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Freedom House

Nations in Transit 2020 - Georgia

TRANSITIONAL OR HYBRID REGIME

38

/ 100

Democracy Percentage 37.50 / 100

Democracy Score 3.25 / 7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

38 / 100 Transitional or Hybrid Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic.

Score changes in 2020

- **Judicial Framework and Independence rating declined from 3.00 to 2.75** to reflect the contentious appointment process of new Supreme Court judges and the disproportionate use of force by police to break up the June 2019 protests.
- **As a result, Georgia's Democracy Score declined from 3.29 to 3.25.**

Executive summary

Over the past several years, Georgia has failed to consolidate its democratic structures as key challenges have remained untouched or even intensified. Polarization and radicalization of politics and the media space have become a new normal in Georgian political life. Citizens have grown increasingly frustrated with the government's policies but, as of yet, have not found political shelter with the country's opposition parties, who remain weak and unconsolidated.

The biggest blow to Georgia's democratic development in 2019 was the violent dispersal of the antigovernment protests in June. These demonstrations erupted spontaneously after a member of the Russian Duma, Sergei Gavrilov, was viewed sitting in the chair of Georgia's parliamentary speaker during a visit. He had been invited to attend the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, and was given the right to open the assembly.¹ This move was considered emblematic of the government's accommodating approach towards Russia. According to various sources, between 10,000 and 30,000 people gathered in front of Parliament,² and after some attempted to storm the building, police responded with a violent crackdown, including the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons.

The June 20–21 protests also demonstrated the intimate connection between Georgia's foreign policy and domestic political processes. Since its ascent to power in 2012, the government formed by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party has attempted to normalize relations with Russia. After 2012, trade and tourism improved between the two countries. Russia became the second biggest export market for Georgian products,³ and Russian travelers contributed to a tourism boom in Georgia.⁴ Still, the Georgian population tends to compartmentalize attitudes towards its neighbor. There is generally support for overall normalization of relations and closer ties in some areas, especially in tourism and trade, but there is opposition to establishing political ties to the Russian government. Russia continues to occupy 20 percent of the country's territory, and the normalization process has not touched the conflict regions. The Russian-sponsored border demarcation alongside the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) also continued and even intensified.⁵ As a result, Georgian society still considers Russia as the greatest political and economic threat to the country,⁶ hence, GD's policy backfired in 2019, leading to the anti-Kremlin protests in June.

Georgia's democratic stagnation has been accompanied by rising discontent with the government's socioeconomic policies. Despite better-than-average economic growth in the region, socioeconomic conditions were improving slowly and citizens became increasingly skeptical about the government's ability to handle socioeconomic

problems.⁷ Jobs, inflation, poverty, but also pensions and wages, were among the most pressing issues.⁸ The economy and the fight against crime, however, were the only two areas where the majority (65 and 52 percent, respectively) thought the situation had worsened, according to public opinion surveys.⁹

But rather than support the opposition camp, the majority of the population has fallen into political apathy and mistrust towards political processes. The opposition failed to attract support from the undecided electorate, which, according to December national polls, stood at 56 percent.¹⁰ The opposition remained weak and fractured in 2019, missing the window of opportunity opened by the government’s unpopularity. It was unclear at year’s end whether the new political party Lelo, founded by Mamuka Khazaradze, former head of one of Georgia’s largest banks, could reshape the country’s political landscape.

