



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2024

South Ossetia*

NOT FREE

12
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	3/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	9/60

LAST YEAR’S SCORE & STATUS

12 /100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.

** Indicates a territory as opposed to an independent country.*



Note

Freedom in the World reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Disputed or occupied territories are sometimes assessed separately if they meet certain criteria, including boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the report [methodology](#) and [FAQ](#).

Overview

Large parts of South Ossetia, a breakaway territory of Georgia, enjoyed de facto independence after a civil conflict ended in 1992. A 2008 war that drew in Russian forces resulted in the expulsion of the remaining Georgian government presence and most ethnic Georgian civilians. Only Russia and a handful of other states have since recognized South Ossetia's independence. The territory remains almost entirely dependent on Moscow, which exerts a decisive influence over its politics and governance. Local media and civil society are largely controlled or monitored by the authorities, and the justice system is subject to political influence and manipulation.

Key Developments in 2023

- In July, the newly appointed prosecutor general finalized a long-running investigation into the 2020 death in custody of Inal Dzhabiev, a local resident who was allegedly tortured after being accused of participating in a gun attack on the interior minister's car. The completion of the probe cleared the way for a trial of eight defendants in the high-profile case, which was ongoing at year's end.
- In August, public transport and hospital workers went on strike over delayed wages and the government's failure to deliver on the promise of higher pay, underscoring the territory's deteriorating economic conditions.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts**Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?****1/4**

The executive branch of South Ossetia's separatist government is headed by a directly elected president serving five-year terms. Although elections have occurred regularly, they are severely restricted at all stages of the process and are not monitored by independent observers or recognized by the international community.

In the May 2022 presidential contest, lawmaker Alan Gagloyev of the opposition party Nykhas defeated incumbent Anatoly Bibilov in two rounds of voting, taking some 59 percent of the runoff ballots. All five registered candidates engaged in a relatively competitive campaign, which included unprecedented and often contentious televised debates. Despite scandals involving the obstruction of observers and alleged ballot manipulation by the Bibilov camp, the conduct of the 2022 election was seen as an improvement over previous polls. Unlike in some past elections, Moscow did not make obvious attempts to support certain candidates or disrupt the electoral process.

A2 0-4 pts**Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?****1/4**

The unicameral Parliament is elected to serve five-year terms. Under a new voting system introduced for the 2019 elections, half of the 34 seats went to political parties via proportional representation, while the other half were filled through contests in single-member constituencies. In contrast to previous elections, parties reported few problems with registration, were able to campaign, and participated in televised debates. However, more than half of the candidates for the single-member constituencies, mainly private individuals, were unable to register. The United Ossetia party of then president Bibilov won 14 seats, followed by Unity of the People (UP) with 5, and Nykhas with 4. Smaller parties captured the remainder.

After President Gagloyev took office in 2022, the speaker of Parliament was replaced with a member of the former opposition who was aligned with the new president. The next parliamentary elections were scheduled for 2024.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	1 / 4
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Among other restrictions, the electoral laws require candidates to have permanently resided in South Ossetia for 10 years. The Central Election Commission (CEC) has historically rejected the applications of many aspiring candidates on various grounds, significantly narrowing the options presented to voters.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?	1 / 4
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Political parties that might challenge Moscow’s influence or the separatist establishment are not permitted to operate in practice. A number of parties have nevertheless been able to register and compete in recent elections, with some successfully displacing older groups.

The CEC continues to block large numbers of individual candidates. Only 39 of the 99 candidates seeking single-member seats ahead of the 2019 parliamentary polls were approved by the commission. During the 2022 presidential campaign, just five out of 17 candidates were registered. Some of the presidential candidates whose registrations were denied accused CEC officials and Bibilov supporters of interfering with their applications.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

1 / 4

South Ossetia has experienced opposition victories and transfers of power, but only among the field of candidates accepted by the Russian government and the separatist authorities. President Gagloyev, who won the 2022 election as an opposition candidate, initially gained prominence during protests that called for Bibilov's resignation following the 2020 death in custody of Inal Dzhabiev.

