

# Georgia

PARTLY FREE

**58**  
/100

|                         |               |
|-------------------------|---------------|
| <u>Political Rights</u> | <b>22</b> /40 |
| <u>Civil Liberties</u>  | <b>36</b> /60 |

## LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

**58 /100**    **Partly Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



## Note

The numerical scores and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are examined in separate reports. *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

Georgia holds regular competitive elections and hosts lively media and civil society sectors. However, oligarchic influence affects the country's political affairs. Corruption in government persists and media freedom is undermined by intimidation and pressure against journalists. Executive and legislative interference in the courts remains a substantial problem, as does a lack of transparency and professionalism surrounding judicial proceedings.

## Key Developments in 2022

- The full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine dominated political discourse during the year. Georgian leaders offered mixed messages about support for Ukraine; for example, the prime minister announced that Georgia would not join sanctions against Russia, even as the National Bank enforced the sanctions. A significant influx of Russian migrants crossed the border into Georgia during the year.
- Together with Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia applied for European Union (EU) membership. The government established parliamentary committees to work on qualifications needed for candidate status; civil society representatives were excluded from the process.
- In July, former deputy director of the State Security Service of Georgia Ioseb Gogashvili publicly accused the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party of interfering with past elections by illegally offering pardons, lighter sentences, and opportunities to skip military service in exchange for votes. The country's top watchdog groups said documents Gogashvili had provided to them supported the claims. Police raided Gogashvili's home and arrested

him soon after he went public with the allegations, and charged him with leaking state secrets and illegal possession of firearms.

# 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?**

**2/4**

The prime minister serves as head of government and the president serves as head of state. Under constitutional changes approved in 2017, the president elected in 2018 is to serve a six-year term, after which a 300-member electoral college comprising national lawmakers and regional and local officials will choose presidents.

In 2018, Salome Zourabichvili, a former foreign minister supported by the Georgian Dream (GD) party, won about 60 percent of the vote in the second round of the presidential election, defeating Grigol Vashadze, a former foreign minister running for the opposition United National Movement (UNM). While the electoral environment was largely peaceful, significant preelectoral issues and voter intimidation on election day marred the quality of the runoff. Abuse of administrative resources and limited instances of vote buying and ballot-box stuffing were reported. GD activists created an intimidating atmosphere outside many voting stations. Just days before the runoff, a charitable foundation controlled by former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, then the GD chairman, promised to write off the debts of about one in six eligible voters.

In 2022, the International Society for Fair Elections And Democracy (ISFED) and the Georgian branch of Transparency International (TI), citing documents provided by the former deputy director of the State Security Service of Georgia, accused GD of illegal offering pardons and improperly pressuring state employees to the degree that it may have influenced the outcome of the 2018 presidential election and the 2020 parliamentary elections.

The president formally appoints the prime minister, whom Parliament nominates. Giorgi Gakharia, the prime minister since late 2019, resigned in February 2021, objecting to the arrest of UNM leader Nika Melia. Gakharia was succeeded by defense minister and former prime minister Irakli Gharibashvili.

**A2** 0-4 pts

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

**2 / 4**

The unicameral Parliament is composed of 150 members, with 120 selected through nationwide proportional representation and 30 directly elected in single-member districts. This system was introduced in 2020; previously, nearly half of lawmakers were elected in single-member districts. All members serve four-year terms.

In the October 2020 parliamentary elections and November runoffs, GD won 90 seats, including all 30 single-member district seats. The UNM-led coalition won 36 seats, all via proportional representation, and 7 smaller groups won the remaining seats. Opposition parties boycotted the runoff, and voter turnout for that election round stood at 26 percent, the lowest recorded since independence. Opposition members who were elected declined to take their seats until an agreement between the government and opposition was brokered with the support of European Council (EC) president Charles Michel in April 2021. GD withdrew from the agreement in July 2021, however. By the end of 2022 most politicians had taken their seats.