Political polarization increased in 2019, with the two major political parties, the ruling GD and the opposition United National Movement (UNM), and their informal leaders ¹¹—billionaire and former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili and ex-president in exile Mikheil Saakashvili, respectively—further radicalizing the field. A few opposition parties, including European Georgia, a splinter group from the former ruling party, have tried to claim their place in this polarized landscape with limited progress. On the other hand, citizens seemed willing to escape the bipartisan political limbo; according to a June survey, 74 percent agreed that it would be “healthy for Georgia’s democracy to have multiple parties in power.”¹²

The government decided to calm the summer protests by making political concessions, including the promise of a fully proportional electoral system for next year’s parliamentary elections. However, the ruling party backtracked on this point, sparking a new wave of citizen protests and attracting severe criticism from Georgia’s strategic partners. This November crisis precipitated dramatic negative shifts in public opinion. According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) survey conducted in December 2019, the perception that the country is “going in the wrong direction” had increased to 53 percent, Georgia’s worst score on this measure in a decade.¹³ Moreover, a worrying 59 percent of respondents did not think of Georgia as a democracy—a dramatic shift in the past year.¹⁴

Throughout 2019, significant developments occurred in Georgia’s media landscape and judiciary. The process for recruiting new Supreme Court judges was criticized by the opposition and civil society as nontransparent and politically motivated. A number of notorious cases, such as money-laundering charges against the head of Georgia’s largest commercial bank as well as a family member associated with the government-critical TV Pirveli, raised further suspicions about the politicization of the justice system. In July, an ECtHR ruling confirmed a 2017 Supreme Court verdict enabling the transfer of ownership of the largest government-critical TV channel, Rustavi2, to its previous owner. Soon after the transfer, many critical journalists abandoned the outlet or were fired by the new director. Despite this major blow to critical outlets, the media landscape remained pluralistic and vibrant throughout the year, and several TV broadcasters, such as Pirveli and the newly founded Mtavari, continued to criticize the government.

The year was also marked by continued and increased activism from grassroots youth movements, and much of the political and social protests throughout 2019 were organized by youth groups and civic activists. As a result, voluntary activism became another significant layer to Georgia’s already vibrant and politically active civic sector. Several of the protests were nonpartisan and politically neutral, which made them harder to target by the government’s negative propaganda.

With the upcoming parliamentary elections in the fall, 2020 will be a decisive year for Georgia’s democracy. Should the country again fail to improve the quality of elections, the pattern of a stagnant hybrid regime will be more firmly established, with negative implications for Georgia’s European ambitions. The year will also be crucial for reshaping the political landscape. New parties and coalitions may emerge, with potential to shake up the status quo. Due to a more proportional electoral system, and a 1-percent electoral threshold, the new Parliament will probably be more pluralist, increasing the chances for having a coalition government and more pluralistic politics. However, increasing polarization and radicalism on the part of key political parties, which would most likely exclude coalition building with opponents, may hinder cohabitation and result in political crisis.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, 2.50 / effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches. 7.00

- Georgia’s political system continued to be controlled by informal governance in 2019. As the chief figure in this dynamic, former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, the country’s richest citizen and leader of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, continued to exert an asymmetric influence over both the government and Parliament, and hence over Georgia’s political decision-making process.¹⁵
- The main event of 2019 was the wave of protests in the capital Tbilisi against the government’s apparent Russia-friendly policy. The demonstrations, which reportedly drew tens of thousands of participants, erupted spontaneously on June 20 at the sight of Sergei Gavrilov, an invited member of the Russian Duma, seated in the chair of Georgia’s Speaker of Parliament at the opening of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. When a few protesters, seemingly supported by United National Movement (UNM) parliamentarians, attempted to storm the building, police used tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons to disperse the crowds. No clear warning had been issued by the authorities prior to this use of force.¹⁶ As a result, 240 people were injured during the demonstration, the majority of them protesters. Throughout the night, 342 individuals were arrested, and administrative imprisonment was imposed on 121 persons who were prevented from exercising their right to a fair trial.¹⁷

