

Document #2046513

Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Georgia

PARTLY FREE

60

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 23 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 37 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

61 / 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 and competitive elections. Its democratic trajectory showed signs of improvement during the period surrounding a change in government in 2012–13, but recent years have featured backsliding. Oligarchic influence affects the country's political affairs, policy decisions, and media environment, and the rule of law is undermined by politicization. Civil liberties are inconsistently protected.

Key Developments in 2020

- Parliament introduced a new mixed electoral system in June, which was implemented in the elections held that autumn. Under the new system, most seats are filled through proportional representation, and the vote threshold for entering Parliament via proportional representation was lowered from 5 percent to 1 percent.
- The ruling Georgian Dream party won a third term in government in the October and November parliamentary elections, though the contest was marred by vote buying, instances of violence, and apparent tabulation errors that prompted an opposition boycott of the November runoff. Voter turnout in that round stood at 26 percent, the lowest since independence.
- Movement and travel restrictions were in force between March and May as part of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and were reintroduced in November as case counts rose. While the restrictions were largely proportionate to the threat, progovernment businesspeople notably won public-health procurement tenders as the pandemic progressed.

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

Georgia has a dual executive, with the prime minister serving as head of government and the president 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, an independent former foreign minister supported by Georgian Dream, 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 problems in the preelection period 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. Outside many voting stations, the presence of Georgian Dream activists created an intimidating atmosphere. Just days before the runoff, a charitable foundation controlled by former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, the Georgian Dream chairman, promised to write off the debts of over 600,000 Georgians—about one in six eligible voters.

The president formally appoints the prime minister, whom Parliament nominates. Giorgi Gakharia, the prime minister since September 2019, was reappointed in December 2020 after Georgian Dream won that year’s parliamentary elections.

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 June 2020; previously, nearly half of lawmakers were elected in single-member districts. All members serve four-year terms.

In the October parliamentary elections and November runoffs, Georgian Dream won 90 seats, including all 30 single-member district seats. The UNM-led coalition won 36, all via proportional representation, and seven smaller groups won the remaining seats. Election observers, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), considered the vote competitive but noted numerous shortcomings, including the use of administrative resources, vote buying, interference with observers, disorganized precinct-level electoral commissions, preelection violence, limited instances of election-day violence, violations of voting secrecy, and intimidation of government employees, party activists, and voters.

After the first round, preliminary Central Election Commission (CEC) figures showed some Georgian Dream candidates winning over 100 percent of the votes in their races, which the commission blamed on a technical error. A parallel tabulation from the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a nongovernmental organization (NGO), suggested major discrepancies, though ISFED disclosed an error in its own data in December.

In early November, opposition parties announced a boycott of that month’s runoff and refused to enter the new Parliament. Voter turnout for the runoff stood at 26 percent, the lowest recorded since independence. Georgian Dream responded in December by introducing legislation that would deny public funding and free media airtime to parties that boycott Parliament sessions. The public defender’s office and the US ambassador to Georgia criticized the bill, which remained under consideration at year’s end.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to significant shortcomings in the year’s elections, including voter intimidation, misuse of administrative resources, vote buying, election-related violence, and apparent tabulation discrepancies, which prompted opposition parties to boycott the runoff.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant 3 / 4 election management bodies?

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

The current electoral system for Parliament was introduced in June 2020 and implemented for the first time in the October and November elections. The new system expanded the use of proportional representation and reduced the vote threshold for entering Parliament via proportional representation from 5 percent to 1 percent.

Under 2017 constitutional amendments, Parliament was set to be elected through a fully proportional system beginning in 2024. Georgian Dream offered to accelerate the new system’s introduction after major protests in June 2019, but the necessary constitutional amendments were rejected in Parliament that November.

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 2 / 4 groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

Georgia hosts a dynamic multiparty system, and new political parties have often been able to form and operate without major obstacles. However, a pattern of single-party dominance since the 2000s has inhibited the development and stability of competing groups. In July 2019, Mamuka Khazaradze, the founder of one of Georgia’s largest banks, and his business partner were charged with money laundering two weeks after Khazaradze stated his intention to form a political party. That party, Lelo for Georgia, won four seats in the October and November 2020 parliamentary elections, though Khazaradze himself remained under investigation as recently as October.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through 3 / elections? 4

Georgia last underwent a peaceful transfer of power between rival groups in 2012–13, when Georgian Dream defeated the UNM in parliamentary and presidential elections. A faction of the UNM split off in 2017, leaving behind two smaller parties that were less capable of mounting a credible opposition challenge. Georgian Dream won most mayoral and gubernatorial posts, including the Tbilisi mayoralty, that year.

