

Freedom in the World 2023



header1 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 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**.

header2 Overview

Abkhazia, a breakaway region of Georgia, has maintained de facto independence since the end of a civil conflict in 1993. The separatist government is financially dependent on Russia, which has a military presence in Abkhazia and is one of a handful of United Nations (UN) member states that recognize the territory's independence. The tumultuous political environment features significant opposition and civil society activity. Ongoing problems include a flawed criminal justice system, discrimination against ethnic Georgians, and a lack of economic opportunity.

header3 Key Developments in 2022

- Parliamentary elections were held in March, resulting in a strong majority for the ruling faction headed by President Aslan Bzhania.
- Following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February, the Abkhaz government faced growing pressure to demonstrate loyalty to the Kremlin and capitulate on its long-standing policy demands. Among other concessions, Bzhania said in August that Abkhazia was prepared to consider joining a Union State with Russia and Belarus.
- Also during the year, the Abkhaz authorities continued a smear campaign against local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that cooperated with foreign donors based in democratic countries. Some civil society activists were summoned for questioning, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs banned a number of programs run by foreign

organizations. At least one staffer with a UN humanitarian organization was declared persona non grata and accused of espionage against the Russian military.

PR Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	2.002
	4.004

Abkhazia's 1999 constitution established a presidential system, in which the president and vice president are directly elected for five-year terms.

In 2019, then president Raul Khajimba appeared to win reelection in a deeply flawed vote, but he ultimately resigned under public, political, and legal pressure in January 2020. Aslan Bzhania, an opposition politician who had previously headed the state security service and was forced to withdraw from the 2019 contest due to mercury poisoning, won a snap election in March 2020, taking more than 56 percent of the vote in the first round. Two lesser-known candidates divided the remainder. Most established election-monitoring organizations do not assess Abkhazia's elections; informal observations indicated that the 2020 balloting and campaign period were relatively free, notwithstanding the circumstances that prompted the new vote.

Under the constitution, the prime minister and cabinet are appointed by and accountable to the president. In April 2020, President Bzhania appointed former president (2011–14) Aleksandr Ankva as prime minister.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	2.002
	4.004

The parliament, or People's Assembly, comprises 35 members elected for five-year terms from single-seat constituencies. The March 2022 parliamentary elections were marred by allegations of vote buying involving candidates affiliated with the government or business groups, who together took most of the seats. While 30 of the 35 successful candidates ran as independents, the results effectively confirmed a consolidation of power by Bzhania and his allies, displacing politicians associated with former president Khajimba. All but nine of the new lawmakers were regarded by analysts as supporters of the government, and only three were seen as genuine opposition figures.

A3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	1.001
	4.004

The legal framework does not support fully democratic elections. Eight members of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) are chosen by the parliament, and seven are appointed by the president. All elections are predicated on the exclusion of ethnic Georgian residents.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 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?	2.002 4.004
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Many parties and social organizations participate in Abkhazia's fractious political system, and these movements generally enjoy freedom of association. Organizations representing veterans of the 1992–93 war with the Georgian government are particularly influential.

However, corruption within parties hampers their democratic functioning, and a 2009 law forbids the formation of parties catering to the interests of any particular ethnic, religious, racial, or professional group. Parties are relatively weak as electoral vehicles and as forces within the parliament, with most candidates campaigning and serving as independents.

B2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	3.003 4.004
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While successive governments have often been able to co-opt some of their opponents, incumbent officials remain vulnerable to defeat at the polls. After winning the 2020 presidential election, Bzhania invited representatives of alternative political groups to join his government, including Ankvab, who became prime minister, and Sergey Shamba of United Abkhazia, who became secretary of the Security Council. Meanwhile, Khajimba supporters quickly formed several opposition groups with the goal of contesting the 2022 parliamentary elections. They ultimately failed to arrange effective cooperation, however, and continued to compete with one another during the electoral campaign, resulting in the loss of most opposition seats in the parliament.

B3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 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?	2.002 4.004
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While voters' choices influence domestic politics, the functioning of Abkhazia's political institutions remains dependent on economic and political support from Moscow. Corruption and intimidation have also played a role in political affairs.

B4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	1.001 4.004
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Under the constitution, only a person of Abkhaz nationality who speaks the Abkhaz language and is a citizen of Abkhazia can be elected to the presidency. Ethnic Abkhaz exercise disproportionate control over the political sphere; of the 35 members of the parliament, 32 have Abkhaz surnames and the rest are Armenian. The sizable ethnic Georgian population is routinely excluded from elections and political representation. As with other recent elections, authorities argued ahead of the 2022 parliamentary elections that most residents of the ethnic Georgian district of Gali were Georgian passport holders and therefore not permitted to cast ballots.