- The Georgian government was widely criticized for this excessive use of force. Amnesty International deplored the "heavy-handed police approach" and "total failure to distinguish between the few violent protestors and the peaceful majority."¹⁸ The U.S. embassy urged the government to investigate "acts of violence, as well as incidents of excessive use of force against demonstrators."¹⁹ At year's end, 15 protesters, including former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili, remained in custody, charged with organizing and leading the public unrest.²⁰ By contrast, the three law enforcement officers charged with exceeding official power were later released on various grounds.
- The brutal crackdown sparked continuous protests organized mostly by youth. To appease the demonstrators, the parliamentary speaker resigned on June 21, and the government promised to introduce a fully proportional electoral system for the 2020 elections. However, the GD-led government failed to meet the main demand of protesters, that is, the resignation of Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia, who was viewed as responsible for the crackdown yet remained in office. Moreover, as the protests faded, the government underwent yet another reshuffle in September, and Gakharia was promoted to prime minister.
- The political opposition remained weak and, consequently, appeared rather unattractive to the majority of protest voters. In September, a new political movement, Lelo ("Try") for Georgia, was established by Mamuka Khazaradze, former head of TBC Bank, Georgia's largest retail bank. Khazaradze was forced to resign from TBC amid money-laundering accusations in July (see "Judicial Framework and Independence"), just two weeks after he announced his intention to launch the new political organization. It remains to be seen whether Lelo—which targets conservative and religious voters, also GD's primary audience—can reshape Georgia's party system ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections. By year's end, Lelo was evolving into a more moderate opposition party and potential candidate to fill the long-awaited third party slot in Georgian politics.
- Throughout 2019, Georgia's party system was still polarized between GD and UNM, and their leaders—Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikheil Saakashvili, respectively—notwithstanding the fact that the two were considered among the "most negatively viewed" politicians in Georgia.²¹
- With the 2018 election of President Salome Zurbichvili, the GD-supported candidate, the last bastion of political opposition fell as all important offices of the executive and legislative branches came under the domination of GD or its close affiliates in 2019.²² The change in presidential power was also reflected in the public mood. After Zurbichvili's election, the popularity of the president's office as an institution declined sharply, with the share of negative assessments outweighing the positives.²³ This was partly due to some dubious presidential pardons, including an individual jailed for killing a policeman, which contributed to a public backlash against Zurbichvili.²⁴ Both the government and the opposition publicly criticized the pardon practice.
- The so-called borderization, or border demarcation, process alongside the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) between Georgia and the disputed territory of South Ossetia continued throughout the year and was accompanied by numerous accidents, including detentions, kidnappings, and military tension. In November, the Georgian doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili was detained for "illegally crossing the border" into South Ossetia. He was released in late December after the case attracted much public and international attention.²⁵

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process. 3.25 / 7.00

- Georgian elections are marred by many shortcomings, including an uneven playing field, use of administrative resources by the ruling party, imbalances in donations, and a polarized media landscape. Due to these persistent challenges, election monitors have yet to evaluate Georgian elections as fully democratic.²⁶
- The main electoral news in 2019 was the GD-led government's backtracking from its major political promise to introduce fully proportional electoral lists by 2020, instead of 2024 as originally planned.²⁷ The initial decision to introduce the proportional system early was intended to calm the public protests that had erupted in June and to solve the political crisis brought on by the law enforcement's violent dispersal of the demonstrations.²⁸ However, a few months later, Parliament could not gather enough votes for a constitutional change due to opposition from the GD members.
- The introduction of fully proportional electoral lists has long been a main ask of opposition parties and civil society. It was hoped that this move would depolarize Georgia's political landscape, bring a break from dominant party politics, and contribute to the emergence of a more pluralist and consensus-based national governance. In June, over 20 opposition parties managed to collect 300,000 signatures to initiate a constitutional change by 2020.²⁹ It was also one of the main demands of protesters on the street.
- Consequently, GD's backtracking in November from its promise sparked a new political crisis. The opposition and civil activists resumed protests in front of Parliament, and international observers as well as domestic watchdog groups criticized the ruling party's inability to live up to its stated plans.³⁰
- On October 27, interim elections were held in three administrative districts of Georgia, and GD candidates won all three by wide margins. In two districts, the GD candidates ran unopposed and received 100 percent of votes.³¹ In the third district, where opposition candidates participated, the GD candidate received 85 percent of the vote.³² The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) noted a number of irregularities, including illegal registration of voters by election coordinators and activists mobilized by GD.³³

