#), only women's rights are considered as gender-related issues. After the adoption of the National Strategy for the Protection of Discriminatory Human Rights in March on October 2023, the government initiated the National Action Plan for the Protection of Human Rights for 2024-2026, which [excludes members of the LGBT\(Q\)I community](#), contradicting the recommendations of the Human Rights and European Commission.

In March 2023, the pro-government party "European Socialists" initially proposed a legislative initiative [demanding a ban](#) on LGBT(Q)I propaganda. However, they later withdrew the draft law; in addition, leaders of the "Georgian Dream" party initially expressed their support for it. Currently, the Parliament of Georgia has registered draft laws from the pro-government political party "Conservative Movement" and the TV company "Alt-Info." According to these draft laws, the planned amendment to the law "On Assemblies and Manifestations" seeks to [prohibit the "propaganda of sexual orientation."](#)

The main challenge for LGBT(Q)I people persist is violence. The state has yet to develop a unified strategy for effectively preventing and responding to hate crimes, which should involve coordinated efforts across law enforcement, social, educational, and penitentiary sectors, systematically ensuring the protection of the safety and dignity of LGBT(Q)I individuals.

For the victims of the violence, access to appropriate psychosocial and health services is vital. However, the state lacks a policy to provide adequate housing for such victims. Short-term services from crisis centers fall short of providing long-term security and support for LGBT(Q)I individuals.



The issue of inclusivity in service should also be emphasized, as many LGBT(Q)I individuals often experience a hostile environment in shelters from other beneficiaries. Consequently, some members of the LGBT(Q)I community may hesitate to seek state asylum for this reason.

## 9. The Legal Status of Women

In 2023, the state's response and policies regarding femicide, forced marriages, and violence against women remained insufficient and ineffective, especially in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities. The most egregious femicide [case occurred on October 6, 2023](#), when a 27-year-old man fatally shot 14-year-old Aitaj Shakhmirova in Lambalo village of Sagarejo municipality. Investigation materials indicate that Aitaj was engaged at the age of 13, and after the engagement, the accused unlawfully restricted her freedom with the intention of marriage. Subsequently, at the age of 13, Aitaj was compelled into forced marriage. The school presumably had information about Aitaj's engagement and marriage, but the administration did not initiate any procedure or provide relevant information to agencies about the engagement/marriage. Importantly, in regions populated by non-dominant ethnic groups, police effectiveness is inefficient, hindering the establishment of trust within the community. Moreover, social care services and appropriate protection tools are already poorly addressed and developed in the policy on violence against women, which are even less effective within ethnic minority communities.

Despite the state's efforts to strengthen the policy against violence towards women, effectively addressing cases of forced marriage and ensuring fair justice remains a challenge. In many instances, investigations are halted, and plea agreements are reached with the accused individuals. There is a critical lack of awareness among those responsible for referrals in the police, social protection, and education systems regarding indicators, procedures, and their obligations to identify child marriages within the system.

In the summer of this year, [another tragic case of femicide](#) occurred in occupied Abkhazia. Natia Bakhtadze, a 28-year-old woman residing in Gali, went missing on July 28. In August, the Prosecutor's Office of the de facto Republic arrested the suspect, Ainar Tsvizhba, who confessed to killing Natia Bakhtadze in a car. The perpetrator then disposed of her body at 3 Vardnilhesi Street along the Enguri River. Unfortunately, the search for Natia Bakhtadze's body has yielded no results. Simultaneously, during the investigation, unconfirmed reports from the Gali district emerged about the discovery of two women's bodies—one in the Ilori forest and the other in the river.

Additionally, in the current year, significant challenges have emerged in ensuring women's reproductive rights and needs regarding the **provision of health services**. As a result, women are unable to access essential healthcare services, which poses a threat to their lives and the well-being of their children. This issue in Khulo indicates a systemic problem. As of July 2023, Khulo lacks a maternity unit despite having a population of over 23,000, and the city no longer has any



gynecologists. This absence of essential healthcare facilities highlights the urgent need for systemic improvements to ensure women's access to reproductive health services in the region.