Election observers including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) considered the October 2020 vote competitive but noted numerous shortcomings, including ruling-party dominance in election commissions; voting stations crowded by party-affiliated observer groups, mostly linked to GD; campaign-finance rules that disadvantaged new and small parties; and highly polarized and nonanalytic media coverage. Additional claims of electoral malpractice benefitting the GD in the 2020 elections emerged in 2022 via a leak of documents from the former deputy director of the State Security Service.

**A3** 0-4 pts

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

**3/4**

The country's electoral laws are generally fair, and the bodies that implement them have typically done so impartially. However, GD's dominance in precinct-level commissions has complicated complaints procedures, and short timelines for filing complaints impair election quality.

New candidates for the Central Election Commission (CEC) were presented to parliament in August 2022, but at year's end lawmakers had failed to vote on their candidacy, in violation of legally defined timeframes.

## **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?**

**2/4**

While Georgia hosts a dynamic multiparty system, opposition parties can face barriers to political competition, including legal and other harassment.

In 2019, the bankers Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze were charged with money laundering two weeks after Khazaradze stated his intention to form a political party. (The party won four seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections.) The pair were convicted of fraud in January 2022 and handed seven-year prison sentences. However, a court commuted the sentences, saying the statute of limitations for fraud had expired.

**B2** 0-4 pts

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

**2/4**

Georgia last underwent a transfer of power between rival groups in 2012–13, when GD defeated the UNM in parliamentary and presidential elections. A faction of the UNM split off in 2017, leaving smaller parties that are less capable of mounting a credible challenge.

Voter intimidation and vote-buying activities inhibit the ability of opposition parties to gain power via elections. Opposition parties and members experienced significant intimidation and harassment in 2021. UNM leader Melia was arrested in February 2021 on charges related to antigovernment protests held in 2019, though he was released from pretrial detention in May. In September 2022, the television channel Pirveli, which is critical of the government, leaked documents its journalists said showed surveillance activity by the State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) against the UNM and other opposition parties.

**B3** 0-4 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 / 4**

Recent elections have featured allegations of various forms of vote buying and intimidation, including pressure on public employees and recipients of social benefits to support the ruling party. Wealthy unelected figures such as GD founder Bidzina Ivanishvili exert significant political influence.

**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?**

**2 / 4**

No laws prevent women or members of ethnic and religious minority groups from participating in politics. Electoral reforms introduced in 2020 included a gender quota for the proportional-representation component of parliamentary elections; at least one in every four candidates on a party's list must be a woman. Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented at all levels of government.

Although a woman became president in 2018, women won only 31 seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Ethnic minority groups make up an estimated 13 percent of the population, with ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis forming the largest communities. However, few parliamentarians are members of ethnic minority groups.

## 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?**

**2** / 4

The ability of elected officials to determine and implement government policy has been impaired by the informal role of so-called oligarchs, including Ivanishvili, who has exerted significant influence over decision-making since leaving office.

**C2** 0-4 pts

**Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?**

**2** / 4

Corruption persists in form of nepotism and cronyism in government hiring and procurement. The lack of independence among law enforcement bodies and the judiciary impedes the effective application of anticorruption laws. Successful cases against high-ranking officials and those close to them remain rare. The State Inspector's Service, a key body responsible for investigating official corruption, was disbanded in late 2021, with the initiative launched in the parliament as its outspoken leader was on maternity leave. An anticorruption body proposed in parliament in 2022 by GD was criticized by the opposition and good-governance groups over appointment procedures that failed to guarantee independence from the ruling party.

**C3** 0-4 pts

**Does the government operate with openness and transparency?**

**3** / 4

Government operations are generally subject to scrutiny by auditing bodies, the media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the public. However, access to public information remains uneven. While public officials declare assets, the Georgia chapter of Transparency International warned in 2020 that the monitoring of such declarations is inconsistent and does not focus on conflicts of interest or potential corruption.

## Civil Liberties

### D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

**D1** 0-4 pts

|                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| Are there free and independent media? | 2/4 |
|---------------------------------------|-----|

The media environment is pluralistic but highly partisan. Although free expression is broadly allowed, the government is often aggressive toward critical journalists, and has pressured unfriendly media outlets.