- During the 2018 presidential elections, the dissemination of divisive narratives on social media (through sponsored posts from anonymous Facebook pages) was named by a watchdog organization as one of the main challenges for electoral processes in Georgia.³⁴ This trend continued in 2019 and may pose a challenge for democratic conduct of the next election in 2020. In a related development, on December 20, Facebook identified and removed a "domestic focused network" that was systematically posting "criticism of the opposition and local activist organizations."³⁵ The Facebook investigation linked this activity to Georgian Dream.³⁶

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups. 4.25 / 7.00

- Georgia has a vibrant and pluralist civic sector, and civil society organizations (CSOs) continued to be very active throughout 2019. Both politically active nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots youth movements contributed to raising public and international awareness about many important topics, such as labor rights, corruption and state capture, civil and political rights, Russian occupation, borderization, and environmental issues. NGOs, and to a lesser extent grassroots groups, also faced significant ongoing challenges, such as dependency on donors, lack of membership-based funding, and the disconnect of ordinary citizens due to Georgia's lack of participatory civic culture.³⁷
- In 2019, the country's prominent NGOs and think tanks continued an established tradition of cooperation and issued numerous joint statements and appeals for international community involvement in democratic-, political-, and security-related problems in Georgia.
- Yet, in a negative development, both Georgian and international NGOs critical of the government became the subject of official criticism and verbal attacks. In November, GD leader Bidzina Ivanishvili claimed that NGOs were hated by Georgian society due to their "lies over the years," and that U.S. nonprofits, such as the International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI), produced biased polls and were losing credibility. Ivanishvili also accused these groups of supporting the opposition.³⁸ Earlier, in March, then-parliamentary chair Irakli Kobakhidze accused local NGOs of being biased and collaborating with the opposition UNM.³⁹
- Grassroots youth movements were the leading force behind the persistent antigovernment protests ignited in June in reaction to the infamous visit by Russian Duma member Sergei Gavrilov, who was invited to take the chair of Georgia's Speaker of Parliament at the opening of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. The resulting protests were organized and managed by members of a Facebook group called the "Society for Spreading Freedom."⁴⁰ This closed group had more than 10,000 members, most of them young activists with no political affiliation. Although members of opposition parties participated actively in the protests and assisted the organizers in various ways, their impact on the overall effort was fairly limited. This was one of the first instances in Georgia where successful antigovernment protests were organized entirely by civil society actors.
- Another novelty related to the protests in 2019 was the central role of social media in raising public awareness and civic consciousness. Although opposition TV channels provided information on the protests, they were mostly organized via social media platforms, particularly Facebook. After the June 20–21 demonstrations, grassroots youth movements became the subject of a targeted discrediting campaign on Facebook that claimed the movements were connected to the UNM.⁴¹
- Illiberal civil society actors also continued their activities during the year. Hundreds of people celebrated "Family Purity Day," a discriminatory holiday established by the Georgian Orthodox Church in 2014. The rights of LGBT+ minorities continued to be severely limited despite there being relatively progressive antidiscrimination legislation elsewhere in the region. Georgia's first Pride march was canceled in May after threats were made against would-be participants; a small Tbilisi march with two dozen participants was held on July 8.⁴² Levan Vasadze, a xenophobic pro-Russian businessman, had announced plans to establish a "people's legion" to patrol the streets and detain participants.⁴³ The Ministry of Internal Affairs reacted to the announcement by launching an investigation against Vasadze for the "creation of an illegal formation."⁴⁴ Overall, however, the Georgian government was criticized for turning a blind eye or even benefitting from the activities of far-right groups.⁴⁵
- The Georgian Orthodox Church, the most popular civil society institution in the country,⁴⁶ was also struck by several scandals in 2019. On October 31, a member of the Synod, the church's ruling body, accused the Georgian Patriarch Ilia II and other high-ranking officials of being "beset by the sins of pederasty and sodomy."⁴⁷ In October, Archbishop Iakob Iakobishvili accused the Georgian government, and Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia personally, of seeking to remove the Patriarch from the throne to gain more influence in the church.⁴⁸ As a result, the Georgian Orthodox Church's approval rating declined from 64 to 50 percent.⁴⁹