In terms of the decline in reproductive rights, the Minister of Health's October 2023 [order](#) related to changes in abortion rules should be highlighted. These changes will add further obstacles for women seeking abortions. **Specifically, starting January 2024, following a five-day waiting period, women will be required to consult not just with a gynecologist but also with a psychologist and a social worker within a "doctor's consultation room specially set aside for this purpose."** After all, the women's rights defenders and reproductive health specialists became aware of this change only after the publication of the [order](#). It is crucial to emphasize that Women's reproductive rights are protected by the Constitution and Legislation of Georgia and by International and Regional Human Rights Treaties ratified by the country.

This year, gender-based [hate speech](#) was constantly used against female politicians in the public sphere. In October, there were the worst [cases](#) of sexist language being used by members of the "Georgian Dream" party in the Parliament, which created a hostile environment for women regarding low political representation in politics. The use of sexist hate speech contributes to the objectification of female politicians in the media and public discourse.

It should be noted that in accordance with subsection "O" of Article 3 of the Code of Ethics, **"it is explicitly prohibited for a member of the Parliament of Georgia to engage in insulting, obscene, sexist, discriminatory speech, actions, or any form of hate speech."** Unfortunately, the Code of Ethics of a Member of the Parliament of Georgia does not provide effective mechanisms in cases of MPs' use of hate speech.

## 10. Right to Adequate Housing

The right to adequate housing and the fight against homelessness were not priorities for the Georgian government and local authorities in 2023 either. Despite a number of recommendations, the Housing Policy - legislation harmonized with international standards, national strategy, and action plan - has not been developed. Therefore, there is still no strategy in the direction of fighting homelessness and guaranteeing adequate housing to people in need, which makes the conditions in the country worse year by year. In 2023, the government did not aim for the scale, forms, and causes of homelessness. It did not reflect even the minimum obligations regarding the right to proper housing in the National Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights of Georgia (2022-2030).

One of the most critical issues this year was the conditions in social housing. Despite the importance of such a mechanism, the service delivery process cannot withstand criticism and fails to meet even the minimum requirements of International Human Rights Standards. In this regard, social housing in Gori municipality is seriously problematic, where more than 100 homeless people live, and

conditions are harsh, degrading, and dangerous. The building is dilapidated and damp; residents cannot access bathrooms and warm water. Overcrowding, inferior heating, and inaccessibility of the facility for the elderly and disabled are highly challenging. Despite numerous [requests](#), the municipality of Gori did not react to transfer the residents to a protected and dignified environment.

The situation is also critical in Orkhevi social housing, where 260 homeless people currently reside. For years, residents of Orkhevi social housing have endured unsuitable conditions, including constant noise, overcrowding, and dampness. An expert report commissioned by the Samgori district administration has [identified](#) urgent safety issues concerning the building. The report emphasizes that the operation of the building is not allowed without necessary strengthening works, and evacuation of residents is required during the construction. The municipality must address the housing issues of Orkhevi residents in a safe and dignified environment in the 2024 budget.

Along with homeless people, the issue of housing has become acute for the rest of the population as well. The cause of this is the significant deterioration of the financial availability of accommodation and a substantial increase in the cost of renting real estate in large cities, especially in Tbilisi, where students [face](#) challenges. Despite the initiatives announced by institutions, a unified and effective policy regarding this group has not been formed.

Like previous years, eviction remains a topical and imperative issue this year. Information about the National Bureau of Enforcement's plan to evict various families from their last residence has been [widely reported](#) in the media. The situation is complicated because eviction legislation is flawed and fails to provide minimal protection to evicted persons/families before and after removal.

Although the so-called police evictions were abolished, and expulsions will now be carried out through the court system, recent [statements](#) by the Minister of Justice regarding changes in the legislation regulating evictions, as well as the content of the draft enforcement code initiated in Parliament, suggest that removals in individual cases (e.g., for non-fulfillment of obligations under the rental agreement) will still be doable. Proceeding without a court hearing excludes the possibility of judicial control over cases and will significantly disintegrate the legal status of people and households at risk of homelessness.

