



Freedom in the World 2013 - Abkhazia

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2013 Scores

Status: Partly Free
Freedom Rating: 4.5
Civil Liberties: 5
Political Rights: 4

Ratings Change

Abkhazia's political rights rating improved from 5 to 4 due to genuinely competitive parliamentary elections that allowed a shift toward independent candidates and away from either government or opposition parties.

Overview

President Aleksandr Ankvab survived an assassination attempt in February 2012. Four suspects were arrested in April, and a former interior minister accused of masterminding the attack reportedly committed suicide before he could be detained. In March, Abkhazia held parliamentary elections that marked a shift toward independent candidates, with only three ruling party and four opposition party candidates winning seats in the 35-member People's Assembly.

Annexed by Russia in 1864, Abkhazia became an autonomous republic within Soviet Georgia in 1930. After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia in 1992, leading to a year-long war that left thousands dead and displaced more than 200,000 residents, mainly ethnic Georgians. Abkhaz forces won de facto independence for the republic in 1993, and an internationally brokered cease-fire was signed in Moscow in 1994.

Incumbent Abkhaz president Vladislav Ardzinba ran unopposed for reelection in 1999, and a reported 98 percent of voters supported independence in a concurrent referendum. Deputies loyal to Ardzinba won all 35 seats in the 2002 parliamentary elections after the opposition withdrew to protest bias by the election commission and state-backed media.

Under pressure from a powerful opposition movement, Prime Minister Gennady Gagulia resigned in April 2003 and was succeeded by Defense Minister Raul Khadjimba, though Ardzinba refused to step down as president.

An opposition candidate, former prime minister Sergei Bagapsh, defeated Khadjimba in the December 2004 presidential election, but was pressured into a January 2005 rerun with Khadjimba – who was backed by Ardzinba and Moscow – as his vice presidential running mate. The new ticket won the rerun with 91 percent of the vote.

Members of three pro-Bagapsh parties captured more than 20 seats in the 2007 parliamentary elections, and a number of opposition candidates also won seats, despite claims that Bagapsh interfered with the electoral process.

After years of rising tension, war broke out in August 2008 between Georgian forces on one side and Russian, South Ossetian, and Abkhaz forces on the other. Although the brief conflict centered on South Ossetia, another Russian-backed Georgian territory that had won de facto independence in the early 1990s, Abkhaz troops succeeded in capturing the Kodori Gorge, the only portion of Abkhazia still under Georgian control, and additional territory on the Georgian-Abkhaz border.

In late August, following a French-brokered cease-fire, Russia formally recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, though nearly all of the international community continued to view the territories as de jure parts of Georgia. Abkhaz authorities subsequently signed a series of new military and economic agreements with Russia.

Bagapsh won reelection in December 2009, capturing more than 59 percent of the vote. Khadjimba placed a distant second with just 15 percent. Though all five candidates reportedly endorsed Russia's preeminent role in the territory, Abkhaz opposition journalists and politicians, led by Khadjimba, accused the government of ceding undue control to Moscow.

In May 2011, Bagapsh died unexpectedly after surgery, leading to a snap presidential election in August between Vice President Aleksandr Ankvab, Prime Minister Sergei Shamba, and Khadjimba, running as an opposition candidate. Amid 70 percent turnout, Ankvab won with 55 percent of the vote, followed by Shamba with 21 percent and Khadjimba with 19.5 percent. The election was considered genuinely competitive, and Moscow did not publicly endorse a candidate, but all three promised to maintain strong ties with Russia.

Ankvab survived an assassination attempt in February 2012, though two of his bodyguards were killed. Four suspects were arrested in April, one of whom was later found hanged in his cell; the other three were in pretrial detention at year's end. The alleged mastermind of the attack, former interior minister Almazbei Kchach, reportedly committed suicide before he could be detained.

Also during the year, parliamentary elections were held in March. Amid a low 44 percent turnout, only 13 candidates won majorities in the first round on March 10, requiring runoff votes for the remaining 22 seats on March 24. Six of the nine incumbents seeking reelection were defeated, including the outgoing speaker of parliament. The voting marked a shift toward independents, who captured 28 seats, compared with only 3 for the ruling United Abkhazia party and 4 for opposition parties.

As of 2012, Abkhazia's independence was recognized only by Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and three small Pacific Island states.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Residents of Abkhazia can elect government officials, but the more than 200,000 Georgians who fled the region during the war in the early 1990s cannot vote in the elections held by the separatist government. Most ethnic Georgians who remain in Abkhazia are unable to vote in local polls, as they lack Abkhaz passports, though 9,000 passports were issued to mostly ethnic Georgian residents of Gali for the 2011 presidential election, compared with 3,000 in 2009. None of the separatist government's elections have been recognized internationally.