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media. 3.75 / 7.00

- Georgia's media landscape remained pluralistic and vibrant but also very polarized in 2019, with biased editorial policies at key media outlets. Developments around major TV channels, including Adjara, Rustavi 2,

and Pirveli, raised alarm among local CSOs and watchdogs about the potential decline of media pluralism and freedom of the press.⁵⁰

- In April, Natia Kapanadze, the director of Adjara TV, a public broadcaster of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, was dismissed by the station's advisory board. Among other offenses, she was accused of “mismanagement of public funds, neglecting program priorities . . . and closure of highly rated programs.”⁵¹ Yet, under her leadership the TV station was praised by many domestic and international watchdogs, including Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the OSCE, for its politically neutral editorial policy.⁵² Local NGOs and watchdogs criticized the decision to dismiss the director.⁵³ A joint statement issued by five local watchdogs deplored this “continuation of the negative trend in the country, which is aimed at worsening the media environment and strengthens doubts about possible political interference.”⁵⁴
- In July, the continuing dispute over the ownership of Rustavi 2 (the main opposition-aligned TV channel at the time) took a new turn when the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) upheld a verdict by Georgia's Supreme Court from 2017 enabling the transfer of company ownership to its previous owner.⁵⁵ This ownership transfer happened soon after the court ruling, and the station's new General Director dismissed government-critical journalists and other high-ranking staff. A number of local NGOs criticized the move as having a “negative effect on the media environment in Georgia” as well as on “the democratic development of the country.”⁵⁶ In August, the channel's former general director was charged with abuse of power and embezzlement, and other staff members were charged with “improper financial activities.”⁵⁷ The company's former staff soon launched a new TV channel, Mtavari. Yet, reaching the audience share and popularity of Rustavi 2 as a newly founded media outlet will be a challenge. Overall, the takeover of Rustavi 2, and the way in which it was accomplished, was indicative of the broader trend in Georgia of trying to sideline voices critical of the government.
- Rustavi 2 was not the only channel that experienced issues with the Prosecutor's Office in 2019. In August, the father of the owner of another TV station, Pirveli, was implicated in a money laundering scandal in the amount of \$17 million, allegedly conducted 11 years ago. The owner and journalists of Pirveli accused the government of using blackmail and political pressure to change the editorial policies of the channel.⁵⁸ The prosecutor's decision was met with skepticism by the opposition and CSOs. Ten prominent local groups and civil society actors put out a joint statement calling the investigation against Pirveli “questionable” and characterized the recent suspicious attempts to change editorial policies at private companies as “of an extremely worrisome nature, threatening freedom of speech and the country's democratic development.”⁵⁹
- There was no systematic physical violence against journalists in 2019. However, many journalists were injured during the clashes between police and protesters on June 20.⁶⁰ According to Amnesty International, at least 31 journalists received various injuries, mostly from the police's firing of rubber bullets.⁶¹
- The case of the Azerbaijani investigative journalist Afgan Mukhtarli, who had been reportedly abducted in 2017 in Georgia and ended up in an Azerbaijani prison, had yet to be properly investigated by year's end.⁶² Mukhtarli himself accused the Georgian criminal police of participation in his abduction.⁶³

