

South Ossetia*



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

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 judiciary is subject to political influence and manipulation.

header3 Key Developments in 2022

- In May, opposition politician Alan Gagloyev won South Ossetia's presidential election and became the new de facto leader of the territory. Incumbent president Anatoly Bibilov accepted defeat.
- After Gagloyev took office, the authorities revisited a number of high-profile criminal cases, releasing a jailed former official who had clashed with Bibilov and dropping charges against local activist and journalist Tamara Mearakishvili. Investigators also reexamined the case of Inal Dzhabiev, who was found dead in 2020 after being tortured at a detention center.

- In August, the local authorities allowed regular openings of several crossing points on the boundary with government-controlled Georgia, ending almost three years of near-total closures.

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?	1.001 4.004
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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, opposition lawmaker Alan Gagloyev 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.

Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because the 2022 presidential election was somewhat more competitive than elections in previous years, with no candidate openly favored by Moscow.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	1.001 4.004
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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 the Nykhas movement 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 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
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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. New members of the CEC were selected in 2021; according to a preliminary agreement on the CEC's makeup, two belonged to United Ossetia, the ruling party at that time. Five other parties, including those in opposition, each received one seat on the commission.

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?	1.001 4.004
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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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	1.001 4.004
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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. Gagloyev, who won the 2022 presidential election as an opposition candidate, had initially gained prominence during protests that called for Bibilov's resignation following the 2020 death in custody of local resident Inal Dzhabiev. Between late 2020 and March 2021, opposition forces largely boycotted parliamentary sessions, and in early 2022 they launched a campaign for Bibilov's impeachment.

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?	0.000 4.004
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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 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?	0.000 4.004
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While the territorial government includes two women ministers, the interests of women and ethnic or religious minority groups are not represented politically. Most ethnic Georgian residents have been denied the ability to participate in elections.

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?

0.000

4.004

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 election, Gagloyev canceled the referendum, which had been set for July, citing the need for further consultations with Moscow.

C2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

0.000 4.004

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.

C3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

0.000 4.004

South Ossetia's government is not transparent. In 2021, opposition lawmakers sought a no-confidence vote after the government declined to disclose the results of an audit; the vote narrowly failed.

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?

-2.00-
2

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.

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	0.000 4.004
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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. In December 2022, authorities dropped a criminal case against Tamara Mearakishvili, a journalist and activist who works with Georgian and international media outlets including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Mearakishvili had originally faced charges including libel in 2017. Although the case was dropped, Mearakishvili was still seeking financial compensation for legal expenses and the return of personal belongings that were seized during her arrest, including a local passport needed for travel between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	1.001 4.004
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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 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
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The government exerts strong influence over the education system. The Education Ministry has been working to phase out Georgian-language education since 2017.

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?	1.001 4.004
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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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?		2.002 4.004
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Freedom of assembly is partially restricted. For over a decade following the 2008 war and Russian recognition of South Ossetia's independence, residents were only occasionally permitted to protest on issues such as environmental degradation, the sluggish pace of postwar reconstruction, or animal rights. 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 of Inal Dzhabiev, who was accused of participating in a gun attack on the interior minister's car; he was later found dead in a detention center, with his body showing signs of torture. 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 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?		0.000 4.004
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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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?		0.000 4.004
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Trade unions in South Ossetia largely defer to the policies of the de facto leadership. In 2022, a local business association called for cooperation and support from the newly elected president, reporting that the outgoing administration had failed to engage with it in recent years.

F Rule of Law

F1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?		0.000 4.004
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South Ossetia's judiciary is not independent. The justice system is manipulated to punish perceived opponents of the government. In 2019, a court handed former official Georgy Kabisov an eight-year prison term on embezzlement-related charges. The case was seen as heavily manipulated due

to personal disputes between Kabisov and then president Bibilov. Almost immediately after Gagloyev was sworn in as president in May 2022, a local court set Kabisov free.

In June 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 refused to cooperate with the ICC.

F2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	0.000 4.004
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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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	0.000 4.004
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Physical abuse and poor conditions are reportedly common in prisons and detention centers. At court sessions, prisoners often speak about floods and freezing temperatures at an old building that was originally intended to serve only as a temporary detention center. 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.

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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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. There are no initiatives to recognize or support the rights of LGBT+ people.

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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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. Crossings were

closed for most of 2021, in part due to COVID-19, but separate crossings into Russia remained open throughout that year.

In August 2022, South Ossetian officials agreed to open the 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 of the previous three years.

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?	0.000
	4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

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.

G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	0.000
	4.004

Economic opportunity has been limited by factors including the separatist government's lack of international recognition and related controls on movement and commerce. Residents living along the de facto administrative border face economic uncertainty due to unpredictable closures and changes in the boundary's exact location.