The 1999 constitution established a presidential system, stating that only ethnic Abkhaz can be elected to the post. 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.

Corruption is believed to be extensive, and government officials are not required to provide declarations of income. In January 2011, Russia's Audit Chamber accused Abkhaz leaders of misappropriating \$12 million allocated by Moscow for infrastructure development. After taking office later that year, President Aleksandr Ankvab began a campaign against official corruption, which included the dismissal of the immigration bureau's entire staff.

Local broadcast media are largely controlled by the government, which operates the Abkhaz State Television and Radio Company (AGTRK). In November 2011, the authorities granted permission to Abaza, the sole independent television station, to expand its broadcast range and cover the entire territory. All the major Russian television stations also broadcast into Abkhazia. Facing persistent opposition complaints of progovernment bias at AGTRK, Ankvab in October 2011 fired its director, who had held his post for 15 years and was seen as an impediment to reform. Ankvab also established a working group to consider deeper changes at the broadcaster, but none had been implemented by year's end.

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*.

Internet access has increased since 2008, with an estimated 25 percent of the population online. Some legal restrictions apply to both traditional and online media, including criminal libel statutes.

Religious freedom in Abkhazia is affected by the political situation. The Abkhaz Orthodox Church declared its separation from the Georgian Orthodox Church in 2009, and a number of Georgian Orthodox clerics have been expelled for alleged spying or refusal to recognize separatist authorities. In 2011, the Abkhaz church split into two factions after a group of clerics objected to the leadership's more deferential stance toward the Russian Orthodox Church. Neither faction is internationally recognized as independent from the Georgian church. Abkhazia's Muslims, who make up about 30 percent of the population, are allowed to practice freely. Jehovah's Witnesses continue to practice openly, though they were banned by a 1995 decree and have recently reported increased pressure from local authorities. In March 2012, a Witness prayer building was attacked with a grenade, causing property damage.

The Abkhaz constitution offers some protection for education in minority languages. Armenian-language schools generally operate without interference, but many of Gali's Georgian-language schools have been converted to instruction in Russian, leaving the future status of the remaining Georgian-language schools uncertain. Some ethnic Georgian students regularly travel to Georgian-controlled territory to attend classes. Ethnic Georgian residents without Abkhaz passports are restricted from attending Sukhumi State University.

Although most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rely on funding from outside the territory, the NGO sector exerts significant influence on government policies. Freedom of assembly is somewhat limited, but the opposition and civil society groups have mounted protests in recent years. A new opposition civic union composed of NGOs and opposition parties was established in January 2012 to demand election law and media reforms ahead of the March elections.

The judicial code is based on Russia's, and 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.

Gali's ethnic Georgian residents continue to suffer from widespread poverty and undefined legal status within Abkhazia. In June 2012, Abkhaz authorities blamed Georgian agents for the recent kidnapping of several Gali residents and the May murder of two security officers and a civilian in the area.

Travel and choice of residence are limited by the ongoing separatist dispute. Most ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia during the early 1990s live in Tbilisi and western Georgia. As many as 47,000 former Gali residents have returned to Abkhazia since 1994, with an additional 5,000 who commute between Abkhazia and Georgia, though the process of obtaining travel permits remains expensive and burdensome. An Abkhaz campaign to repatriate ethnic Abkhaz living abroad resulted in a handful of returnees in 2012, mainly from Syria and Turkey.

Ethnic Georgians are eligible for Abkhaz passports – entitling them to vote, own property, run a business, and obtain Russian citizenship and pensions – on the condition that they give up their Georgian passports, which carry significant economic and legal benefits. About 90 percent of Abkhazia's residents hold Russian passports, as Abkhaz travel documents are not internationally recognized. However, since the 2008 war, ethnic Abkhaz have had greater difficulty receiving visas to travel abroad, including to the United States and European Union countries. The U.S. government announced in June 2012 that it would recognize so-called "status-neutral" travel documents issued by Georgia since mid-2011 to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The documents, meant to ease travel for participating individuals without explicitly asserting Georgian sovereignty, were lauded internationally but opposed by Russia and Abkhazia as an attempt to challenge Russian influence.

Under a law preventing foreigners from buying Abkhaz property, ethnic Russians have been barred from acquiring residences in the territory, and some have reported that their homes have been confiscated.

Equality of opportunity and normal business activities are limited by corruption, criminal organizations, and economic reliance on Russia, which pays for half the state budget and accounts for nearly all foreign investment.

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, holding only one of the 35 legislative seats and heading just two of 12 government ministries.

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