

State-Enabled Hate Speech and Hate Speech Prevention in Georgia

For years, representatives of the ruling Georgian Dream party and their allies have used degrading, threatening, and stigmatizing language against political opponents, representatives of civil society and the media, participants in protest demonstrations, and individuals critical of the authorities, while law enforcement agencies have systematically failed to ensure adequate protection for these groups.^[1] Taken together, such rhetoric, intimidation, and the systemic impunity of perpetrators of violence have contributed to an environment of deep polarization and delegitimization, in which the non-governmental sector faces an increased risk of harassment and physical violence.¹ Rather than developing adequate policies to address this situation, the stigmatizing environment has been further reinforced through the selective use of legal mechanisms.²

In June 2026, a Hate Speech Prevention Division was established within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The official appointed to head the Division had, prior to the appointment, represented the Ministry's interests in court proceedings related to protest demonstrations. These developments raised serious concerns that the legal mechanisms formally introduced to combat hate speech could instead be used to penalize government critics and members of the very groups that such measures would ordinarily be intended to protect.³

The Hate Speech Monitoring Division was not established in isolation. As early as February 2025, Georgian Dream adopted legislative amendments making the insult of a public official, including on social media, an administrative offence. Since then, several critics of public officials have been fined or subjected to administrative detention under this provision. The new Division therefore begins operating in an environment where a legal instrument restricting critical expression is already in place, while continuous and reactive monitoring of public expression risks further expanding its application.

I. State-Enabled Hate Speech as a Tool of Suppression

2024: Intimidation Campaigns Against Civil Society

The wave of restrictive legislation that began in 2024 gave fresh momentum to a coordinated campaign of intimidation against human rights defenders, lawyers and activists.⁴ In May and September, dozens of activists and their family members received threatening phone calls in the middle of the night. Insulting graffiti and posters, reading things like “Foreign agent,” “Traitors,” and “No place for agents in Georgia,” turned up on the offices of human rights organizations and at staff members' homes. Reportedly, more than 17 civil society organisations were affected. Cars and apartment buildings were vandalized on more than one occasion, and the

¹ World Report 2025, Georgia, Events of 2024, available at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/georgia>; Amnesty International Georgia Report 2025, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/georgia/report-georgia/>; European Parliament Georgia resolutions / reports 2024–2025; TDI, Freedom of Religion or Belief, Equality, and Secularity, 2025, available at https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/report_forb_equality_and_secularity_may_2025.pdf

² RFE/RL, “I beat them — a chronicle of declared violence”, 28 June 2023, available at <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/%E1%83%9B%E1%83%94-%E1%83%95%E1%83%AA%E1%83%94%E1%83%9B%E1%83%94-%E1%83%92%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%9D%E1%83%AA%E1%83%AE%E1%83%90%E1%83%93%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%A3%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98-%E1%83%AB%E1%83%90%E1%83%9A%E1%83%90%E1%83%93%E1%83%9D%E1%83%91%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A5%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9C%E1%83%98%E1%83%99%E1%83%90/32480662.html> [GEO]

³ Interpressnews. Division for Combating Hate Speech starts operation within Human Rights Department of Ministry of Internal Affairs, 01 June 2026, available at <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/147759-division-for-combating-hate-speech-starts-operation-within-human-rights-department-of-ministry-of-internal-affairs/>.

⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Venice Commission ‘Strongly Recommends’ That the Authorities Repeal the ‘Agents Law’ in Its Current Form,” 21 May 2024, available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32957881.html> [GEO]

harassment didn't stop at the activists themselves: relatives, including elderly parents, spouses and children, were drawn in as well. Police were notified but largely did nothing or simply ignored the complaints.⁵

On 31 May 2024, Georgian Dream MP Dito Samkharadze effectively claimed responsibility for part of this campaign, posting on Facebook that those he was targeting “won't want to show up” and warning that whatever they tried against Georgian Dream would come back “a thousand times worse.” He attached video appearing to show offices and activists' homes being defaced. No official inquiry or political accountability was launched against his actions and statements.⁶

One of the most recent incidents of intimidation occurred in July 2026, when comedian Onise Okriashvili was physically assaulted following the misinterpretation of a joke he had made.⁷ Following the attack, on 27 July, MMA fighter and Georgian Dream supporter Giorgi Kartvelishvili announced the launch of a “people's movement” meant to defend Georgian “values and traditions” against “foreign-funded” and “pseudo-liberal” groups, saying its members were ready to “go to prison if necessary.”⁸ The announcement came just days after Kartvelishvili had publicly stood up for the man charged with attacking Okriashvili, and amid public shows of support for the accused from Georgian Dream figures, including Dimitri Samkharadze⁹ and party's young activists.¹⁰ Taken together, this raises a credible concern about intimidation or informal retaliation against people targeted for their peaceful free speech.