Societal norms discourage women from running for office, and women and their interests remain underrepresented in the political sphere. In 2022, only one cabinet-level position and two parliamentary seats were held by women, and only 16 of the 179 seats contested in the 2021 local elections were filled by women.

C Functioning of Government

C1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

1.001
4.004

While Abkhazia's president sets the tone for most domestic policy, the overall ability of elected authorities to determine and implement policies is limited by the economic and political influence of the Russian regime.

Moscow's costly February 2022 invasion of Ukraine led to a decline in the Russian financial support that has traditionally made up most of Abkhazia's state budget, and a significant share of the Russian troops stationed in Abkhazia were redeployed to Ukraine. However, the local authorities faced increased pressure from the Kremlin to demonstrate loyalty by capitulating on long-standing points of disagreement. For example, after almost eight years of resistance, in late February 2022 the Abkhaz authorities recognized the "independence" of two Russian-backed separatist entities in Ukraine—the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR). In September, Abkhaz officials prepared for the mobilization of local youth, most of whom hold Russian passports, though it was unclear whether any Abkhaz recruits had left the territory by year's end. In March the Abkhaz leadership rejected the idea of holding a referendum on joining the Russian Federation, but in August President Bzhania said the territory was ready to consider joining the looser Union State of Russia and Belarus.

C2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

1.001 4.004

Corruption is believed to be extensive and is tolerated by the government, despite promises to combat it. In recent years, Russian officials have voiced concern about the large-scale embezzlement of funds provided by Moscow.

Since the change in leadership in 2020, prosecutors have launched investigations into allegations of embezzlement and fraud at state-owned companies and government ministries. One of these investigations resulted in the April 2022 arrest of a former culture minister, and in September the Prosecutor General's Office opened a criminal case against a senior medical official who was accused of fleeing abroad with stolen funds.

C3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

2.002 4.004

Legal amendments from 2015 allow citizens to request information about any government decisions that are not classified as state secrets, and to receive a response within a month. Nevertheless, the territory's political culture is nontransparent, and social stigmas prevent citizens from requesting information.

In 2021, the parliament adopted legislation requiring all public officials and their close relatives to declare their income, property, and expenses. A second round of annual declarations were submitted in 2022. Some local activists argued that the information supplied in the documents was not sufficient to shed light on any possible corruption schemes.

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? | 2.002 4.004

The local media sector is dominated by the government, which operates the Abkhaz State Television and Radio Company (AGTRK), a newspaper, and a news agency, though there are also some private outlets. News websites and social media have become increasingly popular sources of information. Major Russian television stations broadcast into Abkhazia, and residents of the Gali district have access to Georgian broadcasts. Some legal restrictions apply to both traditional and online media, including criminal libel statutes.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? | 2.002 4.004

Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion in Abkhazia, but the Georgian Orthodox Church faces discrimination and restrictions. Most practicing Christians adhere to one of two branches of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church. Though the Abkhazian Orthodox Church declared its separation from the Georgian Orthodox Church in 2009, its autonomy has not been officially recognized.

Muslims are allowed to practice freely, though some community leaders have been attacked in the past. Islamic religious services have generally been held in private homes, some of which were renovated and expanded to accommodate increased participation. The local synagogue is in poor condition, with a declining Jewish congregation of only around 150 people. There are no widely reported restrictions on the minority of residents who identify with Abkhazia's traditional pre-Christian religion. Jehovah's Witnesses are formally banned under a 1995 decree.

D3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? | 1.001 4.004

The education system is affected by the de facto government's political priorities. Schools providing instruction in Russian, Abkhaz, and Armenian generally operate without interference. However, schools in Gali have been undergoing reorganization since 2015 with the aim of replacing the Georgian language with Russian. In 2021, teaching in Georgian was officially banned in Abkhazia, though it is still taught as a foreign language in many schools throughout the predominantly Georgian east.

Universities in the capital have recently become more lenient about the enrollment of Gali Georgians who lack Abkhaz passports, but bureaucratic complications still arise with respect to obtaining a diploma, and some argue that requiring aspiring university students to take Abkhaz-language proficiency exams as part of their graduation from secondary school disadvantages members of ethnic minorities.

