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Freedom in the World 2016 - Abkhazia

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Freedom Status: Partly Free

Aggregate Score: 42

Freedom Rating: 4.5

Political Rights: 4

Civil Liberties: 5

Quick Facts

Capital: N/A

Population: 242,826

GDP/capita: N/A

Press Freedom Status: N/A

Net Freedom Status: N/A

OVERVIEW

During a tumultuous year, parties opposed to Abkhaz president Raul Khajimba coalesced in a new Bloc of Opposition Forces of Abkhazia. Its leading member party, Amtsakhara, demanded Khajimba's resignation at a party congress in October 2015, saying he had failed to fulfill campaign promises.

In June, Russia delayed financial aid to Abkhazia, saying the funds were contingent on the ratification of a controversial section of a 2014 treaty that would establish a coordination center between Moscow and Abkhazia's interior ministries. The provision was heavily criticized domestically, with opponents claiming that its terms served to expand Russian influence in Abkhazia.

In 2015, officials began a process of issuing new Abkhaz passports, requiring residents to exchange existing documents for new ones. During this process, the passports of around 22,000 ethnic Georgians in the Gali region are expected to be invalidated.

At the end of 2015, only Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and the Pacific Island state of Nauru recognized Abkhazia's independence from Georgia.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 19 / 40 (+1)*A. Electoral Process: 6 / 12*

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. 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 2014, following the resignation of President Aleksandr Ankvab amid widespread public protests. 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.

Four candidates competed for the presidency. Khajimba, who had run in three previous presidential elections, won with 51 percent of the vote, followed by the former leader of the State Security Service, Aslan Bzhania, with 36 percent. Former defense minister Mirab Kishmaria captured approximately 6 percent, and former interior minister Leonid Dzapshba won over 3 percent of the vote.

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 Georgians' 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

Political opposition groups in Abkhazia are active. In 2014, growing opposition cooperation culminated in the protest actions of the Coordinating Council, which drew together a broad range of opposition parties representing different political beliefs. The wave of protests organized by the group that year led to Ankvab's resignation and the subsequent presidential election.

A political standoff between Khajimba and opposition members emerged in early 2015, only months after his inauguration, leading to a significant reorganization of Abkhazia's political landscape. In January, the opposition party Amtsakhara, which had supported Ankvab, released a sharply worded statement criticizing Khajimba's record on implementing preelection promises. Then, in May, Amtsakhara adopted a resolution criticizing Khajimba on a number of counts, including economic and budgetary mismanagement, corruption, and ceding too much control to Moscow – mirroring the criticisms leveled against Ankvab by the Coordinating Council in 2014 –

and demanding the replacement of Khajimba's government with an opposition-led coalition government. In June, ostensibly in response to the opposition's demands, the Abkhaz parliament passed over 40 draft laws, which included provisions on reforming election laws as well as the judiciary, media, and banking system.

By mid-July, Amsakhara had joined three other political groups to form the Bloc of Opposition Forces of Abkhazia. During a party meeting in October 2015, about 3,000 Amsakhara members issued a vote of no confidence in Khajimba, and called on him to resign. In response, Khajimba pledged to remain in office until his term's end in 2019. He additionally established a consultative council open to all parties, but Amsakhara and the other groups comprising the Bloc of Opposition Forces of Abkhazia refused to participate.

In 2015, Abkhazia began a process of issuing new Abkhaz passports, requiring residents to exchange existing documents for new ones. During this process, the passports of around 22,000 ethnic Georgians in the Gali region are expected to be declared invalid. According to a new provision, Gali Georgians holding dual citizenship with Georgia are only eligible to receive residence permits, effectively stripping them of Abkhaz citizenship. Under an Abkhaz law on foreign citizenship adopted in December 2015, individuals holding residence permits may not vote or own property.

C. Functioning of Government: 5 / 12 (+1)

The ability of elected authorities to set and implement policies is limited by the influence of Moscow, which funds a significant portion of the state budget, has paid for construction and refurbishments of military and other infrastructure in Abkhazia, and in 2015 had several thousand troops permanently stationed in the territory. However, there has been significant pushback against a 2014 Russian-Abkhaz treaty, provisions of which critics say threaten Abkhaz autonomy.

The treaty, signed in 2014 and ratified by Moscow in January 2015, 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; its terms also state that Russia will respond to an attack on Abkhazia as an attack on itself. The 2014 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 members of the Abkhaz military and government, in addition to the Abkhaz opposition and civil society. Critics argued that the terms infringe on Abkhaz autonomy, a complaint Amsakhara cited as a precipator of its October 2015 call for Khajimba's resignation.

In June 2015, Russian officials announced that it would make the payment of pledged financial aid contingent on the ratification of a controversial section of the treaty that would establish a coordination center between Moscow and Abkhazia's interior ministries. The ultimatum was widely condemned in Abkhazia, and prompted concerns that Russian authorities ultimately sought to annex the region. Abkhaz lawmakers had not ratified the section of the treaty at the year's end, and Moscow had not released funds it attached to the ratification.

Corruption is believed to be extensive, and government officials are not required to provide declarations of income.

Civil Liberties: 23 / 60

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 and opposition have criticized Khajimba since 2014 for failing to reform AGTRK; critics argue among other things that it fails to air material that could be perceived as unflattering to the government. In 2015, about 1,200 people signed a petition calling for the resignation of AGTRK head Emma Khojava, which Khajimba rejected.

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*. The internet and social media platforms have become increasingly popular in recent years. Some legal restrictions apply to both traditional and online media, including criminal libel statutes.

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 are allowed to practice freely, but some Muslim leaders have been attacked in the past. Jehovah's Witnesses were banned by a 1995 decree.

Armenian-language schools generally operate without interference, but Gali's schools are officially allowed to offer instruction only in Russian. Ethnic Georgian residents without Abkhaz passports are restricted from attending Sukhumi State University.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 6 / 12

Opposition and civil society groups mount regular protests. Although most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rely on funding from outside Abkhazia, the NGO sector exerts significant influence on government policies.

F. Rule of Law: 4 / 16

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. Prison facilities are reportedly insufficient.

In January 2015, five people, including a Russian border guard, were killed during a police response to the alleged kidnapping of a Gali resident.

Galien ethnic Georgian residents continue to suffer from widespread poverty and undefined legal status. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people do not enjoy comprehensive legal protections.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16

Travel and choice of residence are limited by the ongoing separatist dispute. 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.

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, and some ethnic Russians have reported that their homes have been confiscated.

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. NGOs have expressed concern about human trafficking in Abkhazia.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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