The events of 8 September 2025, during the Tbilisi mayoral re-election campaign, are also a particularly telling example. Georgian Dream supporters physically attacked peaceful protesters outside Mayor Kakha Kaladze's re-election campaign headquarters, including women activists and journalists. Rather than condemn the violence, Kaladze responded by declaring that the women who had been assaulted weren't really women at all, they were, in his own words, “a different breed.”¹¹ Other Georgian Dream officials picked up the same framing, describing the victims as “provocateurs.”¹² When dehumanizing language targeting government critics comes from the incumbent Mayor of Tbilisi and a mayoral candidate following acts of physical violence against those critics, it cannot be regarded as ordinary political rhetoric. Such statements, made by a high-ranking official immediately following the attack and subsequently echoed by other representatives of the Georgian Dream party, risk legitimizing hostility towards the victims, normalizing violence against them, and further entrenching a climate of

⁵ Former Ombudsperson and human rights defender Ucha Nanuashvili was among those targeted, with humiliating posters and graffiti appearing on his workplace, his registered residence, and the home of his elderly parents. The targeting of family members reflects a deliberate strategy of collective intimidation designed to deter human rights advocacy.

⁶ On 31 May 2024, the Georgian news reported that Georgian Dream party member Dimitri Samkharadze admitted that he and his group members were behind the humiliating and threatening posters and graffiti. He posted a Facebook status, saying “The low-quality bullying initiated by neo-fascists and stateless agents was answered yesterday! We won't tolerate you in the slightest and forgive you. Bully each other! What you intend against us, we will return to you a thousand times worse, painful, and of higher quality! You won't want to show up and run into each other. You won't even want to see each other. We'll treat you like that! You are having a lot of fun; We know your identity one by one; your owners can't help you if you do something bad to any member of the Georgian Dream team! So that I don't miss the point, stop looking back; we are not sneaking up on anyone; look ahead; don't step on anything!” Samkharadze attached a video to his status, which was taken while making insulting inscriptions near the offices of Georgian Dream target organizations and the houses of activists,” available at <https://sakartvelosambebi.ge/en/news/georgian-dream-mp-admits-organizing-campaign-of-hatred-and-violence>

⁷ Amnesty International, “Georgia: Journalist jailed and comedian attacked for political satire”, 23 July 2026, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/07/georgia-journalist-jailed-and-comedian-attacked-for-political-satire/> and OC-Media, “Georgian Dream MP admits to attacks on NGO and opposition offices”, 1 June 2024, available at <https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-mp-admits-to-attacks-on-ngo-and-opposition-offices/>

⁸ Civil.ge, “MMA Fighter Launches Movement to Defend Georgian ‘Values and Traditions,’ Fight ‘Pseudo-Liberal,’ ‘Foreign-Funded’ Groups”, 27 July 2026, available at <https://civil.ge/archives/746068>

⁹ Front News Georgia, “Ruling party official offers bail guarantee for suspect in attack on comedian”, 24 July 2026, available at <https://frontnews.ge/en/news/dimitri-samkharadze-tu-niko-khurtsilavas-survili-ikneba-minda-tavdebshi-davudge-rata-giraos-sanatsvlod-gaatavisuphlon>

¹⁰ Civil.ge, “Man Charged Over Assaulting Comedian Onise Okriashvili Released on Bail”, 25 July 2026, available at <https://civil.ge/archives/745744>

¹¹ Following the incident, Kaladze responded to the journalist requesting for a comment: “Where do you see women here? Not one of them is a woman, they are some other breed. Show me who among them is a woman. Those who attacked the campaign headquarters yesterday are people sowing division in society, trying to split it. And you are no different from them.” Jam News, “‘Not women but provocateurs’: Georgian government's response to attack on activists and journalists”, 09 September 2025, available at <https://jam-news.net/not-women-but-provocateurs-georgian-governments-response-to-attack-on-activists-and-journalists/>

¹² *Ibid.*

impunity—concerns compounded by the fact that, to date, no one has been effectively held accountable for the attack itself.