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities. 2.75 / 7.00

- The local self-governance and decentralization reform in Georgia has witnessed many ups and downs over the last years. The GD-led government has initiated a number of decentralization reforms, which have introduced some positive aspects to the country's otherwise centralized governance.⁶⁴
- Nevertheless, throughout 2019, local watchdogs and NGOs criticized the government for several flaws in the reforms. A joint statement issued on June 3 by 24 local CSOs critically assessed the government's new decentralization action plan from 2018, which envisaged the next stage of the self-governance reforms.⁶⁵ The NGOs criticized the lack of interagency coherence and transparency. The statement also claimed that the reform package did not address the critical issue of financial sustainability and self-financing through increased economic activity.⁶⁶ As a result, a huge majority of local services would still be financed by the central government, putting an unsustainable burden on the central budget and risking a further widening of the inequality gap between the center and the regions.⁶⁷
- Local authorities and self-governance bodies continued to experience many structural difficulties, such as lack of financial resources and dependency on transfers from the central budget.⁶⁸ Local self-governance bodies also continued to rank among the least trusted institutions in the country, with only 27 percent of the population assessing their performance as good.⁶⁹
- On October 27, interim elections were held in three administrative districts: Lagodekhi, Martvili, and Adigeni. The ruling party's candidates won in all three campaigns, and the GD continues to dominate local governments in Georgia.

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions. 2.75 / 7.00

- In 2019, the Georgian justice system was dominated by controversial court cases, the June police violence, and the politically loaded process of recruiting new judges to the Supreme Court. Overall, the nomination and appointment procedures for Supreme Court judges had a negative impact on the integrity and independence of the judiciary during the year.

- Constitutional amendments in 2018 increased the minimum number of judges on the Supreme Court from 16 to 28, giving the new judges lifetime appointment instead of the previous 10-year period.⁷⁰ Additionally, in the spring, Parliament adopted new amendments to the Law of Georgia on Common Courts, initiated by the ruling party.⁷¹ The new nomination process would include an open recruitment, background checks, interviews with each candidate in a public hearing, and their ranking through a secret vote by the High Council of the Judiciary (HCJ).⁷² Although the amendments were praised by OSCE/ODIHR and other international bodies as a step forward towards a more transparent and accountable judiciary, the majority of the opposition criticized and voted against the amendments. The OSCE, itself, noted their shortcomings regarding “transparency in the decision-making aspects of the process” and other procedural problems.⁷³
- Still, the amendments were passed in May, and the HCJ initiated a process of filling vacant seats in September. Both the amendments and the nominating process were criticized by domestic watchdogs and international organizations. The OSCE characterized the process as “lacking transparency and accountability . . . to build public trust in the judiciary.”⁷⁴
- On December 12, Parliament appointed for life 14 new judges to the Supreme Court. The international community—including the European Union,⁷⁵ the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE),⁷⁶ and the U.S. embassy in Tbilisi⁷⁷—issued statements raising their concerns. Their criticisms noted that the selection procedure had “key shortcomings, including a lack of transparency that undermines a genuinely merit-based nomination process.”⁷⁸ As a result, a number of candidates were selected who “were unable to demonstrate sufficiently their legal expertise or a commitment to impartiality.”⁷⁹
- The year was also marked by controversial court cases that raised questions about the independence of the judiciary and apparent evidence of selective justice.⁸⁰ In February, the prosecutor’s office accused Mamuka Khazaradze, founder of TBC Bank, of money laundering involving a \$17 million transaction that allegedly occurred in 2008.⁸¹ Khazaradze and his deputy director denounced the charges as an “orchestrated attack,” “blackmail,” and “threats,” but finally bowed to pressure to save the bank from a free fall.⁸² They both resigned, and TBC Bank agreed to pay a fine of GEL 1.1 million.⁸³ Related to the Khazaradze affair was another case involving Vakhtang Tsereteli, father of the owner of the independent TV Pirveli. The prosecutor’s office found Tsereteli to be complicit in Khazaradze’s money-laundering case and questioned him (see “Independent Media”).⁸⁴
- The issue of police violence in the country was not adequately addressed during the year, especially given that law enforcement had used excessive force to disperse the June protests (see “National Democratic Governance”). The November protests were again dispersed, wherein Georgia’s ombudsman assessed the police’s methods and the proportionality of use of force as “questionable.”⁸⁵ Meanwhile, 37 new arrests took place under the administrative code in 2019.⁸⁶
- In December, 15-year-old Luka Siradze died in the hospital after attempting to take his own life. His family claimed that he had been mistreated by police.⁸⁷ An investigation was ongoing at year’s end; however, it should be noted that Siradze was not an isolated case of mistreatment by the police but, rather, additional evidence of shortcomings in Georgia’s juvenile justice reform.
- The prison population continued to decrease in 2019, but Georgia still has the second highest rate of incarceration among European countries (252.2 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants).⁸⁸