## **11. Green Policy**

The year 2023 turned out to be particularly difficult for Georgia due to the devastating consequences of disasters caused by climate change. About 40 people lost their lives due to landslides in Shovi and Guria. Until now, many [questions remain unanswered](#) about the role and responsibility of the state in this process, concerning early warning systems that are not implemented in landslide-prone areas, matters whether the state's response was adequate or not, especially in the first hours of the disaster, and whether such a large number of victims could have been avoided. In addition, it was problematic

that as soon as the investigation began, government officials practically [ruled out the existence of a crime](#), which raised additional questions about the investigation's independence. Moreover, government officials do not shy away from attacking disaster survivors and [questioning their origins](#). The investigation started on this [case was flawed](#) because the agency refused to hand over the case materials to one of the victim's family and its lawyer and only [proposed to introduce](#) them to the Special Investigation Service, which complicated the proper implementation of the protection of the rights due to the volume and complexity of the materials.

In addition, the government [attacked](#) media reporting from the disaster location and other figures who criticized the state for its absence of reaction measures and early warning systems. The authorities targeted the Georgian news "Mountain Stories," which covered Shovi's events from the very first hours of the disaster. Because the information spread by the publication did not match the media narrative of the government, many aggressive, insulting, and threatening statements were made against its editor, Gela Mtvlishvili, by both central and local government representatives.

Tea Godoladze, Head of the Department of the Institute of Earth Sciences and Seismic Monitoring at Ilia State University, also became the subject of the government's aggression and the target of a defamatory [information campaign](#). It is worth noting that the story of the Rustavi 2 TV company, in which the government representatives made statements on the personal content and groundlessly linked the personal life of Tea Godoladze to the reliability of the public assessments made by the scientist regarding the Shovi landslide. The Charter of Journalistic Ethics [assessed](#) this act as violating media standards.

The government employed a strategy of undermining the credibility of environmentalists while justifying the "Foreign Influence Agents" draft law. In doing so, they accused the "Rioni Valley Defenders" of having connections to Russia [without providing substantial evidence to](#) support the claim. This strategy was part of the effort to discredit and cast doubt on the motives of environmental advocates.

The government has been making significant environmental decisions without considering the opinions and concerns of the local population. For instance, the decision to [hand over](#) the Baldi Canyon natural monument to a private investor for 40 years was made without considering the community's interests. This action led to protests by the residents of Martvili municipality, who expressed their dissent by continuous protest in tents.

In 2022, the decision to lease the Racha forests to a Russian-linked oligarch for 49 years triggered ongoing protests by Racha residents and the "Rioni Valley Defenders" movement. Initially, the demonstrations took place in the Oni and Ambrolauri municipalities. After that, demonstrators extended their [protest](#) to the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture in Tbilisi. However, law enforcement officials illegally obstructed an attempt to set up tents in the public space outside the Ministry's enclosure, resulting in the unlawful [arrest](#) of 11 demonstrators.

The Hunting License was revoked on November 28, although not based on [illegality and violation of the human rights](#) of the locals, [but because](#) the investor company failed to fulfill its obligations, and the Ministry of Environment Protection and Agriculture [did not acknowledge](#) the unfavorable nature of the license at any stage.

## 12. Protecting the Rights of People with Disabilities

People with disabilities remain one of the most invisible and vulnerable members of society. Although the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) has been in force for Georgia since 2014, the state has not yet developed a human rights-based system that would take into account the individual needs of persons with disabilities and ensure the protection of the dignity, autonomy, and freedom of choice.

The protection of disabled people in Georgia was the topic of study of international mechanisms. In April 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities assessed the current situation in the country in its [final recommendations](#) and drew attention to several [problematic issues](#). In September of 2023, the UN special rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities visited Georgia, which will publish an in-depth assessment of the legal status of persons with disabilities in the coming months.

The legal status of people with disabilities is rigid in many directions, but a distinct challenge remains:

- Weak social policy that reduces opportunities for a dignified life for the disabled community;
- The harshest practice of institutionalization that results in hundreds of mentally and intellectually disabled people living in isolation from society, independent life, and neglect of other rights and freedoms;
- Assessing, assigning status, and implementing policies toward community members based solely on medical diagnosis;
- The absence of statistical information regarding people with disabilities is an essential factor hindering the planning and implementation of evidence-based policies;
- Improper implementation of capacity reform, causing thousands of disabled people to lose actual control over their lives;
- Due to language policy, significant barriers to accessing services and information at the central level by people with disabilities representing ethnic minorities;
- Weakness and unsystematic character of the involvement of disabled people and their representative organizations in the decision-making process.