These incidents are difficult to reconcile with Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16,¹³ which calls on public officials, especially those in leadership roles, to avoid engaging in, endorsing or spreading hate speech, and to condemn it without delay, all while still respecting freedom of expression. Given the context, the speaker's position, and how widely the statements were disseminated, the episodes also raise a genuine question about whether this rhetoric crossed the line into incitement to hostility or violence. Reaching that conclusion, though, would require weighing it against the full Rabat Plan of Action threshold test, including intent and the likelihood of resulting harm.¹⁴

At the same time, it is important to note that the Rabat Plan of Action's threshold test for assessing the severity of hate speech specifically concerns the high threshold established under Article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) — advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. It should therefore be distinguished from the broader understanding of harmful expression under CM/Rec(2022)16 and from assessments of restrictions on freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

II. The Hate Speech Prevention Division: Protection or Pretext?

On 1 June 2026, the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that a newly created Hate Speech Prevention Division, sitting within its Human Rights Protection Department, had become operational.¹⁵ Staffed by roughly ten law enforcement officers, the Division is tasked with monitoring public statements considered offensive, degrading, or amounting to hate speech under the Code of Administrative Offences Articles by identifying suspected offenders, building the administrative case file, and referring it on to the courts.¹⁶

Within days of the Division's establishment, information emerged about its first cases, giving concrete grounds to concerns raised by experts and critics. By 15 June 2026, just two weeks after it began operating, the Division had already referred approximately 60 alleged hate speech cases to first-instance courts.¹⁷ Among those fined was prominent lawyer Shota Tutberidze, who had commented on a Facebook post by Member of Parliament Nino Tsilosani. The court fully endorsed the Ministry of Internal Affairs Division's position that the content of his comment constituted an insult against a state-political official.¹⁸

¹³ Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 on Combating Hate Speech, adopted 20 May 2022, available at <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=0900001680a67955>

¹⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council, Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Addendum – Report on the Expert Workshops on the Prohibition of Incitement to National, Racial or Religious Hatred, UN Doc. A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, 11 January 2013, available at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf

¹⁵ Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, “Newly Established Division for combating hate speech Begins to Operate”, 1 June 2026, available at <https://police.ge/news/sidzulvilis-enis-tsinaaghmddeg-brdzolis-akhlad-shekmnili-sammartvelo-punktsionirebas-sheudga/10969?locale=en>

¹⁶ RFE/RL, “Swearing, Cursing and “Censored” Words – Fines from the Hate Speech Courts”, 23 June 2026, available at <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/%E1%83%af%E1%83%90%E1%83%a0%E1%83%98%E1%83%9b%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98-%E1%83%a1%E1%83%98%E1%83%ab%E1%83%a3%E1%83%9a%E1%83%95%E1%83%98%E1%83%9a%E1%83%98%E1%83%a1-%E1%83%94%E1%83%9c%E1%83%98%E1%83%a1-%E1%83%a1%E1%83%90%E1%83%a1%E1%83%90%E1%83%9b%E1%83%90%E1%83%a0%E1%83%97%E1%83%9a%E1%83%9d%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98%E1%83%93%E1%83%90%E1%83%9c/33787138.html>

¹⁷ RFE/RL, “Whether We’re Scrolling or Not, the Facts Are Plain to See”: What the Ministry of Internal Affairs Looks for on Social Media, Whom It Targets, and How,” 17 June 2026, available at <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/%E1%83%A0%E1%83%90%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%95%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%93%E1%83%90-%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9D%E1%83%92%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A0-%E1%83%94%E1%83%AB%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A8%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%9D%E1%83%AA%E1%83%98%E1%83%90%E1%83%9A%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0-%E1%83%A5%E1%83%A1%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%A8%E1%83%98/33782996.html>

¹⁸ The judge found the lawyer guilty of using insulting and abusive language against a political officeholder and member of the Georgian Dream party Nino Tsilosani and of directing offensive verbal attacks at her, under Article 173(16) of the Code of Administrative Offences. The case was initiated by a police inspector from the Hate Speech Prevention Division, who said he discovered the comment on Facebook, collected screenshots as evidence, and identified the author through a government electronic system. The evidence consisted primarily of social media posts and screenshots. Tutberidze was unable to cross-examine the police inspector who initiated the case because the inspector did not attend the court proceedings.

