
Social Vulnerability and Systemic Failures in the Juvenile Justice and Children's Rights Protection

Children in Georgia are growing up in an environment that fails to effectively address social vulnerability, institutional shortcomings, and increasing political polarisation that undermine effective enjoyment of the rights guaranteed under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Georgia is required to prioritise the best interests of the child in all actions concerning children (Article 3), including to protect children from all forms of violence (Article 19), recognise every child's right to the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24), guarantee protection from arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of liberty (Article 37), and require that juvenile justice systems prioritise rehabilitation and reintegration (Article 40).

The following analysis assesses recent legislative and institutional developments in Georgia against these international standards.

I. Social Vulnerability and Child Poverty

According to the Social Service Agency's data, approximately 278,628 children aged 0 to 18 receive subsistence assistance. It means that nearly one-third of children in the country are socially vulnerable. By 2025, the Public Defender's annual report recorded 379,957 children registered in the database of socially vulnerable families, with 23,322 newly registered that year alone.¹

This data is not a mere statistic. In the report, the Ombudsman highlights that “poverty remains one of the main challenges in the country, which in turn negatively affects the realization of all human rights and further worsens the situation of vulnerable groups.” In 2025, 5,875 families were enrolled in the sub-programme "Emergency Assistance for Families with Children in Crisis Situations", which is significantly higher than the number of families that benefited from this service in the previous year.²

II. State-Sponsored Hate Speech and the Well-Being of the Child

In the recent period, the reports highlight the Georgian Dream political party members and their affiliates' use of rhetoric that contributes to a broader communicative environment marked by polarisation, delegitimation, and incitement that significantly increases the risk of harassment and physical abuse against targeted groups.³ As recognised in international child rights standards, children absorb and are influenced by the communicative

¹ Public Defender of Georgia, 2025 annual report, pgs. 343-348, available at <https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2026040108450417707.pdf> [GEO]

² Ibid, pg. 344

³ In its 9 October 2024 press release, the European Parliament stated that "Georgian government officials are fuelling a climate of hatred" and expressing concern regarding "the climate of hatred and intimidation fuelled by statements by representatives of the Georgian government and political leaders", available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241003IPR24429/parliament-says-georgia-s-democracy-is-at-risk>

environment in which they develop - when political officials in positions of power justify violence, frame victims as less than human, or direct intimidation campaigns against civil society, they transmit to children a deeply damaging message about acceptable behaviour, accountability, and the boundaries of legitimate authority.

Georgian Dream party officials have openly use precisely this rhetoric and actions. The dehumanisation of women activists as “a different breed” by Mayor Kakha Kaladze following the September 2025 attack on protesters;⁴ the party’s public endorsement of intimidation campaigns targeting activists and their families — including elderly parents and children;⁵ and the sustained use of stigmatising rhetoric against civil society representatives have created what the CoE’s Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 on combating hate speech describes as a “communicative environment” that structurally increases the risk of harm to vulnerable groups.

Children's sustained exposure to the public normalisation of violence and rhetoric that undermines human dignity causes significant psychological harm and distorts their understanding of civic life, democratic values, and socially acceptable behaviour.

III. The Juvenile Justice

“Rehabilitation” Initiative: Punitive Response to Structural Failure

On 17 December 2025, Georgian Dream adopted the law “On the Rehabilitation and Support of Minors in Conflict with the Law,”⁶ establishing a closed “Juvenile Rehabilitation and Support Home” for children aged 10 to 18. The explanatory note of the draft law framed the measure as a response to an alleged gap in effective tools for addressing behaviour by children below the age of criminal responsibility.⁷ That framing was both factually inaccurate and analytically misleading.⁸ For years, human rights organisations have criticised the government for chronic underfunding and failure to operationalise those that exist. The proposed closed institution does not address that failure — but instead creates an alternative institutional model.

