



## Freedom in the World 2015 - Abkhazia

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 10 August 2015

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2015 - Abkhazia*, 10 August 2015, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/55cb45e347.html> [accessed 21 October 2015]

Disclaimer This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

### 2015 Scores

Status: Partly Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 4.5

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 5

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 4

### OVERVIEW

In June 2014, Aleksandr Ankvab resigned from the presidency amid protests led by the Coordinating Council, a joint opposition group. A snap presidential election was held in August, and Raul Khajimba – the leader of the Coordinating Council – won with more than 50 percent of the vote. Thousands of ethnic Georgians from the district of Gali were barred from voting. In November, Abkhazia and Russia signed a treaty stipulating closer Abkhaz-Russian relations, particularly in military and economic matters. The treaty was highly criticized domestically and internationally, with opponents claiming that its terms serve to expand Russian influence on the territory.

At the end of 2014, only Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and the Pacific Island state of Nauru recognized Abkhazia's independence from Georgia.

### POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

**Political Rights:** 18 / 40

*A. Electoral Process:* 6 / 12 (-1)

Abkhazia's 1999 constitution established a presidential system, in which the president and vice president are elected for five-year terms. The parliament, or People's Assembly, consists of 35 members elected for five-year terms from single-seat constituencies. Under the constitution, only ethnic Abkhaz can be elected to the presidency. The more than 200,000 ethnic Georgians who fled the region during the 1992-93 war – in which Abkhazia secured de facto independence – cannot vote in Abkhazia's elections. None of Abkhazia's elections have been recognized internationally.

The 2012 parliamentary elections marked a significant shift toward independents, who captured 28 of the 35 seats, compared with 4 for opposition parties and only 3 for the ruling United

Abkhazia party. Six of the nine incumbents seeking reelection were defeated, including the outgoing parliamentary speaker. Amid a low 44 percent turnout, only 13 candidates won majorities in the first round, requiring runoff votes for the remaining 22 seats.

A snap presidential election was held in August 2014, following Ankvab's resignation amid widespread public protest and upheaval. The protests followed his refusal to meet the demands of the newly formed Coordinating Council – an amalgam of opposition parties and movements – that included the dismissal of Ankvab's cabinet and the redistribution of power from the office of the president to that of the prime minister. Parliamentary speaker Valery Bganba was designated acting president following Ankvab's resignation.

Four candidates competed for the presidency. Khajimba, who had run in three previous presidential elections, won with 50.57 percent of the vote, followed by former leader of the State Security Service Aslan Bzhania with 35.9 percent. Former defense minister Mirab Kishmaria captured approximately 6 percent, and former interior minister Leonid Dzapshba won over 3 percent of the vote. Khajimba was inaugurated in September; he has formerly served as vice president, prime minister, and defense minister.

More than 20,000 Gali Georgians were disenfranchised before the election, when Abkhaz authorities removed their names from voter lists; the decision was partly driven by claims that the Gali Georgian's Abkhaz passports were illegal. The political status of this group had been a point of serious contention between Ankvab and the opposition, who claimed that ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia posed a security threat. Gali Georgians had been allowed to vote in previous elections.

#### *B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 8 / 16 (+1)*

Abkhazia's opposition has grown stronger in recent years, and various opposition parties and figures have spearheaded protest movements against incumbent presidents in recent years. In 2014, growing opposition cooperation culminated in the actions of the Coordinating Council, which actively challenged the Ankvab administration through political protest and dialogue. A broad range of opposition parties representing different political beliefs participated in the Coordinating Council, and the wave of protests organized by the group throughout May 2014 led to Ankvab's resignation and the subsequent presidential election.

The Georgian government elected in 2012 had adopted a softer policy toward Abkhazia, no longer discouraging Gali Georgians from seeking Abkhaz passports; more than 20,000 of them had received the documents. Following protracted public debate and pressure from then-opposition members, Ankvab suspended issuance of Abkhaz passports to Gali Georgians in 2013. The passports carry significant legal benefits, entitling residents to vote, own property, run a business, and obtain Russian citizenship and pensions.

#### *C. Functioning of Government: 4 / 12*

The ability of elected authorities to set and implement policies is limited by the influence of Moscow. Moscow provides direct budgetary support amounting to roughly a fifth of Abkhazia's state budget, additional funds for aid projects and civilian infrastructure, and some \$70 million annually in pension payments, as most Abkhaz residents hold Russian passports. Since 2008, Moscow has spent at least \$465 million to build or rehabilitate military infrastructure in Abkhazia, including the largest military airfield in the South Caucasus and a strategic naval base close to Tbilisi. According to Russian officials, roughly 5,000 Russian military and other security personnel remain stationed in Abkhazia.

Moscow extended its already significant military and economic control over the region in a treaty signed in November 2014. The treaty, focusing on deepening bilateral relations, stipulates the

creation of a joint Russian-Abkhaz military force, increased Russian funding to regional military efforts, and the doubling of Russian subsidies to Abkhazia. The terms of the agreement also state that Russia will respond to an attack on Abkhazia as an attack on itself. The treaty negotiations were met with contentious public debate in Abkhazia, and although several unpopular provisions were removed from the final draft, its signing was nevertheless condemned by the Abkhaz opposition and international community, including Georgia. Critics argued that the terms infringe on Abkhaz autonomy.

