

South Ossetia*

NOT FREE

10
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	2 / ₄₀
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	8 / ₆₀

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

10 /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

The numerical scores and status listed here do not reflect conditions in Georgia, which is examined in a separate report. *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](#).

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 many 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 Russia, and Moscow 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.

Key Developments in 2020

- The suspicious death of a local resident, Inal Dzhabiev, at the Tshkhinvali detention center in August provoked street protests and led to a number of resignations in the government. The demonstrations went forward without interference from authorities, marking a tentative break from the restrictive environment of past years.
- Citing a need to sustain contact exclusively with Russia, and no states or institutions that did not recognize the sovereignty of South Ossetia, authorities refused to accept support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and UN agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic—despite shortages of protective equipment and other supplies.
- For almost the entire year, the local leadership kept border crossings with Georgia proper closed, leading to shortages and restricted access to emergency medical care for many ethnic Georgians living in the region.

- The South Ossetian journalist and activist Tamara Mearakishvili continued to face harassment from authorities.

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?

0 / 4

Although South Ossetia's elections occur 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 most recent presidential election, in April 2017, former military leader Anatoly Bibilov was elected to a five-year term with 58 percent of the vote; he defeated the incumbent, Leonid Tibilov, who took 30 percent, and State Security Committee (KGB) official Alan Gagloyev, who took 11 percent.

Political analysts said that the conduct of the 2017 election was an improvement on the 2011 poll, the results of which had been disputed. Nevertheless, political debate and competition only occurred within a narrow field of candidates allowed by Russia and pro-Russian authorities.

A2 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

In June 2019, residents of South Ossetia elected parliamentarians through a new voting system: half of the 34 seats went to political parties in a proportional representation system, and the remaining spots were designated to single-member constituencies. Legislative elections are not internationally recognized, and the extent of Russian influence in the territory's politics precludes truly competitive contests.

The parliamentary elections yielded some positive developments. In contrast to previous years, political parties reported few problems with registration, campaigned in the region, and took part in televised debates. However, more than half of the candidates for the single-member constituencies, mainly private individuals, were unable to register their candidacies. The United Ossetia party of President Bibilov won 14 seats, followed by the Unity of the People party with 5 seats, and the Nykhas movement with 4 seats. Smaller parties captured the remainder.

A3 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

According to electoral laws, candidates must have permanently resided in South Ossetia for 10 years. Authorities continue to restrict voting rights of ethnic Georgian residents remaining in South Ossetia. Russian political influence undermines the independence of the election commission.

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

Moscow exerts a decisive influence over politics and governance, effectively placing significant restrictions on the ability of political parties outside of a narrow political spectrum to operate freely. However, a number of new parties have registered over the past decade, including the ruling United Ossetia, which has governed the territory since winning the most seats in the 2014 elections. United Ossetia controls the local Ministry of Justice and thus oversees the party registration processes. The body has

inspected party-member lists, but upon identifying mistakes has allowed parties to resolve them without negative consequences for elections.

However, individual candidates have faced difficulties registering with the Central Election Commission (CEC) to participate in elections. Ahead of the June 2019 parliamentary polls, a number of opposition politicians and individuals responded to new legislation that allowed both proportional representation and single-member constituencies (decided by a “first-past-the-post” or majoritarian election). Ninety-nine candidates applied to stand in the elections for single-member constituencies, but only 39 received approval from the CEC to register, and appeals of CEC decisions were unsuccessful.

B2 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

While Bibilov, the opposition candidate, challenged and defeated the incumbent in the 2017 presidential election, the success or failure of opposition politicians is largely determined by Moscow. South Ossetian government sources implied that banned presidential candidate Kokoity was not in Moscow’s favor. Opposition lawmakers have some influence in the legislature, and criticize the ruling party on occasion.

In September 2020, mass street rallies provoked by the suspicious death in August of a local resident, Inal Dzhabiev, while in police custody at the Tskhinvali detention center led to widespread calls for Bibilov’s resignation. Around that time, local law enforcement conducted surprise searches at the office of the main opposition party, Nykhas, and at the private home of its leader. Most opposition parliamentarians have boycotted parliamentary sessions since early September, demanding the resignation of the general prosecutor in order to ensure a transparent investigation into Dzhabiev’s death.