The CoE Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice and the General Comment No. 24 (2019) on Children's Rights in the Child Justice System,⁹ strongly indicate that placing children below the age of criminal responsibility in closed

⁴ International Press Institute (IPI) and others, Georgia: Georgian Dream Supporters Assault and Obstruct Journalists, Media Freedom Rapid Response, 12 September 2025, (State reply published 18 December 2025), reporting that, when asked to comment on footage showing a Georgian Dream supporter attacking a woman protester on 9 September 2025, Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze stated: “There isn't one single woman here, I don't know, it's some other breed, there is no woman here”; he further described journalists as “ordinary agitators” who “fuel conflict in society” and “try to sow division”, available at <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107642934>

⁵ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025 (Georgia), section on Violence against Activists, available at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/georgia>

⁶ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6715468?publication=0>

⁷ <https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/404438>

⁸ The Juvenile Justice Code (2015), adopted with support from UNICEF, the EU, and the CoE, which established child-specific procedures and mandated specialist training; the Juvenile Referral Centre (2020), established within the Ministry of Justice with EU and UNICEF support, specifically to coordinate rehabilitation and resocialisation for children below the age of criminal responsibility; the Barnahus model (2022), introduced with UNICEF and Estonian government support, providing a child-friendly, multi-disciplinary response framework for child victims of violence.

⁹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 24 (2019) on Children's Rights in the Child Justice System, UN Doc CRC/C/GC/24 (18 September 2019), available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-24-2019-childrens-rights-child>

institutions is inconsistent with the child rights principles of rehabilitation, proportionality, and deprivation of liberty as a measure of last resort.

Deprivation of liberty, regardless of the label applied to the facility, causes stigmatisation, developmental harm, and obstacles to social integration. The international human rights standards has consistently held that community-based, family-oriented, and restorative responses are required. Institutionalisation, which in certain cases may continue for prolonged periods, does not constitute rehabilitation; rather, it amounts to punitive isolation carried out under the guise of promoting the child's welfare.

Public protest and the right of a child

The escalation of administrative and criminal sanctions for assembly-related offences raises distinct but interlocking concerns for children's rights, both as direct subjects of sanction and as members of families affected by the punitive regime targeting their parents. While the Code of Administrative Offences included certain protections for persons under eighteen, as well as mothers with children under twelve, the October 2025 Amendments replace that protection with a fines between 5,000 GEL —15,000 GEL (for organizers). The disproportionate fines relative to average income risks deterring parents, particularly mothers of young children, from exercising their right to peaceful assembly altogether, with direct consequences for the economic security and stability of the household and, by extension, the child's well-being.¹⁰

At the same time, minors themselves are no longer shielded from the criminal sphere: repeated violations of the same assembly-related provisions now expose children directly to a fine, corrective labour, or up to one year of imprisonment. This dual exposure — financially punitive for parents, custodial for children — raises serious concerns regarding Georgia's compliance with its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which require that any measure affecting a child's family environment or liberty take the best interests of the child as a primary consideration, and that deprivation of liberty be used only as a measure of last resort, for the shortest appropriate time, consistent with the CRC Committee's Concluding Observations on Georgia.¹¹

IV. State Responsibility: Child's Health and Safety

Failures of Child Protection in Public Space

The occurrence of child safety-related incidents, including fatalities, in Georgian public spaces underscores ongoing challenges in ensuring comprehensive protection and effective safeguarding measures for children.

In October 2022, a 13-year-old girl died by electrocution in Tbilisi's newly renovated Vake Park — opened the previous day by the mayor in a public ceremony.¹² In January 2025, a 16-year-old drowned in an unsecured pit in Rike Park, with emergency services taking over 30 minutes to arrive.¹³ In February 2025, two children aged 4 and

¹⁰ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Urgent Opinion on the Amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences and the Criminal Code of Georgia (as Adopted on 16 October 2025), Opinion No. FOPA-GEO/564/2025 [ALC/TN], 12 November 2025 (based on an unofficial English translation of the amendments provided by the Public Defender of Georgia), pgs. 18-19 and 23-28.

¹¹ Ibid, pgs. 28-30.