Later, on 10 July 2026, Formula TV journalist Vakho Sanaia was fined GEL 6,000 on the Division's motion over a Facebook post about political officeholders; he then posted sarcastic commentary reacting to that fine, which became the basis for a further case, and on 22 July he was sentenced to 14 days' administrative detention over it.¹⁹

By 1 August, the Division, relying mainly on Administrative Offences Code Articles 173¹⁶ (insulting a state political officeholder or public official) and 166 (petty hooliganism, including public swearing or insulting conduct), had reportedly referred more than 300 cases to court,²⁰ of which around 130 had already been resolved.²¹ The sheer scale and speed of this enforcement, paired with the lack of any publicly disclosed criteria for how cases get selected for social-media monitoring, deepens concerns about foreseeability, transparency, and whether enforcement is being applied evenhandedly.

The contrast is relevant to the assessment of discriminatory or selective enforcement, but a conclusive finding should be based on comparative examination of similarly situated cases, including the Division's referrals, the identity of complainants and respondents, the expression at issue, law enforcement responses, and judicial outcomes.

The arrests carried out between 26 and 31 July in connection with protest banners, which featured a sarcastically worded question addressed to Georgian Dream honorary chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili, raise broader concerns about restrictions on freedom of expression beyond the Division's direct activities. Several demonstrators were detained under Articles 166 (petty hooliganism) and 173 (disobeying a lawful police order) of the Code of Administrative Offences.²² Five were fined and four sentenced to administrative detention.²³ Tornike Toshkhua, who was initially fined GEL 3,000 on 29 July, was sentenced to five days of administrative detention on 31 July after returning with a banner bearing modified wording.²⁴

In recent Georgian context, a mandate to combat hate speech built around proactively monitoring content deemed “offensive” or “dignity-violating”, if it isn't paired with precise thresholds and close judicial scrutiny, carries a real risk of chilling political dissent, civil society advocacy, and journalism.

While restricting hate speech is a legitimate aim in any society, restrictions on freedom of expression must be clearly and narrowly defined and satisfy the requirement of proportionality. The Rabat Plan of Action establishes a six-factor threshold test for assessing incitement prohibited under Article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, while CM/Rec(2022)16 requires responses to potential hate speech to be proportionate to the severity of the harmful expression. Separately, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights requires any restriction on freedom of expression to be prescribed by law, necessary, and pursue a legitimate aim,

¹⁹ RFE/RL, “Journalist Vakho Sanaia was sentenced to 14 days' administrative detention over a Facebook post”, 22 July 2026, available at <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33809713.html> [GEO]

²⁰ Ministry of Internal Affairs, Facebook post, Interior Minister Sulxan Tamazashvili and Deputy Minister Aleksandre Darakhvelidze met with staff of the Hate Speech Prevention Division of the Human Rights Protection Department and the Court Relations Division of the Legal Department, available at <https://www.facebook.com/MIAofGeorgia/photos/%E1%83%A8%E1%83%98%E1%83%9C%E1%83%90%E1%83%92%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%A5%E1%83%9B%E1%83%94%E1%83%97%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%98%E1%83%9C%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A2%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A3%E1%83%9A%E1%83%AE%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C%E1%83%97%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%90%E1%83%96%E1%83%90%E1%83%A8%E1%83%95%E1%83%98%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%9B%E1%83%9D%E1%83%90%E1%83%93%E1%83%92%E1%83%98%E1%83%9A%E1%83%94%E1%83%90%E1%83%9A%E1%83%94%E1%83%A5%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C%E1%83%93%E1%83%A0%E1%83%94%E1%83%93%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%90%E1%83%AE%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%AB%E1%83%94%E1%83%A1%E1%83%97%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C/-1335762022065961/>

²¹ Publica, “Who Works in the So-Called “Scroll-and-Screenshot” Division?” 30 July 2026, available at <https://publika.ge/article/vin-mushaobs-e-w-sqrolva-sqrinvis-sammartveloshi/> [GEO]

²² Caucasian Knot, “An activist with a poster about Ivanishvili was detained in Tbilisi on the 607th day of protests,” 27 July 2026, available at <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/77258>

²³ Civil.ge, “Court Fines Five, Sends Another Five to Detention Among Protesters Arrested Over ‘Insulting Banners’ About Ivanishvili,” 29 July 2026, available at <https://civil.ge/archives/746203>

²⁴ OC-Media, “Georgian authorities sentence man for poster mocking Ivanishvili days after arrest on same grounds,” 3 August 2026, available at <https://oc-media.org/georgian-authorities-sentence-man-for-poster-mocking-ivanishvili-days-after-arrest-on-same-grounds/>

such as protecting national and public security and order, health or morals, the rights and reputation of others, confidentiality, or the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.