While smaller parties could more easily enter Parliament in 2020 due to the new 1 percent vote threshold, their fragmentation limits their ability to form coalitions and attain power.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political 2 / sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 4

Ivanishvili, the wealthy businessman who founded Georgian Dream in 2011, resigned as party chairman and premier in 2013, but remained the party's primary financial backer and continued to control it informally. His successors as prime minister and party chairman were close confidants and former employees. Ivanishvili was reelected as chairman of Georgian Dream at a party congress in 2018, and he remained in that post at the end of 2020.

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.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other 2 / relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

No laws prevent women or ethnic and religious minorities from participating in politics. Electoral reforms introduced in June 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 and minority groups and their interests remain underrepresented at all levels of government. Although a woman did become 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. Some 17 candidates from these groups ran in the 2020 elections, though only a fraction of them won seats.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies 2 / of the government? 4

The ability of elected officials to determine and implement government policy is impaired by the informal role of Ivanishvili, who holds no government office but exerts significant influence over executive and legislative decision-making. His de facto authority was demonstrated in 2018, when Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili resigned due to disagreements with Ivanishvili.

Ivanishvili's policy influence has also been visible in the authorities' generally favorable treatment of his financial and business interests, and in particular the multibillion-dollar Georgian Co-Investment Fund (GCF), which was unveiled in 2013 and is active in large real-estate development projects in Tbilisi.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

While petty corruption has become less common, corruption within government persists. In some cases, it has allegedly taken the form of nepotism or cronyism in government hiring and procurement. Effective application of anticorruption laws and regulations is impaired by a lack of independence among law enforcement bodies and the judiciary, and successful cases against high-ranking officials who are on good terms with the Georgian Dream leadership remain rare.

Businesspeople with links to Georgian Dream received COVID-19-related public contracts during 2020; between April and June, a contributor to President Zourabichvili's campaign received several tenders, including a \$1.3 million deal with the Health Ministry. In April, a firm owned by another party supporter secured a contract to produce four million face masks for a foundation controlled by Ivanishvili.

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, civil society organizations, and the public. However, the Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information, a Georgian advocacy group, reports that access to public information has been uneven since 2010. While public officials do declare assets, the Georgia chapter of Transparency International (TI) warned in September 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 partisan. The public broadcaster has been accused of favoring the government. Several staff members at Adjara TV and Radio, a publicly funded regional outlet, were dismissed or reassigned between March and July 2020 after Georgian Dream criticized the outlet’s editorial stance and employees protested over political interference; at least some of the affected staff members were later reinstated after further protests.

In July 2019, a long-running legal dispute over the ownership of the opposition-aligned television station Rustavi 2 was decided at the European Court of Human Rights, leading to the station being transferred to a former owner who was more sympathetic to Georgian Dream. A newly appointed director then dismissed key employees. A large share of the staff quit to join a new station, Mtavari Arkhi (Main Channel), which began broadcasting in September 2019. Its founder, Giorgi Rurua, was subsequently arrested on gun possession charges, which were considered to be politically motivated, that November. Rurua received a four-year prison term in July 2020.

In December 2019, Facebook announced that it had taken down hundreds of Georgian accounts and pages for fraudulently posing as media outlets and news organizations. Their content supported the Georgian Dream government, and Facebook traced them to the government and a Georgian advertising agency. In May 2020, ISFED identified continued inauthentic pro-Georgian Dream social media activity.

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. COVID-19-related gathering restrictions were not enforced against the church, though many congregants reportedly did not attend church ceremonies.

Georgia’s religious minorities—among them Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Muslims—have reported discrimination and hostility, including from Georgian Orthodox priests and adherents, and are insufficiently protected by the state.

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, in August 2018, Georgian authorities froze the assets of the International Black Sea University and prevented it from accepting students for the new academic year, citing tax arrears that were allegedly owed by the institution. The asset freeze was eventually lifted that October after the debt was paid, though the university maintained that the tax claim was unlawful. The university is associated with the movement led by Turkish Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen, which the Turkish government has declared a terrorist organization. In 2017, Georgian authorities closed two schools associated with the movement, citing regulatory violations. The seemingly disproportionate and arbitrary nature of the enforcement actions raised suspicions that they were carried out under Turkish pressure.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 3 / 4

Georgians generally enjoy freedom of expression, including in their online communications. However, watchdog groups have expressed concerns in recent years that various security-related laws empower state agencies to conduct surveillance and data collection without adequate oversight. A 2017 law created a new electronic surveillance agency under the umbrella of the State Security Service that would have the authority to fine service providers for failure to cooperate with its work. Privacy advocates questioned whether the law complied with earlier Constitutional Court rulings on state surveillance.

