



Freedom in the World 2017 – Abkhazia

Freedom Status: Partly Free

Aggregate Score: 41 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 4.5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 4 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 240,000

OVERVIEW

Abkhazia, a breakaway region of Georgia, has enjoyed de facto independence since the end of a civil conflict in 1993, and the last pocket of government-controlled territory was captured by separatist forces during a war that drew in Russian troops in 2008. The Abkhaz government is financially dependent on Russia, which maintains a military presence in the territory and is one of a handful of states that recognizes Abkhazia's independence. Nevertheless, the political system features significant opposition and civil society activity, and most residents reportedly oppose formal annexation by Russia. While local broadcast media are largely controlled by the government, there are some independent print and online outlets. Freedom of assembly is usually respected. Ongoing problems include a deeply flawed criminal justice system and discrimination against ethnic Georgians.

Key Developments in 2016:

- In July, a referendum on whether to hold a snap presidential election failed to gain the required voter turnout after it was boycotted by both the opposition and government supporters.
- In December, amid opposition demands for his resignation, President Raul Khajimba agreed to appoint opposition nominees to a number of government posts.
- Local elections were held in April, and polling places were opened in September to allow residents to participate in Russia's parliamentary elections.
- In February, Khajimba signed legislation that criminalized all abortions in an apparent attempt to increase the birth rate.

Executive Summary:

In April 2016, Amsakhara and other opposition parties petitioned the Central Election Commission (CEC) to hold a referendum on an early presidential election, having collected some 19,000 signatures, almost double the required 10,000. Their grievances against incumbent president Raul Khajimba included his alleged failure to implement democratic reforms, work cooperatively with other parties and the parliament, and improve the economy and state management of Russian aid.

Khajimba allowed the referendum to proceed in July, but gave the opposition little time to prepare and refused to postpone it. Amid growing acrimony, both the president and the opposition ultimately urged supporters to boycott the vote, and it garnered turnout of just 1.23 percent, rendering it invalid. The opposition then continued to demand Khajimba's resignation.

In December, he reached a compromise with some elements of the opposition, agreeing to appoint its nominees as vice premier, prosecutor general, and various deputy ministers and agency heads. The opposition would also be able to fill positions at the CEC and the Constitutional Court. Furthermore, the president expressed support for proposed constitutional amendments that would bar him from dismissing the premier without the parliament's consent, among other changes. Amsakhara did not join the agreement.

The year featured several incidents of political violence. In April, the car of an opposition lawmaker was blown up in Sukhumi, though it was not occupied at the time; he had strongly objected to a proposal that month – which was ultimately defeated – to lift a ban on selling land to foreigners. In July, opposition protesters repeatedly attempted to storm the Interior Ministry building. And in October, a suicide bomber killed himself outside the headquarters of the state broadcaster.

Local elections held across Abkhazia in April drew a relatively low turnout, and the voting was postponed in the Gali district because so many of its ethnic Georgian residents lacked documents from Abkhaz authorities. In September, nine polling stations were opened across Abkhazia so that residents, most of whom hold Russian passports, could participate in Russia's parliamentary elections. Georgia strongly condemned the move.

In November, in keeping with a treaty originally signed in 2014, Russia ratified a plan to form a joint military force with Abkhazia that would be under Russian command. Some elements of the treaty had generated considerable resistance in Abkhazia during 2015 on the grounds that they infringed on sovereignty, but implementation continued to move forward in 2016.

Explanatory Note:

This territory report has been abridged for *Freedom in the World 2017*. For background information on political rights and civil liberties in Abkhazia, see [*Freedom in the World 2016*](#).