The protection afforded by Article 10 of the European Convention does not mean that public officials enjoy immunity from all forms of political or personal criticism directed at them. In *Miladze v. Georgia* (19 May 2026), the European Court of Human Rights approached the issue under Article 10 not from the perspective of any entitlement of public officials to enhanced protection, but by assessing the content and form of the expression, its context and reach, and the proportionality of the sanction imposed.²⁵

In Georgian context, questions also arise about the structural and personnel choices behind the Hate Speech Prevention Division.²⁶ Here, the real question concerns whether the Ministry itself, given its track record of pursuing administrative punishment against dissent, has put in place sufficient safeguards to ensure that this new monitoring power is exercised responsibly and without arbitrary or politically selective enforcement. That concern is compounded by the Ministry's broader record: its officers have been documented mistreating detained protesters,²⁷ and its senior officials received state honors in January 2025 despite several of them being under international sanctions for serious human rights violations, which only reinforces how essential credible safeguards, transparency and accountability are to how the Division operates.²⁸

While instances of threatening rhetoric and intimidation by Georgian Dream representatives and supporters have been left without an adequate legal response, serious concerns arise that mechanisms intended to combat hate speech may be applied selectively for politically motivated purposes.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the recent wave of restrictive legal amendments and policies curtailing freedom of speech and expression, it is essential that Georgia's counter-hate-speech practices be brought into conformity with international human rights standards and the state's corresponding obligations.

The international community is urged to:

- Call for political accountability and public condemnation of the use of derogatory and dehumanising rhetoric by public officials against human rights defenders, journalists, the political opposition, the LGBTQ+ community and women. This should expressly invoke the responsibility of public officials under paragraph 28 of Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 to refrain from engaging in, endorsing or disseminating hate speech, and to condemn such speech promptly. It should further call for accountability for those Georgian Dream party members and supporters who have openly participated in verbal or physical attacks against civil society, human rights defenders, and peaceful protesters.
- Call for the repeal or substantial amendment of those specific provisions of the Code of Administrative Offences that afford public officials enhanced legal protection beyond what is permissible under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, or that fail to ensure a contextual and proportionate assessment of restrictions on expression. In applying mechanisms restricting hate speech, a clear

²⁵ European Court of Human Rights, *Miladze v. Georgia*, no. 41585/23, Judgment, 19 May 2026, Fourth Section, paras 68 and 69, available at <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/?i=001-250113>

²⁶ RFE/RL, "Who Is the Head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' "Systematic Monitoring" Division?", 01 June 2026, available at <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33770029.html>

²⁷ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Memorandum on Georgia: Council of Europe Commissioner Calls for Accountability of Law Enforcement and Expresses Concerns Regarding Mounting Restrictions on Democratic Freedoms, Strasbourg, 19 June 2026, following the Commissioner's visit to Georgia in April 2026, para 10, available at <https://rm.coe.int/memorandum-on-georgia-on-accountability-of-law-enforcement-and-freedom/48802c0ac8>

²⁸ Civil.ge, "GD President Awards Sanctioned MIA Officials with Order of Honor," 30 January 2025, available at <https://civil.ge/archives/657740>

distinction should be drawn between protected political criticism and forms of personal insult whose restriction may legitimately be justified under the Convention.

- With regard to the Hate Speech Monitoring Division, call on the Ministry of Internal Affairs to establish clear, foreseeable, and publicly accessible safeguards to ensure that punishable forms of hate speech are distinguished from political criticism protected under international standards. Such safeguards should include transparent criteria for selecting cases for monitoring and legal action, as well as effective, independent, and impartial judicial review of any interference with freedom of expression.
- Request that the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) examine the mandate, composition and operational practice of the Hate Speech Prevention Division, as well as the enforcement pattern of the insult provisions, and issue country-specific recommendations accordingly.
- Invite the Venice Commission to assess the legal basis of the Hate Speech Monitoring Division and its compatibility with Council of Europe standards on freedom of expression, taking into account the Commission's previous assessment of the amendments to Georgia's Code of Administrative Offences.