In recent years, multiple public figures—including opposition and ruling party politicians—have been subjected to intimidation through the threatened or actual release of surreptitiously recorded sex videos, contributing to an atmosphere that deters free expression on politics.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 2 / 4

Freedom of assembly is often respected, but police sometimes respond to demonstrations with excessive force. In November 2020, the police used water cannons to disperse largely peaceful demonstrators protesting apparent electoral violations outside the CEC building in Tbilisi. The public defender’s office and other watchdogs called the use of water cannons excessive and illegal.

Water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets were previously used in June 2019, when protesters attempted to enter the Parliament building after a Russian lawmaker appeared in the speaker’s chair to address an Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy meeting. Hundreds of people were injured. Police also used water cannons and tear gas to disperse protesters gathered outside Parliament that November, after the body failed to pass electoral reforms.

Separately in 2019, the government declined to guarantee protection for a planned LGBT+ pride rally in Tbilisi. In 2020, right-wing protesters gathered outside the offices of an LGBT+ pride organization and reportedly vandalized the building's exterior.

E2 0-4 pts

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

The civil society sector is fairly robust. Some groups are included in policy discussions, though others report facing political pressure, largely in the form of public criticism by government officials and opposition figures.

In January 2020, the judge presiding over the case against Giorgi Rurua refused an amicus curiae brief offered by the TI chapter in Georgia. The organization criticized the judge's conduct in a September statement, accusing him of demonstrating progovernment bias.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4

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

Is there an independent judiciary? 2 / 4

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.

Under the constitutional framework that took effect after the 2018 presidential election, the High Council of Justice rather than the president nominates Supreme Court judges; Parliament then approves the judges. A judicial self-governing body elects most council members. In December 2018, the council presented a list of Supreme Court nominees, but a coalition of NGOs argued that it had used an opaque process and selected judges with tainted reputations. Later that month, the head of the legal affairs committee in Parliament resigned to protest what she called the "hasty and unacceptable" nomination process. In December 2019, Parliament ultimately confirmed 14 Supreme Court justices, though opposition members refused to participate. Observers from the Council of Europe and other institutions criticized the appointments, saying the candidates did not demonstrate the requisite knowledge or impartiality to serve.

Parliament passed further judicial reforms in September 2020, preempting an opinion from the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. In an October statement, the council's representatives noted that some of its recommendations had been implemented, but criticized Parliament's decision to preempt the review, which the government had requested.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 2 / 4

The law guarantees due process, but the related safeguards are not always respected. The office of the country's public defender, or ombudsperson, has reported problems including 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. A number of perceived opponents of the government have faced prosecutions in recent years that were widely seen as selective or politically motivated.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4

Human rights watchdogs and the ombudsperson continue to express 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. A 2018 law established a new state inspector's office tasked with investigating police abuses, but it is not independent from the prosecutor's office, a shortcoming that drew criticism from human rights groups. The new office went into operation in November 2019. Violence and harsh conditions in prisons remain a problem.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

A 2014 antidiscrimination law provides protection against discrimination on the basis of various factors, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity, but it is enforced unevenly. Women and people with disabilities suffer from discrimination in employment, among other problems. LGBT+ people face societal discrimination and are occasionally the targets of serious violence. Transgender people in particular 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, 4 / employment, or education? 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. A COVID-19-related state of emergency from March to May 2020 included a curfew and transportation restrictions; similar rules were reintroduced in November and remained in force through year's end, as cases of the virus increased. Nevertheless, the constraints were largely proportionate to the public health threat, and 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 3 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 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, 3 / protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 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, notably in the country's mines, though the number of such incidents has fallen in recent years. The number of workplace deaths reached 59 in 2018 before slipping to 38 in 2019 and 22 in the first nine months of 2020. In September, 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, and displaced people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia are among the populations most vulnerable to trafficking. However, according to the US State Department's latest *Trafficking in Persons Report*, the government continued its enforcement efforts and improved its performance on victim identification.

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