D4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? | 3.003 4.004

The freedoms of personal expression and private discussion are not severely restricted in practice. Social media platforms host vibrant discussions on political and other topics in Abkhazia. However, there is some self-censorship on sensitive subjects, especially those relating to ethnic Georgians and

relations with Tbilisi. In June 2022, the Abkhaz State Security Service (SGB) lodged treason allegations against Daur Buava, a resident who had recently left Abkhazia for government-controlled Georgia; Buava had posted videos on the social media platform TikTok in which he called for reconciliation with Georgians.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?		3.003 4.004
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Freedom of assembly is largely respected, and opposition and civil society groups regularly mount protests. In December 2021, the authorities deployed soldiers and riot police to prevent opposition protesters from storming the parliament building during an antigovernment demonstration in Sukhumi. Despite the use of tear gas and batons, there were no reports of protesters or police being hospitalized; however, members of a television crew were injured.

E2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?		1.001 4.004
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Civil society organizations exert influence on government policies, but those that receive funding from foreign governments or entities that do not recognize Abkhazia's independence face criticism from local journalists and authorities. The government's 2020 policy agreement with Moscow called for special restrictions on groups that receive foreign funding. While no such legislation had been adopted by the end of 2022, Abkhaz civil society was subjected to growing state pressure during the year. Many local activists were summoned for questioning by the SGB in April after their names appeared on a petition against the war in Ukraine. Despite protests by the local human rights commissioner, these interrogations continued, and later expanded to include representatives of foreign organizations operating in Abkhazia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs banned a number of projects implemented by foreign organizations and their local partners; in September the ministry designated a staff representative of the UN Food and Agricultural Organization as persona non grata, accusing her of espionage against the Russian military.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because the authorities have increased efforts to suppress the activities of both local and international nongovernmental organizations in Abkhazia.

E3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?		1.001 4.004
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Trade unions exist, but unions and labor activists have struggled to effectively defend the rights of workers and typically have little say in policies or decisions made by the government or private businesses. Workers often rely on informal networks to settle disputes.

F Rule of Law

F1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?		1.001 4.004
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Despite attempts to introduce more parliamentary oversight of the judiciary, nepotism and corruption reportedly have a significant impact on judicial independence. Implementation of

judicial decisions remains inconsistent.

F2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	1.001 4.004
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The criminal justice system is undermined by limited defendant access to qualified legal counsel, violations of due process, and lengthy pretrial detentions.

F3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	1.001 4.004
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Isolated acts of criminal and political violence occur in Abkhazia, though government data have shown declines in the overall crime rate in recent years. Organized crime remains a significant problem. Conditions in prisons and detention centers are reportedly poor, and the local human rights commissioner's office has highlighted cases of alleged torture and mistreatment of detainees.

F4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	1.001 4.004
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Ethnic Georgian residents of the Gali district continue to face discrimination, including police harassment and unequal access to documentation and public services. In 2017, Sukhumi began issuing residence permits to Gali Georgians for five-year renewable terms. Permit holders may retain Georgian citizenship, reside in Gali, and cross the de facto border into Georgia proper.

Many women in Abkhazia reportedly experience gender-based violence, with higher rates in rural areas. The territory lacks robust legal protections against discrimination affecting LGBT+ people.

Beginning in 2011, the government facilitated the travel of hundreds of ethnic Abkhaz, Adyghe, and Circassian people from Syria to Abkhazia, enabling them to escape Syria's civil war. Most of these refugees reportedly left Abkhazia due to local economic problems, but a small number still lived in the territory in 2022.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	1.001 4.004
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Freedom of movement is limited by the ongoing dispute over Abkhazia's status. Travel permits remain expensive and burdensome to obtain. More than 70 percent of Abkhazia's residents hold Russian passports, as Abkhaz travel documents are not internationally recognized.

After pandemic-related closures during 2020 and 2021, crossings between Georgian-controlled territory and Abkhazia generally remained open in 2022.

G2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	1.001 4.004
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Criminal activity hampers the operations of local businesses. The constitution forbids foreigners, including Russians, from buying real estate in Abkhazia, a rule that has broad support in Abkhazian society. Uncertainty persists regarding property rights for ethnic Georgians in Gali, whose residency permits do not allow them to officially own or inherit property. The legal status of properties whose owners were expelled from Abkhazia during the 1990s is also unclear, as displaced people cannot return to claim them.

G3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner	2.002
and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	4.004

Personal freedoms are somewhat inhibited by conservative social mores and societal disapproval of certain identities and behavior, including “nontraditional” sexual orientations and gender nonconformity. Domestic violence and rape are serious problems, and victims lack access to effective aid. There is no specific law to address domestic violence. A 2016 law banned abortions in all circumstances apart from prior fetal death.

G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic	1.001
exploitation?	4.004

Equality of opportunity is limited by Abkhazia’s international isolation, as well as by corruption and criminality. NGOs have expressed concern about human trafficking in Abkhazia, with migrants and internally displaced people deemed especially vulnerable to sexual or labor exploitation.