THE DIGITALIZATION OF DEMOCRACY

HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

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ASSESSING THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF AI SYSTEMS IN GEORGIA

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In younger democracies such as Georgia that still struggle to fortify the rule of law, the risks that artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies pose in the public sector are particularly acute. Where officials confront entrenched corruption and cumbersome systems of public administration, advanced digital tools hold out an appealing promise to improve service delivery, modernize the public sector, and make it easier to do business.

Yet these same applications can endanger democratic principles—especially if state accountability is already tenuous due to shortcomings in judicial independence, government transparency, or law-enforcement oversight mechanisms. **Free expression, non-discrimination, and the right to privacy are among the many democratic norms potentially at stake.**

In Georgia, much remains to be done in terms of establishing the institutional and informational structures needed for public agencies to guard against these risks. My organization, the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), has conducted research on **AI use in Georgia's public sector**. Our experience serves as a case study on the obstacles that exist across many settings to holding governments accountable in their deployment of AI tools.[1]

Our report identified only a few cases of AI usage within these agencies, possibly in part because officials either do not know or do not wish to share information about the systems they use. Nonetheless, such tools are rapidly growing more popular and

accessible. In this context, our research experience reveals some key gaps that Georgia and other developing democracies should address to **ensure political transparency, enable civil society engagement,** and **facilitate thoughtful, open, and inclusive deliberation around AI systems** as they are adopted—rather than waiting until unforeseen digital risks undercut citizens' rights.

USES OF AI IN THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT

Since Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, when peaceful protests led to post-Soviet president Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation and the election of a new government with an ambitious anticorruption agenda, the country has implemented numerous good governance reforms. E-government initiatives, in particular, became popular starting in 2009. These innovations modernized the public sector significantly, with notable improvements in public service delivery, public procurement, public finance, and the transparency and accountability of public institutions. Still, a number of serious challenges to the rule of law remain. It is against this backdrop that IDFI decided to examine **the extent to which public agencies were utilizing AI,** as well as **what measures the officials implementing these systems had taken to protect democratic principles** such as transparency and accountability.

Our study identified five government institutions that have been using AI-enabled digital systems.[2] In some cases, these were isolated applications—for instance, to analyze and visualize education-management data or to conduct an AI-powered analysis of social media posts by visitors to Georgia. The Ministry of Internal Affairs' systems, however, stood out for their relative complexity. Most important, this ministry used **facial recognition systems** for investigative purposes and to carry out criminal and administrative proceedings.[3] Recently, media outlets reported that the Ministry also employed other AI systems, including ballistics and fingerprint recognition programs of Russian and Belarusian origin.[4] The recent revelation that these systems were in use—something that was not disclosed to IDFI during our research—underscores the possibility that other agencies may similarly be deploying AI systems of which we remain unaware.

Guarding against the abuse or misuse of AI tools is particularly critical in the public-security context, especially since Georgia's law enforcement agencies are criticized frequently for their opaque practices. As with other countries in the region, civilian oversight and control mechanisms for these agencies are weak, and Georgian politics in recent years has been shaken by reports of large-scale, politically motivated surveillance. Moreover, the Russian origin of certain applications raised concerns that they could make the country more vulnerable to Russian cyberattacks. (Following critical reporting on the two systems mentioned above as well as Russian facial recognition software, the Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed that some of these programs were actually developed in Turkey and that they are connected only to the Ministry's internal network.)[5]

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OBSTACLES TO TRANSPARENCY

Our ability to assess whether AI systems were being used responsibly in Georgia's public sector was limited. While conducting our study, we found that **detailed information about this topic was difficult to retrieve**. The institutions that provided information on their AI use supplied only general details. In most cases, they did not share additional relevant documentation such as user instructions or technical manuals, legal or normative acts governing the use of the software, ethical standards, or personal data protection safeguards. The responses we received left us with the sense that Georgian public institutions **do not regularly conduct external audits** to vet the proper functioning of their AI tools.

Gaps in AI governance also make collecting reliable information more challenging. In Georgia, as in most other settings, there is no common registry with information about AI systems in use by public agencies. Although few examples of such registries currently exist globally,[6] their adoption will be critical for accountable governance as public institutions begin to rely on AI tools more heavily. To uphold democratic principles in the use of technologies that are transforming governance, **stakeholders need a clear understanding of which AI systems are being used by government institutions, and for what purposes.**

Another challenge is that Georgian official institutions seem to lack a clear definition of AI, including on the legislative level. Absent such guidance, it is difficult for officials to distinguish between AI and other types of software with high levels of automation. This situation has provided institutions with a ready pretext to avoid answering our request for public information about their use of AI tools. Defining AI more clearly is an important precondition for understanding what types of AI systems are in use and what level of scrutiny may be needed depending on their function, complexity, and potential impact on human rights.

These omissions are more than just a problem for researchers: They dampen the prospects for regulating AI and adequately monitoring AI systems to address privacy, human rights, and other risks. Our study found that **there is currently a void when it comes to defining working principles, ethical norms, and even basic concepts related to AI**. The National Bank of Georgia was the only exception we identified; it has adopted a decree setting out risk management principles and control mechanisms for statistical, AI, and machine learning systems. In May 2022, the decree was revised to include requirements to adopt ethical standards and certain transparency mechanisms for these systems.[7]

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FILLING THE GAPS

Georgia's situation highlights several critical gaps that struggling democracies will need to close if they want to ensure that AI's integration into their public sectors strengthens, rather than weakens, state accountability. In order to begin tackling this challenge, digitalizing democracies should keep in mind the following principles:

- **Analyze Critical Risks.** When agencies embark on the process of developing AI tools, officials should analyze algorithmic risks as well as opportunities that technology offers, and establish relevant ethical, transparency, and accountability mechanisms at the outset. Moreover, **safeguards should be enacted in advance to mitigate human rights risks and ensure that officials do not have opportunities to abuse AI tools for personal, economic, or political ends.**[8] These measures are especially vital where public institutions have been criticized for their opacity, corruption, or lack of oversight.