Formula TV faces a potential government takeover, as its partial owner and former defense minister Davit Kezerashvili has been sued for reparations to the Ministry of Defense over alleged corruption. In May 2022, Nika Gvaramia, head of the opposition television channel Mtavari Arkhi (Main Channel), was imprisoned on charges of abusing his position while working at Rustavi 2 TV station. The charges were widely viewed as politically motivated. Earlier, in January, the father of the founder of Pirveli TV was convicted of money laundering, in a case generally viewed as motivated by material on his son's television station. There continue to be reports of officials denying access to journalists critical of government.

The Ministry of Culture has increasingly been involved in efforts to suppress cultural expression. In 2022, the culture minister was accused of purging cultural institutions of employees for their views, with courts finding in favor of employees in wrongful dismissal lawsuits. The Georgian Film Academy decided not to show a

film critical of Ivanishvili, a decision widely believed to be the result of pressure from the ministry.

**D2** 0-4 pts

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

**2/4**

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion but grants unique privileges to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Georgia's religious minorities—among them Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims—have reported discrimination and hostility, including from Georgian Orthodox priests and adherents.

The State Security Service of Georgia surveilled members of the clergy, according to August 2021 press reports, with agents reportedly tracking their communications with journalists and diplomats as well as their personal activities.

**D3** 0-4 pts

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

**3/4**

Academic freedom is generally respected. However, school principals and teachers regularly face pressure to campaign for the ruling party during elections. Several institutions associated with the Turkish Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen have faced official pressure or even closure in recent years. (The Turkish government blames Gülen's movement for a 2016 coup attempt in Turkey.)

**D4** 0-4 pts

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

**2/4**

Georgians generally enjoy freedom of expression, including in their online communications. However, watchdog groups have expressed concerns that state agencies can conduct surveillance and data collection without adequate oversight. In 2022, the powers of security services to engage in surveillance expanded, while

checks on surveillance weakened under provisions of a controversial surveillance law.

In August 2021, the State Security Service was revealed to have engaged in widespread surveillance of public figures, including journalists, activists, clergy members, and politicians. Multiple individuals confirmed the authenticity of their conversations after they were leaked.

## E. Associational and Organizational Rights

**E1** 0-4 pts

|                               |       |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| Is there freedom of assembly? | 2 / 4 |
|-------------------------------|-------|

Freedom of assembly is upheld unevenly, with police sometimes responding to demonstrations with excessive force. In 2022, there were large-scale rallies in favor of Georgia's EU membership bid, and against the authorities for their failure to secure EU candidate status.

LGBT+ groups' right to assembly is rarely protected. In July 2021, anti-LGBT+ rioters met little resistance from police when they broke into the offices of Tbilisi Pride, destroying property and attacking journalists. The Pride rally did not take place in 2022.

**E2** 0-4 pts

|                                                                                                                                       |       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? | 3 / 4 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|

Civil society is fairly robust. Some groups are included in policy discussions, though others face political pressure including criticism and exclusion from policy dialogue. In December 2022, several parliamentarians proposed a “foreign agents” law that would place extra scrutiny on some civil society groups. In 2021, civil society advocates were revealed to be targets of state surveillance.

In 2022, the Georgian government established parliamentary groups to work on reforms necessary for EU candidacy status, but civil society groups were excluded from these processes.

**E3** 0-4 pts

|                                                                                           |            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?</b> | <b>2/4</b> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|

Workers are legally allowed to organize, bargain collectively, and strike, though there are some restrictions on the right to strike, including a ban on strikes by certain categories of workers. Legal protections against antiunion discrimination by employers are weak and poorly enforced in practice.

## F. Rule of Law

**F1** 0-4 pts

|                                           |            |
|-------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Is there an independent judiciary?</b> | <b>2/4</b> |
|-------------------------------------------|------------|

Despite ongoing judicial reforms, executive and legislative interference in the courts remains a substantial problem, as does a lack of transparency and professionalism surrounding judicial proceedings.