B3. 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

South Ossetia’s institutions are almost entirely dependent on economic and political support from Moscow. There are few avenues for people to meaningfully participate

in political processes if they wish to advocate for interests that fall outside of the narrow political spectrum defined by Russia and the territory's Russian-aligned authorities and their private business interests.

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

While the South Ossetian government includes several women ministers, the interests of women and minority groups are not represented politically. Most ethnic Georgian residents have either declined or 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

The ability of elected officials to determine and implement policy is heavily influenced by the Russian government. A sweeping 2015 treaty between Russia and South Ossetia closely integrates the territory's defense, security, and customs mechanisms with those of Russia, charging Moscow with protection of South Ossetia's borders. Russian aid comprises almost the entirety of South Ossetia's budget. Private emails leaked in 2016 that were apparently tied to a senior Kremlin adviser described Moscow-based working groups that reviewed legislation drafted by the authorities in Tskhinvali. Media reports detailing the increasingly important role of South Ossetia as a conduit for funds from Russia to the breakaway territories of eastern Ukraine continue to surface; details of the reports reflect the ability of Russian authorities to shape South Ossetia's financial and business regulations and infrastructure to serve their own purposes. Like his predecessors, many of Bibilov's ministerial appointments are of Russian citizens, and Bibilov has spoken repeatedly of formally uniting the territory with Russia's North Ossetia-Alania or joining the Russian Federation as a separate region.

During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, Bibilov declined humanitarian support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations agencies, citing a need to sustain contact exclusively with Russia, and no states or institutions that did not recognize the sovereignty of South Ossetia. This effectively left South Ossetian medical institutions with a shortage of protective equipment, medication, and disinfectants.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

0 / 4

Official corruption is widespread in South Ossetia, and there is little to no systematic attempt to fight it. However, a rare parliamentary review of the presidential fund in June 2020 identified purchases of luxury cars for parliamentarians and officials loyal to the president and United Ossetia. Soon after, in July, parliament adopted and the president signed a new law that introduced annual declarations for all civil servants and restrictions on conflicts of interest. Adoption of the law was delayed for five years.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

0 / 4

Due in large part to the significant level of Russian influence on domestic politics and decision-making, South Ossetia's government does not operate with transparency. Officials have not identified a lack of transparency as a policy priority.

ADDITIONAL DISCRETIONARY POLITICAL RIGHTS QUESTION:

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 / 0

During the 2008 war, Ossetian forces seized or razed property in previously Georgian-controlled villages, and large numbers of ethnic Georgians fled the fighting. Authorities in South Ossetia have since barred ethnic Georgians from returning to the territory 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 local residents have largely stabilized since the war, particularly due to the absence of open conflict across the administrative line separating the territory from Georgia. Nevertheless, the weeks-long restrictions of movement between the territory and Georgia proper in January and September 2019 provoked a temporary rush of dozens of fleeing ethnic Georgians fearful of permanent closure of crossing points. A similar outflow of local Georgians took place in January 2020, when region's leadership agreed to open crossings with Georgia proper for 10 days: people left for Georgia, many due to hardships and shortages caused by border closures.

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 authorities. Self-censorship is pervasive, and defamation charges are often employed against critical media. An increasing number of residents rely on online outlets for news and other information, and foreign media, including broadcasts from Russia and Georgia, remain accessible. The local version of Russian news portal Sputnik, accessible in both Russian and Ossetian, is increasingly popular.

Social media platforms are also popular among the region's residents, who maintain both public and private groups to discuss politics and everyday problems. Some discussions attract parliamentarians, officials, and even President Bibilov. People mainly use mobile internet, which is of a low speed and relatively expensive, but still accessible to many users.