- **Prioritize Tech Literacy.** Public institutions need to bolster their capacity to understand the workings and challenges of AI systems, emerging trends in this field, and how to address technical issues, among other considerations. To this end, **institutions should regularly provide opportunities for public servants to participate in experience-sharing and educational programs**. As our exchanges and meetings with civil servants during our research demonstrated, there is currently no common understanding about AI systems within Georgia's public institutions. The issue is viewed as a niche policy concern, often considered relevant only for technology specialists. New training and credentials for civil servants can help to address this knowledge gap and encourage more effective engagement on the human rights impacts of AI technologies.

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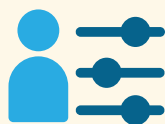
FIGURE

Key Principles for the Democratic Integration of AI in Government

To ensure that public agencies' use of AI tools is in line with democratic values, officials should keep the following guidelines in mind.
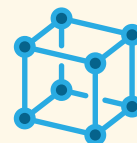
Analyze Critical Risks	Prioritize Tech Literacy	Share Information with the Public	Develop Crucial Normative Frameworks

- **Share Information with the Public.** To build public trust in AI systems and ensure that people see actions taken with the help of these tools as legitimate, **adequate information about their functions and capacities must be made publicly available.** In addition, complaint mechanisms should be made available for those affected by system failures or other technical errors.

- **Develop Crucial Normative Frameworks.** Countries must develop adequate **overarching regulatory frameworks and standards** for AI systems across sectors and articulate a **common vision when it comes to the benefits expected** from these systems. These frameworks should provide a **clear definition of AI** as a starting point for broader conversations.

In various international fora, it has become popular to speak about the need for multistakeholder AI governance. In practice, however, **civil society organizations seeking to engage on these issues face major roadblocks when public institutions are opaque or even ill-informed about their own use of AI tools.** Establishing clearer norms, concepts, and procedures for AI governance will be a crucial step toward ensuring that civil society can carry out its critical role overseeing public institutions in the digital age.

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ENDNOTES

1   Much of the information in this essay has been drawn from IDFI's study on AI usage in the public sector (with a focus on Georgia). For more information, please consult: *Artificial Intelligence: International Tendencies and Georgia – Legislation and Practice*, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 19 February 2021, https://idfi.ge/en/artificial%20 intelligence_international_tendencies_and_georgia.

2   These government institutions were: the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia and its Public Safety Command Center 112, the General Prosecutor's Office of Georgia, the Georgian National Tourism Administration, Education Management Information System for the Ministry of Education and Science, and the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement.

3   For instance, POLYFACE application is a system that can be used identify persons of interest using subjective portraits (photorobots)—For more information, please see: https://papillonsystems.com/products/programs/polyface/; and *Artificial Intelligence: International Tendencies and Georgia – Legislation and Practice*.

4   "დანაშაულის გამოსაძიებლად საქართველო რუსულ ხელოვნურ ინტელექტს იყენებს," [Georgia Uses Russian Artificial Intelligence to Investigate Crimes], NextOn, 24 January 2023, https://tinyurl.com/2p8b5u78; and Nastasia Arabuli, "როგორ იყენებს ქართული პოლიცია რუსულ პროგრამებს და საექსპერტიზო ტექნიკას" [How the Georgian Police Uses Russian Programs and Expert Techniques], Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 31 January 2023, http://bit. ly/3DHwsAZ. (Original source material for both citations in Georgian.)

5   "Statement of the Strategic Communications Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs," Department of Strategic Communications of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 26 January 2023, www.facebook.com/ photo?fbid=495601639418277&set=a.233701852274925.

6   Initiatives along these lines can be found in Amsterdam, Helsinki, and New York City. For more information, please see: Khari Johnson, "Amsterdam and Helsinki Launch Algorithm Registries to Bring Transparency to Public Deployments of AI," Venture Beat, 28 September 2020, https://venturebeat.com/ai/amsterdam-and-helsinki-launch-algorithm-registries-to- bring-transparency-to-public-deployments-of-ai/.

7   "მონაცემებზე დაფუძნებული სტატისტიკური, ხელოვნური ინტელექტის და მანქანური სწავლების მოდელების რისკების მართვის დებულების დამტკიცების თაობაზე" [Approving the Provision for Risk Management of Data- Driven Statistical, Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning Models], Office of the President of the National Bank of Georgia, 17 August 2020, https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/4964423?publication=0. (Original source material in Georgian.)

8   Procedures to address these risks have been implemented in other settings. Please see, for instance, the following examples: The Canadian government's Algorithmic Impact Assessment Tool, www.canada.ca/en/government/system/ digital-government/digital-government-innovations/responsible-use-ai/algorithmic-impact-assessment.html; and the U.K.'s Algorithmic Transparency Standard, www.gov.uk/government/collections/algorithmic-transparency-reports.