¹² Eurasianet, Tragic park incident puts Tbilisi mayor's career to test, 18 October 2022, available at <https://eurasianet.org/tragic-park-incident-puts-tbilisi-mayors-career-to-test>

¹³ Georgia Today, Tragedy in Tbilisi: Teenager drowns after falling into a pit in Rike Park, 29 January 2025, available at <https://georgiatoday.ge/tragedy-in-tbilisi-teenager-falls-into-an-open-ditch-in-rike-park-and-dies/>

5 drowned in a trench at a construction site in Batumi, one week after the Prime Minister had attended a ceremony marking the start of that development.¹⁴

The pattern of accountability across these incidents is instructive. In the Vake Park case, criminal prosecution did follow: the former head of the City Hall's Environmental Protection Department and a contractor's expert were sentenced to imprisonment for negligence and document falsification respectively, and the companies involved were fined. However, those proceedings addressed only the technical failures in the construction, not the institutional and political accountability. In the Rike Park and Batumi cases, the state's response did not even reach that threshold. Although reportedly formal investigations into the incidents were initiated, officials attributed the deaths to the private ownership of the properties or otherwise deflected responsibility entirely.

Across all three cases — absent safety monitoring, unregulated construction sites in and near the public spaces, and inadequate inspection frameworks — remained unaddressed. The obligation to protect life requires more than prosecuting contractors after the fatal incidents, it requires States to establish effective regulatory, inspection and enforcement systems capable of preventing foreseeable risks to life.

Coordinated Disinformation

Concerning the best interest of the child, special attention should be given to children with special needs. In this regard, the coordinated disinformation campaign targeting parents of children with Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD), documented by ISFED,¹⁵ illustrates a further concern regarding the right of a child in the country.

For over a month, while families publicly demanded access to modern treatments and Ilia State University students organised a nationwide solidarity movement raising over 2 million GEL,¹⁶ reportedly, pro-government media and networks of inauthentic accounts simultaneously amplified narratives questioning the effectiveness of the requested medications and discrediting the advocacy movement as politically motivated.¹⁷

Only after 43 days of continuous protest had passed and the coordinated disinformation campaign to suppress public solidarity had failed, the Prime Minister ultimately met with the parents and committed to establishing a working group on medication access.¹⁸ Unfortunately, it cannot be presented as evidence of good governance. The sequence of events raises serious concerns that meaningful engagement with the families occurred only after sustained public mobilisation and the failure of a coordinated campaign that sought to undermine public support for their demands.

¹⁴ Civil.ge, Authorities Accused of Negligence After Two Children Die in Batumi, 16 February 2025, available at <https://civil.ge/archives/663164>

¹⁵ ISFED, "Georgian Dream coordinated information campaign against medicines for the treatment of Duchenne muscular dystrophy," 20 April 2026, available at <https://www.isfed.ge/geo/blogi/qartuli-otsnebis-koordinirebuli-sainformatsio-kampania-diushenis-sindromis-samkurnalo-preparatebis-tsinaaghmdeg>

¹⁶ OC Media, How fundraising for DMD children became a safe form of resistance in Georgia, 15 June 2026, available at <https://oc-media.org/how-fundraising-for-dmd-children-became-a-safe-form-of-resistance-in-georgia/>

¹⁷ Civil.ge, Parents of Children with Duchenne Dystrophy Launch Non-Stop Rallies as Officials Deny New Medication Request, 22 April 2026, available at <https://civil.ge/archives/731463>

¹⁸ Civil.ge, Parents Mark 'Victory' After Officials Agree to Work on Providing Modern Duchenne Treatment, 04 June 2026, available at <https://civil.ge/archives/737194/amp>

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

The condition of children in Georgia cannot be understood in isolation from the political environment, social vulnerability, institutional neglect, and punitive legislative responses. These are mutually reinforcing dimensions of a governance model that consistently subordinates child well-being to political interest.

It is recommended to:

- ❖ **Repeal or substantially revise** the Law on the Rehabilitation and Support of Minors in Conflict with the Law (17 December 2025) to ensure full compliance with international standards on children's rights, including the principle that deprivation of liberty is used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.
- ❖ **Ensure that all legislative and policy reforms affecting children** are developed through meaningful consultation with independent experts, child rights organisations, civil society, and children themselves, where appropriate.
- ❖ **Prohibit and actively address** the use of dehumanising, violent, or discriminatory rhetoric by public officials, recognising its harmful impact on children's development, mental health, and enjoyment of their rights.
- ❖ **Strengthen safeguards against institutionalisation** by ensuring that children are separated from their families only where strictly necessary, subject to judicial oversight, and supported by appropriate family and community services.
- ❖ **Ensure that the best interests of the child** are treated as a primary consideration in all legislative, administrative, and judicial decisions affecting children, in accordance with international human rights law.