In 2020, authorities continued to press charges against Tamara Mearakishvili, a journalist and activist who works with Georgian and international media outlets including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). After the South Ossetian Supreme Court dismissed three previous criminal accusations against Mearakishvili in July 2019 (concerning illegal acquisition of documents and defamation), Mearakishvili has stated that authorities continued to harass her and to demand her imprisonment. In January 2020, the Supreme Court overturned its 2019 verdict and returned Mearakishvili's case to the first instance court for retrial. In September, the prosecutor's office cut off the electricity at Mearakishvili's apartment for almost a month, claiming she owed a payment from 2017. The issue was resolved at the request of the region's parliamentarians.

Prominent journalist Irina Kelekhsaeva also faced possible criminal charges related to her work. In January 2020, the Justice Minister sued Kelekhsaeva for defamation for a 2019 RFE/RL story on poor conditions and abuses in prisons. The case was sent to the prosecutor general office's for review in February.

D2 0-4 pts

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

1/4

While the majority of the population is Orthodox Christian, there is a sizeable Muslim community. Followers of Russian Orthodoxy and Ossetian neopaganism also inhabit the territory. Some property of the Georgian Orthodox Church is controlled by the South Ossetian Orthodox Church (called the Eparchy).

In 2017, South Ossetia's de facto Supreme Court outlawed Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" organization; the group had been banned in Russia earlier that year.

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. In 2017, the ministry of education began to phase out Georgian-language education, and this process continued throughout 2020. In February 2020, Nino Amiranashvili, the director of a Georgian school, lost her job after she refused to expel five ethnic Georgian students who had enrolled in 2019. She appealed this decision in court, which ruled in July against her dismissal, asked the government to reinstate her, and ordered that she be compensated for lost wages and moral damages.

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

Private discussion is constrained by the sensitivity of certain topics, particularly the territory's geopolitical standing. Speaking of the property rights and expulsion of the Georgian population is assumed to attract unwanted attention.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

2 / 4

Residents occasionally demonstrate against environmental degradation, the sluggish pace of postwar reconstruction, animal rights, and, more rarely, overtly political grievances. However, in past years, freedom of assembly has been strictly limited. Participants in unsanctioned gatherings risk being charged with crimes, and authorities have responded to demonstrations by closing roads and deploying security forces to patrol.

However, an antigovernment protest movement that emerged in 2020 proceeded without interference from authorities, marking a tentative break from the restrictive environment of past years. In late August, the death in police custody of local resident Inal Dzhabiev, 28, who had been detained for alleged involvement in a gunfire attack on the interior minister's vehicle, provoked mass protests in the Tskhinvali central square. Photos of his corpse depicting extensive bruises were widely shared on social media, providing apparent evidence for accusations that he had been tortured. Thousands turned out to demand the resignation of the president and punishment of those responsible for the death; Dzhabiev's funeral, at the end of August, turned into the largest mass protest seen in the region in years. Protests continued into September, when supporters of both the opposition and the president held rallies, and beginning in December, relatives and friends of Dzhabiev held a nonstop protest and vigil in Tskhinvali's central square demanding punishment of those responsible for the death. Police made no attempts to prevent or disperse any of these rallies throughout the year. A number of senior officials, including the prime minister and interior minister, resigned amid the movement, though not the president, who promised a transparent investigation.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because large antigovernment protests over the suspicious death of a young man in police custody proceeded without interference from the authorities.

E2 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that operate in the territory are subject to government influence and, by extension, influence from Russia. Legislative amendments in 2014 increased the oversight capacity of authorities over NGO activity, subjecting organizations that receive foreign funding to broader and more frequent reporting requirements and branding them “foreign partners.” In recent years, a handful of organizations have officially received funding from Russia, while at least one took part in a United Nations–run project. NGOs engaged in conflict resolution and reconciliation are smeared by the authorities and progovernment media as agents of Tbilisi or western intelligence services.