Corruption is believed to be extensive, and government officials are not required to provide declarations of income. In 2013, Russia's Audit Chamber reported that only half of the aid funds allocated for 2010-12 had been spent, citing poor planning and oversight as well as noncompetitive contracting practices.

### **Civil Liberties: 23 / 60 (+1)**

#### *D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 8 / 16*

Local broadcast media are largely controlled by the government, which operates the Abkhaz State Television and Radio Company (AGTRK). Abkhaz journalists criticized Khajimba in 2014 for failing to reform AGTRK, including for keeping it under government control. Major Russian television stations broadcast into Abkhazia. The print media are considered more influential, consisting of several weekly newspapers. The government publication *Respublika Abkhazii* competes with two main independent papers, *Chegemskaya Pravda* and *Novaya Gazeta*, which are openly critical of government policies. Some legal restrictions apply to both traditional and online media, including criminal libel statutes. In August 2014, a car belonging to the editor of the newspaper *Nuzhnaya Gazeta* was shelled with an automatic weapon, although no one was harmed. The perpetrator had not been found at year's end. Internet access continues to increase, with over a quarter of the population believed to be online.

Religious freedom in Abkhazia is affected by the political situation. In 2011, the Abkhaz Orthodox Church split into two factions; while both officially support autocephaly, or independence, for the Abkhaz church, the newer faction accused the established leadership of acquiescing to de facto control by the Russian Orthodox Church. Outside Abkhazia, the territory is still formally considered to be in the Georgian Orthodox Church's jurisdiction.

Abkhazia's Muslims, who make up about 30 percent of the population, are allowed to practice freely, though a series of murders and assassination attempts have targeted local religious leaders in recent years. Jehovah's Witnesses continue to practice openly, but they were banned by a 1995 decree and have recently reported increased pressure from local authorities.

The Abkhaz constitution offers some protection for education in minority languages. Armenian-language schools generally operate without interference, but Gali's schools are officially allowed to offer instruction only in Russian or Abkhaz. While Georgian is often used in these schools in practice, enforcement by the authorities has reportedly been on the rise. Some ethnic Georgian students regularly travel to Georgian-controlled territory to attend classes. Ethnic Georgian residents without Abkhaz passports are restricted from attending Sukhumi State University.

#### *E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 6 / 12 (+1)*

Opposition and civil society groups have mounted regular protests since 2013. The May 2014 protests leading Ankvab to step down from the presidency drew thousands of local residents and opposition members. The protests were conducted nonviolently, with broad-ranging political support, and without major interference from security forces. Many of the protests took place in

front of the presidential headquarters, and protesters briefly occupied the building, as well as the offices of AGTRK, in the week preceding Ankvab's resignation.

Although most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rely on funding from outside the territory, the NGO sector exerts significant influence on government policies.

#### *F. Rule of Law: 4 / 16*

The judicial code is based on Russia's, and the criminal justice system suffers from chronic problems, including limited defendant access to qualified legal counsel, violations of due process, and lengthy pretrial detentions. Local NGOs have petitioned for significant judicial reform.

Gali's ethnic Georgian residents continue to suffer from widespread poverty and undefined legal status, though the security situation in Gali is reported to have improved in 2013 and 2014 following an increase in violence over the previous two years, during which eight Abkhaz officials and one Russian soldier were killed, according to Abkhaz sources. In June 2014, a Georgian court sentenced a Russian citizen from Chechnya to 12 years in prison for the 2013 murder of a Russian consulate officer in Sukhumi.

#### *G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16*

Travel and choice of residence are limited by the ongoing separatist dispute. Most ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia during the early 1990s live in Tbilisi and western Georgia. As many as 47,000 former Gali residents have returned to Abkhazia since 1994, with an additional 5,000 who commute between Abkhazia and Georgia. Travel permits remain expensive and burdensome to obtain, and travel has become more difficult since Russian border guards closed the administrative line between Abkhazia and Georgia and took control of the sole official crossing point in 2012. About 90 percent of Abkhazia's residents hold Russian passports, as Abkhaz travel documents are not internationally recognized. Since the 2008 war, ethnic Abkhaz have had greater difficulty receiving visas to travel abroad, including to the United States and European Union countries.

Equality of opportunity and normal business activities are limited by corruption, criminal organizations, and economic reliance on Russia, which accounts for nearly all foreign investment.

Foreigners are barred from buying Abkhaz property by law, and some ethnic Russians have reported that their homes have been confiscated. An early draft of the November 2014 Abkhaz-Russian pact had included a provision that would have expedited procedures for ethnic Russians to gain Abkhaz citizenship and thus purchase property. The provision was removed by Abkhaz authorities.

A strong NGO sector has contributed to women's involvement in business and civil society. However, Abkhaz women complain of being underrepresented in government positions, holding only one of the 35 legislative seats.

#### **Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Copyright notice: © Freedom House, Inc. · All Rights Reserved

## Search Refworld

by keyword

and / or country

[Advanced Search](#) | [Search Tips](#)

## Countries

- [Georgia](#)
- [Russian Federation](#)

## Topics

- [Democracy](#)
- [Elections](#)
- [Freedom of assembly and association](#)
- [Freedom of expression](#)
- [Freedom of religion](#)
- [Rule of law / Due process / Procedural fairness](#)