

Monitoring COVID-19 and Freedom of Assembly Restrictions in Georgia

As part of the [INSPIRES project](#), Flexible Response Funds (FRFs) are designed to provide USAID missions and partners with easily accessible and flexible support in the form of technical assistance and subgrants to local organizations that can help address urgent and emerging threats to civic space.

In **Georgia**, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) and European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL) collaborated with local partner the Human Rights Center (HRC) to analyze and conduct outreach regarding government restrictions on freedom of assembly during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, undertaking three key activities:

- Conducting active monitoring and analysis of COVID-19 emergency in Georgia;
- Conducting active monitoring and analysis of issues related to Freedom of Assembly in Georgia (including recommendations); and,
- Leading advocacy and outreach around these findings and recommendations.

Support was provided over the course of twelve months between September 2020 and September 2021.

In this summary brief, we share learnings and lessons from key informant interviews and document reviews for these activities.

Outputs and Outcomes. The FRF activities in Georgia were designed to produce several key outputs, including production of quarterly COVID 19-related briefs, publication of a report with analysis on and recommendations for Freedom of Assembly in Georgia, and dissemination of materials through public outreach and advocacy activities.

Based on interviews with key informants who were involved in the program as well as a review of

documentation from the FRF activities, there is strong evidence that all intended outputs were achieved, as highlighted in Figure 1 (FRF outputs).

Figure 1. Georgia FRF Outputs



Note: Minimum reach is the highest number of views/downloads for one product. As such, these are likely to be significant underestimates for actual reach.

Evidence from key informant interviews as well as documentation from partners suggest that the FRF activities contributed to several key outcomes:

- **Strengthened capacity of civil society to monitor and advocate for civic freedoms.** ECNL worked with the Human Rights Center to strengthen their capacity to monitor and analyze breakdowns in freedom of assembly, resulting in an up-to-date mapping of how civic freedoms are being curtailed in Georgia and a roadmap for addressing these gaps. Key stakeholders also cited that FRF outputs are already being utilized by a broad set of CSOs in the country, improving the ability of the sector as a whole to track and

advocate for civic freedom both related to the COVID-19 pandemic and in general.

"... finally I think there is a clear roadmap for reform in freedom of assembly in Georgia. Our partners but also any other organization interested in freedom of assembly now have a clear analysis of the situation and recommendations that could be followed."

- Key Informant Interview (November 2021)

- **Increased regional sharing of lessons and best practices for combatting restrictions on freedom of assembly.** Key stakeholders also cited two-way sharing of experiences and evidence between Georgia and other countries in the region which has helped advocacy for civic freedom more broadly. Partners in Georgia highlighted that they have been able to use tools and information on how other country governments have implemented policies during COVID-19 to use in their advocacy in Georgia and that they were involved in the ECNL-led Assembly Hub for the region. Further, ECNL has been able to use analysis conducted as part of this FRF in Georgia to provide evidence to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association to improve the ability of international partners to predict and respond to civic freedom changes across the region.
- **Concrete policy changes including the abolishment of fines related to assembly.** While it is not possible to fully attribute policy changes to a single activity or partner, there is evidence that the analysis and advocacy undertaken as part of the FRF was associated with changes including the eventual amnesty on heavy fines levied on those caught breaking curfews. FRF partners researched government policies that were cited as COVID-19 restrictions and found that people were having to pay significant fines that were both subject to unclear rules and out of line with the current health and economic situations. Ultimately, 200,000 people were freed from fines after significant pressure placed on the government by HRC and other civil society organizations. Similar analysis and advocacy on regulations such as curfews and

other restrictions on protests were cited as also potentially contributing to an easing of overly-strict COVID-19 policies.

Helping and Challenging Factors. Key informants were asked about factors that they perceived to help or hinder the outcomes of this work. These factors can help future work leverage or mitigate factors to support the effective design of FRF activities.

Helping factors include:

- **Timing of the activity** – several informants noted that the issue protests and assembly are currently “hot topics” and thus received significant attention.
- **Flexibility** - in the design and implementation of the activities.
- **Cross-country learning** – partners noted the value of having tools and evidence from outside of Georgia to support their work.
- **Government champions** – while government was largely a hindering factor, partners noted the will and contributions of the Office of the Public Defender in support of this work.

Hindering factors include:

- **Lack of responsiveness from government** – despite several attempts to engage them.
- **COVID-19 restrictions, including legal uncertainties** – limited outreach opportunities to largely online events and required adaptation in monitoring freedom of assembly violations.
- **Time and resources** – limited time and support, especially to undertake advocacy and outreach upon completion of the monitoring and analysis.

For more information about this FRF, please contact: info@inspiresconsortium.org.

"For us, the legislation under which the curfew was enacted didn't give them the right to intervene in assembly; however, the government tried to expand the scope of legislation with its interpretation. We quickly reacted to set boundaries to not use regulations against protestors and set practices where protestors would be protected. We tried to find ways in the legislation to help protestors to use freedom of assembly and to find balance with this freedom, the COVID situation and the risks that it brought to the health of the population."

- Key Informant Interview (November 2021)