E3 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

Trade unions in South Ossetia largely defer to the policies of the separatist government. Conflict with Georgia has left trade unions weak and geographically divided.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0 / 4

South Ossetia's judiciary is not independent. The justice system is manipulated to punish perceived opponents of the separatist leadership. In July 2019, after more than a year in pretrial detention, a local court sentenced former official Georgy Kabisov, accused of embezzlement of state funds, to seven years in prison. The case is seen as highly political due to personal problems between Kabisov and President Bibilov. Later in July 2019, the court launched a closed-door investigation into the case of an official in the presidential administration, Sergey Lipin, as well as Lipin's wife and two administrators of a local computer center: all were accused of state espionage for the Georgian government. In July 2020, Lipin and his wife were sentenced to 16 and 13 years in prison, respectively, for treason.

In 2020, President Bibilov further consolidated his control over the courts, proposing to replace a number of district judges. Despite criticism of the opposition, the parliament approved the president's proposal.

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. Government allies reportedly continue to violate the law with relative impunity. Russian prosecutors have attempted to curb malfeasance by local officials, but the Russian court system itself remains deeply flawed.

Criminal prosecutions are used to punish activists and individuals that question or inconvenience the authorities, as reflected by multiple criminal accusations made against journalist Kelekhsaeva and activist and journalist Mearakishvili. In April 2019, a Russian businessman, Kurban Bugarov, who had received no repayment for massive public works projects completed over the previous decade, became the focus of a criminal investigation by the office of the prosecutor general, despite no apparent evidence of wrongdoing. The investigation appears to be a means for the South Ossetian government to avoid payment for the public infrastructure projects completed by Bugarov's company.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

0 / 4

Victims of human rights violations committed during the 2008 conflict have few avenues for legal recourse. Physical abuse and poor conditions are reportedly common in prisons and detention centers. At court sessions, prisoners often speak about floods and freezing conditions at an old building that was built decades ago merely as a temporary detention center, and not as a long-term prison. In October 2019, 56 inmates of the only local prison located in Tskhinvali went on hunger strike with the demand for better food and more opportunities to exercise. Negotiations with the local justice minister ended with the prisoners being physically assaulted, which was filmed by CCTV cameras, leaked, and shared widely on social media.

In late August 2020, after Inal Dzhabiev died while in police custody, photos of his corpse that circulated on social media depicted extensive bruises. Two detainees implicated alongside Dzhabiev in a gunfire attack on the interior minister's vehicle were released after promising not to leave the region; one of them could not walk after leaving the detention center and spent weeks undergoing medical care. At least eight police officers were detained on charges related to Dzhabiev's death. The opposition and Dzhabiev's family rejected investigations by local officials.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

1 / 4

Discrimination against ethnic Georgians continues. Reports of arbitrary discrimination and detention of ethnic Georgians continue to arise. There are no initiatives to support the rights of LGBT+ people.

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?

0 / 4

Restrictions on freedom of movement between South Ossetia and Georgia proper remain in place. In 2019, border crossings were closed for long periods with no prior notification with one action ostensible to prevent the spread of influenza prompting denunciations by the European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and UN mediators.

The crossings were closed for most of 2020, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Security services granted almost no requests to cross into Georgia proper, even for people with emergency health problems. The Georgian government reported that at least 16 people had died by mid-November due to a lack of timely medical assistance. Crossings into Russia were also restricted at times due to the pandemic.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to arbitrary restrictions on travel across both the Russian border and the de facto border with government-controlled Georgia, resulting in denial of access to life-saving medical care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

G2 0-4 pts

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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 protections of property rights, particularly for residents close to the administrative border. The separatist authorities have consistently refused to countenance the return of ethnic Georgians expelled from their homes before or during the 2008 war. Small businesses risk being seized or subjected to predatory behavior by larger, more powerful corporations.

In July 2020, several businesses from Tskhinvali established a new association with their counterparts in Russia's North Ossetia, aimed at gaining additional authority and protections in light of new Russian customs regulations.

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' public appearance, statements by public officials reflect intolerance for behavior that deviates from the territory's conservative norms. No laws or government programs specifically protect victims of domestic violence.

G4 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

Economic opportunity is been limited by the territory's unrecognized status, among other reasons. Populations living along the administrative border with Georgia proper face economic uncertainty due to divisions created by shifting and uncertain borders.

On South Ossetia

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

11/100 Not Free

Other Years

2022

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