In 2023, One of the most urgent issues was the social protection of disabled people. Unfortunately, the current system still ignores the needs of community members and provides them with

unsustainable support. Municipal services, which are often fragmented and short-term, are particularly problematic. People with disabilities face severe challenges due to the discriminatory nature of certain services, as well as the absence/lack of appropriate assistance and their low quality and accessibility problems, including physical, geographic, informational, and linguistic.

In the absence of an effective policy, up to 37,000 people with disabilities (as of the summer of 2023) receive social benefits, while the system for identifying socially vulnerable families, due to its shortcomings, cannot ensure the estimation of all people living in poverty and the minimum subsistence allowance.

In the current year, ensuring an adequate social package for disabled individuals has been a critical concern. Although the amount allocated for the social package has increased since 2023, with the legal commitment to raise it outlined in the "Law of Georgia On Social Assistance," more than 82,000 people, or 65% of those receiving the social package, still get less than the subsistence minimum (135 GEL for moderately disabled individuals and 175 GEL for severely disabled individuals). This amount, considering the needs of disabled people and the limited employment opportunities, poses a severe risk of extreme socioeconomic vulnerability.

In addition to the insufficient funds in the social package, a substantial number of disabled individuals are excluded from this aid system. As of October 2023, only 3.4% of the country's population, totaling more than 127,000 people with disabilities, received a social package. This falls below the global indicators, which suggest that the percentage of people with disabilities in the population should be between 11-18%. These figures indicate that at least two-thirds of disabled individuals do not benefit from the social package. This group includes elderly disabled individuals who receive an old-age pension.

Despite the articulated visions in several thematic strategies, integrating human rights into the mental health system remains a significant challenge as of 2023. While the approval of the strategy for independent living and deinstitutionalization of people with disabilities (2022-2030) and its action plan marked a crucial step this year, the implementation of these documents, along with the mental health strategy (2022-2030), is progressing with notable gaps.

Despite the critical need, there are currently no guarantees to protect recipients of inpatient psychiatric services from violence or the usage of violent methods during medical interventions. Additionally, there is a significant problem with the absence of an accessible and confidential complaint system for users of mental health services.

The challenges extend to the [functioning of mental health programs](#). In the current year, a budget of 49 million GEL has been allocated for financing mental health services. More than 48% of this budget is designated for inpatient services, while only 0.27% is allocated to psychosocial rehabilitation services. Notably, the majority of inpatient service providers (8 out of 10) still operate in the form of large and specialized institutions, hindering the deinstitutionalization process.

Amidst these challenges, a crucial development in 2023 was the creation of a protocol for managing the diagnosis of achondroplasia and initiating the [process of introducing](#) medication for affected children. This positive change resulted from the persistent and unwavering [protests](#) led by parents of children with achondroplasia.

### 13. Social Allowance System

In 2023, As in previous years, the social allowance program remained a crucial component of the social protection system. This program offers monthly financial support to eligible families based on their scores (65,000 points or less for individuals over 16 years old and 120,000 points or less for those under 16). It is important to note that the monthly cash allowance for individuals over 16 years old ranges from 30-60 GEL, while assistance for children under 16 years old is fixed at 200 GEL. This amount is lower than the subsistence minimum, [making it impossible](#) for individuals to meet their basic needs.

The prerequisite for inclusion in the service is that individuals must be registered in the unified database of socially disadvantaged families and assessed for socioeconomic status by a social agent. In 2023, there was a substantial increase in the number of people registered in the socially disadvantaged families' database, reaching its [highest since 2016](#). The peak was observed in September, with 1,200,719 people registered, constituting one-third of the country's population (32.1%). These figures suggest that one in three individuals in the country seeks a social allowance from the state.

In 2023, the number of people receiving the social allowance hit a [historic high](#), with 676,641 beneficiaries in March. Over the year, this number decreased; in October, more than 627,000 people, including 245,318 children. As of May 2023, in 32 out of the country's 64 municipalities, over 25% of the population were beneficiaries of the social allowance. Notably, in five municipalities in Georgia (Kedi, Oni, Tsageri, Lentekhi, and Mestia), the share of allowance recipients [exceeded half of the population](#).