In May 2023, Justice Minister Oleg Gagloyev threatened to suspend the activities of Bibilov's United Ossetia party, in opposition since 2022, over a delay the submission of the party's annual financial report. Observers noted a long-standing enmity between Bibilov and the justice minister, whom the former president had fired as head of his administration in late 2020.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

0 / 4

People whose views and interests fall outside the narrow spectrum permitted by Moscow, South Ossetian authorities, and allied private businesses cannot meaningfully participate in the political process. In 2022, a number of prominent would-be presidential candidates who were apparently disfavored by the Kremlin failed to pass the CEC registration process, including a former president, a former foreign minister, and a sitting deputy speaker of Parliament.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

0 / 4

The interests of women and ethnic or religious minority groups are not represented politically. As of 2023, only one of 15 cabinet members was a woman, and there were only three female members of Parliament. Most ethnic Georgian residents have been denied the ability to participate in elections.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	0/4
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The ability of elected officials to determine and implement policy is heavily influenced by Moscow. A sweeping 2015 treaty between Russia and South Ossetia closely integrates the territory’s defense, security, and customs mechanisms with those of Russia. During his presidency, Bibilov spoke repeatedly of uniting the territory with Russia’s North Ossetia–Alania Republic or joining the Russian Federation as a separate region. In early 2022, he promoted the idea of a new referendum on unification with Russia in an attempt to improve his standing in the presidential race. However, the deployment of poorly equipped South Ossetian soldiers to fight alongside Russian forces in Ukraine apparently cost Bibilov public support.

After the May 2022 election, President Gagloyev canceled the referendum, which had been set for July, citing the need for further consultations with Moscow. Such talks continued during 2023. While the government’s relations with the Kremlin have reportedly cooled under Gagloyev, the territory’s fiscal and economic dependence ensures a high degree of Russian control.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	0/4
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Official corruption is widespread in South Ossetia, and there is little effort to combat such behavior systematically. Opposition lawmakers have sought to debate the issue in Parliament, and a 2020 law imposed restrictions on conflicts of

interest, requiring all civil servants to submit annual declarations to support compliance.

After winning the 2022 presidential election, Gagloyev asked the prosecutor’s office to facilitate investigations into possible corruption involving members of the former administration. However, some observers characterized the initiative as part of Gagloyev’s effort to consolidate power rather than a genuine and impartial bid to fight corruption, and similar allegations of political motivation emerged during 2023.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	O / 4
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South Ossetia’s government is not transparent. Existing laws and regulations do not provide effective means for journalists, activists, or members of the public to obtain official information, and the government has resisted such disclosures in practice.

Add Q

Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group?	-2
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During the 2008 war, South Ossetian forces seized or destroyed property in previously Georgian-controlled villages, and large numbers of ethnic Georgians fled the fighting. South Ossetian authorities have since barred ethnic Georgians from returning unless they renounce their Georgian citizenship and accept Russian passports. Of approximately 20,000 ethnic Georgians displaced from their homes in South Ossetia, most have not been able to return.

Conditions for remaining ethnic Georgian residents have stabilized somewhat since the war, given the absence of open conflict across the de facto administrative line separating South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia. However, hardships and shortages caused by extended border closures, combined with the

risk that such closures could become permanent, have motivated more ethnic Georgians to leave the territory over the past several years.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	0 / 4
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Local media, including the television channel Ir, the newspapers *Yuzhnaya Osetiya* and *Respublika*, and the online portal Res, are almost entirely controlled by the de facto authorities. Foreign media, including broadcasts from Russia and Georgia, remain accessible. The Russian state-owned news service Sputnik produces content in both Russian and Ossetian. Self-censorship is pervasive, journalists sometimes face physical intimidation or assaults, and defamation charges are employed against critical outlets or reporters.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	1 / 4
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Most residents are Orthodox Christian, though there is also a sizeable Muslim community, and others identify with the traditional pre-Christian Ossetian religion. Some property of the Georgian Orthodox Church is controlled by the South Ossetian Orthodox Church; it is reportedly difficult for Georgian clergy to travel to the territory. Jehovah’s Witnesses have been banned as an “extremist” organization since 2017.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

1/4

The government exerts strong influence over the education system. The Education Ministry has been working to phase out Georgian-language education since 2017.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

1/4

Personal expression and private discussion are constrained by the political and social sensitivity of certain topics, particularly the territory's geopolitical status. Some forms of critical speech are subject to criminal punishment. However, residents are able to discuss politics and practical concerns on social media, at times drawing engagement from lawmakers and other officials.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

2/4

Freedom of assembly is partially restricted. For over a decade following the 2008 war and Russian recognition of South Ossetia's independence, authorities often responded to demonstrations related to political grievances by closing roads and deploying security forces. The situation changed in 2020, when residents gathered in unusually large numbers to protest the death in custody of Inal Dzhabiev. The mass demonstrations were tolerated by the authorities, and public protests have since faced fewer restrictions. Opposition forces were able to hold rallies during the 2022 presidential election period.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