The High Council of Justice nominates Supreme Court judges; whom Parliament then approves. A judicial self-governing body elects most council members. Over the past five years, Supreme Court nominations have featured criticism of opaque processes and allegations of unqualified nominees, and consequent boycotts of confirmation votes by opposition lawmakers. In 2022, two judges considered close to the ruling party were elected to the High Council of Justice, following the sudden resignations of two other members. Their election was criticized by opposition parties as reflecting further capture of the judiciary by a small number of influential judges.

**F2** 0-4 pts

|                                                                |            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?</b> | <b>2/4</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------|

The law guarantees due process, but associated safeguards are not always respected. The ombudsman's office has reported a failure to fully implement Constitutional Court rulings on due process matters, administrative delays in court proceedings, the violation of the accused's right to a presumption of innocence, failure to observe rules surrounding detention and interrogation, and the denial of access to a lawyer upon arrest. Multiple government opponents have faced prosecutions in recent years that were widely seen as selective or politically motivated.

Former president Mikheil Saakashvili, who had been convicted of abuse of power in absentia in 2018, was arrested by Georgian authorities upon his return to Georgia in October 2021. Saakashvili was prohibited from attending several hearings related to new charges in 2021 and 2022.

**F3** 0-4 pts

|                                                                                                               |            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?</b> | <b>2/4</b> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|

Human rights watchdogs and the ombudsman have expressed concern about the physical abuse of detainees during arrest and in police custody, and have noted the lack of an independent system for supervising police conduct and addressing claims of mistreatment. Violence and harsh conditions in prisons remain problems.

A 2018 law established the State Inspector's Service (SIS), which was tasked with investigating police abuses. In December 2021, the government passed legislation to replace the SIS with two entities, which the state inspector described as "punishment of the service for its independence."

Former president Saakashvili faced apparent mistreatment after his October 2021 arrest. Not long after he was detained, the State Penitentiary Service (SPS) released footage of Saakashvili being physically dragged into a prison hospital, apparently against his will.

**F4** 0-4 pts

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

**2/4**

A 2014 law provides protection against discrimination based on various factors, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity, but it is enforced unevenly. Women and people with disabilities frequently experience employment discrimination.

LGBT+ people face societal discrimination and have been targets of serious violence. Transgender people receive little protection, and prosecutors rarely designate crimes against transgender people or other minorities as hate crimes, despite evidence supporting such designations.

## **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?**

**4/4**

There are ongoing restrictions on travel to and from the separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and individuals who approach their de facto borders can face detention, generally for short periods. Georgians are otherwise free to travel and change their place of residence, employment, and education without undue interference.

**G2** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?**

**3/4**

The legal framework and government policies are generally supportive of private business activity. However, protection for property rights remains weak, and deficiencies in judicial independence and government transparency hamper economic freedom.

**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?**

**3/4**

Personal social freedoms are generally respected. However, constitutional changes approved in 2017 define marriage as “a union between a man and a woman for the purpose of creating a family.” There is no law allowing civil unions for same-sex couples.

Domestic violence remains a problem in Georgia, and the response from police is often inadequate, though changing societal attitudes have contributed to more frequent reporting and some improvements in enforcement in recent years. Spousal rape is not specifically criminalized.

**G4** 0-4 pts

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

**2/4**

Unsafe conditions and inadequate legal protections for workers continue to contribute to a high rate of workplace deaths and injuries. In 2020, Parliament passed a labor reform law that introduced new rules for overtime, shift breaks, and other working conditions, while strengthening the labor inspector’s office.

Georgia is a source, destination, and transit country for human trafficking linked to sexual exploitation and forced labor. Displaced people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia are among the populations most vulnerable to trafficking. However, according to the US State Department’s *Trafficking in Persons Report 2022*, the government has continued its enforcement efforts and improved its performance on victim assistance.



## On Georgia

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### Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

**58/100**    **Partly Free**

Internet Freedom Score

**76/100**    **Free**

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