Not only is the sheer number of people receiving the social allowance alarming, but also the extended [duration](#) of their reliance on the system. As of June 2023, 47% of social allowance beneficiaries have been in the system for more than five years, 19.3% for more than 11 years, and over 61,000 people for over 15 years.

Despite the broad coverage of the system, it fails to reach various vulnerable groups, leaving them without support. For instance, individuals living on the streets who are highly vulnerable are not considered. A 2023 [study](#) by the Social Justice Center revealed that the system overlooks the needs of homeless groups, people with disabilities, the elderly, and ethnic minorities. According to United Nations Children's Fund data, one-third of the population living below the absolute poverty line remains out of the system and does not apply to the state for assessment and benefit allocation. The

methodological shortcomings in identifying socially vulnerable families result in households being left without support, even if referred to the social services agency. For instance, an International Labor Organization study found that the targeted child benefit package reached only 43% of the poorest decile of minors. According to United Nations Children's Fund data, only 37% of children living below the poverty line were covered by this service.

The deficiencies in the social allowance system become more complex when considering that access to various other benefits depends on the status and score of socially vulnerable individuals. Many municipal-level services are exclusively directed towards the socially vulnerable population, excluding those outside the social allowance system from crucial services like funding for medicines, complementary canteen services, money assistance, and subsidized utility bills.

#### **14. Labor Policy**

As in previous years, 2023 glimpsed significant violations regarding neglect of fair, safe, and healthy working conditions, wages not [commensurate with decent living standards](#), excessive working hours and [unpaid overtime](#), inadequate pay for maternity leave, and lack of vacation and resting opportunities. Many formal guarantees in the legislation are not implemented in practice, and some issues remain problematic at the legislative level. Workplace deaths and injuries are still a significant problem. The lack of awareness and willingness of employers to comply with basic labor standards, [weak state supervision](#), and lack of effective mechanisms to enforce labor rights are critical systemic failures that the state is not adequately addressing.

It is meaningless to pay for work, which does not create guarantees of a proper life. There is no minimum wage regulation in Georgia (except for the medical sector), which would force the employer to pay an adequate and decent wage. As a result, we end up with hard work that is not adequately paid and workers struggling from month to month, not to mention their worry about savings and future financial well-being. Undervalued labor and the country's economic situation, in general, led many groups of workers to organize strikes and protests to demand better working conditions. During the year, we saw workers publicly protesting against employers in various employment sectors, including those employed in [mining](#), heavy industries, [the medical sector](#), education, and [online delivery services](#). The abundance of protest movements of different groups of workers indicates the severe social reality created in the country, to which the state cannot respond with an appropriate action plan. The issues that concern ordinary citizens the most are not included in the agenda of political actors either.

Another troubling event in 2023 was the frequent dismissal of employed people due to dissent and critical views. In recent years, the Ministry of Culture has been particularly distinguished by similar practices of discriminatory treatment towards employed persons. As a result of the reorganization carried out in 2021-2022, more than 90 employees were released from institutions under the

Ministry, including the National Museum and the National Agency of Cultural Heritage. Many dismissed employees were critical of the new leadership of the Ministry, who openly expressed diverse views regarding the changes implemented by the new management. In 2023, such dismissals were [declared illegal](#) by the courts of Georgia, and the Ministry was ordered to compensate the affected persons. Public Defender proved the fact of discrimination and gave [specific recommendations](#) to the Ministry and the National Museum to eliminate discrimination towards several that have not been implemented.

Three-way consultations and social dialogue between the state, employees, and employers are essential for working on existing labor problems. Formally, there is a deliberative entity equipped with similar functions to the Government of Georgia - the tripartite social partnership commission, which studied many acute labor issues during 2023. According to the 2019-2023 national strategy of labor and employment policy, the issues to be discussed by the Commission during 2023 included unemployment benefits, the minimum wage, and the feasibility of subsidizing wages for low-wage employees. The tripartite social partnership commission probably did not fulfill the functions assigned to it during the year. Information about the work performed by the Commission during the year is not available in open sources or issued in response to public information requests.