O / 4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that operate in the territory are subject to government influence. Legislative amendments in 2014 increased authorities' oversight of NGOs, subjecting organizations that receive foreign funding to broader and more frequent reporting requirements and branding them "foreign partners." NGOs that engage in conflict resolution and reconciliation are smeared by the authorities and progovernment media as agents of Tbilisi or Western intelligence services. In 2022, a number of local civil society activists made public statements about their engagements with Georgian partners, prompting harassment on social media. However, in contrast to past years, they did not face prosecutions or interrogations by the local security service.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

O / 4

Trade unions in South Ossetia largely defer to the policies of the de facto leadership, though growing economic problems have fed discontent. In 2022, a local business association criticized the outgoing administration for failing to engage with it in recent years. In August 2023, public transit drivers and hospital catering staff went on strike over delayed wages and President Gagloyev's unfulfilled promises of increased pay. Postal workers went on strike in November, similarly citing inadequate compensation and equipment.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

O / 4

South Ossetia's judiciary is not independent. The justice system is manipulated by those in power to punish perceived opponents of the government or pursue personal disputes.

In 2022, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for three former de facto officials who were accused of war crimes during the 2008 conflict. Like the Russian government, the South Ossetian authorities refuse to cooperate with the ICC.

F2 0-4 pts**Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?****0** / 4

South Ossetia uses a modified version of the Russian criminal code. Criminal prosecutions are employed to punish activists and individuals who question or inconvenience the authorities. After taking up his post in 2022, President Gagloyev appointed new leaders for the local prosecutor's office, which initiated cases targeting members of the former administration.

The territory's law enforcement bodies do not conduct transparent or fair investigations related to border crossings between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia. Residents of the territory and ethnic Georgians from elsewhere in Georgia risk arrest for crossing without authorization; while most individuals are fined, some are arbitrarily detained.

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?****0** / 4

Physical abuse and poor conditions are reportedly common in prisons and detention centers. In 2020, after Inal Dzhabiev died in police custody, photographs of his corpse that circulated on social media showed extensive bruises. Two detainees who were implicated alongside Dzhabiev in a gun attack on the interior minister's vehicle were released after promising not to leave South Ossetia; one spent weeks undergoing medical care after release. In July 2023, the newly

appointed prosecutor general finalized a long-running investigation into Dzhabiev’s death, clearing the way for a trial of eight defendants, which was ongoing at year’s end.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	1/4
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Although the law provides nominal protections for individual rights, these are not well enforced, and there are few specific or effective safeguards against discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other such categories. Ethnic Georgians continue to face discrimination in practice. While Russian-style legal restrictions on LGBT+ people have yet to be imposed, there are no initiatives to recognize or support their rights, and the high level of societal hostility toward them has prompted most to hide their identity or leave the territory.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	1/4
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Restrictions on freedom of movement between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia, across what the Russian and South Ossetian authorities consider a “state border,” remain in place. Russian border guards have installed barbed wire and other obstructions there to limit travel.

In August 2022, after a period of closures linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, South Ossetian officials agreed to open crossings to the rest of Georgia on regular basis for at least 10 days each month. This led to an outflow of many residents who had struggled to receive Georgian salaries and pensions during the lengthy closures.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

0 / 4

The territory's political and military situation has negatively affected the protection of property rights, particularly for residents close to the de facto administrative boundary. Small businesses are at risk of being seized or subjected to predatory behavior by larger business groups with connections to the authorities.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

2 / 4

While no laws officially regulate individuals' personal appearance, statements by public officials reflect intolerance for behavior that deviates from conservative social norms. No laws or government programs specifically protect victims of domestic violence, and few if any cases are reported as a result. Women and girls face social pressure to marry early and have several children, and some are subjected to arranged marriages.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

0 / 4

Economic opportunity has been limited by factors including the separatist government's lack of international recognition and related controls on movement and commerce. High levels of income inequality add to social tensions. Residents living along the de facto administrative border face economic uncertainty due to unpredictable closures and changes in the boundary's exact location. During the harvest period of August and September 2023, the local government simplified access to farmland close to the boundary line, suspending the need for special permission.

On South Ossetia

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Country Facts

Region

Eurasia

Global Freedom Score

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Other Years

2023

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