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives. 7.00

- While Georgia remains a regional champion of fighting petty corruption, high-level corruption remains a serious challenge in the country. After the 2012 power change, the new government maintained “previous achievements for eradicating petty corruption” but, like its predecessor, failed to tackle systemic corruption.⁸⁹ In June 2019, a report by Transparency International (TI) identified steps that Georgia should take to tackle systemic corruption, including the establishment of a nonpartisan independent anticorruption agency, promotion of a more pluralistic political system, and the introduction of a fully proportional electoral system.⁹⁰
- The persistent problem of systemic corruption was also reflected in the mood of the population. According to an IRI survey, 42 percent of Georgians claimed that corruption had worsened in 2019 (against 11 percent who believed the situation had improved).⁹¹
- TI reported a number of suspicious cases throughout 2019 involving the authorities, including public tenders won by companies associated with government officials⁹² and noncompetitive public procurements.⁹³ The infamous cases against the director and deputy director of TBC Bank and the owner of TV Pirveli (see “Judicial Framework and Independence”) could also further tarnish the image of Georgia’s anticorruption system, raising questions about its impartiality and vulnerability to corruptive political influence.
- Throughout the year, Georgia continued to suffer from political ills that breed systemic corruption and inhibit the fight against it, such as weak checks and balances, concentration of political power, an uneven electoral playing field, government pressure on leading TV stations and their editorial policies, informal governance, and the politicization of the judiciary.⁹⁴
- TI’s 2019 report listed Georgia as a “country to watch” in terms of high-level corruption and the health of democratic governance.⁹⁵ The country fell three places in TI’s 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index as compared to 2018.⁹⁶

Note

The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0–100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic.

Footnotes

- 1 “Who is the Russian Orthodox communist who provoked protests in Tbilisi?” Jam news, 2019, <https://jam-news.net/who-is-the-russian-orthodox-communist-who-provoked...>
- 2 “In Georgia’s Parliament, One Russian Too Many,” Foreign Policy, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/21/georgia-tbilisi-protests-political...>. “Who is the Russian Orthodox communist who provoked protests in Tbilisi?” Jam news, 2019, <https://jam-news.net/who-is-the-russian-orthodox-communist-who-provoked...>
- 3 “European Union, Trade in goods with Georgia,” European Commission, 2019, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_ge...
- 4 “Number of tourists visiting Georgia increases 8% in Jan-July 2019: Most visitors from Russia,” Agenda.ge., 2019, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/2097>.
- 5 The process is often referred to as „borderization“ or „creeping annexation“.
- 6 “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia. May 20 – June 11, 2019,” IRI, 2019, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia_poll_2.pdf, P.15.
- 7 “Public Attitudes in Georgia Results of July 2019 survey. Issues Poll Results,” NDI, 2019, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_July_2019_political%20prese..., P.16
- 8 “Public Attitudes in Georgia Results of July 2019 survey. Issues Poll Results,” NDI, 2019, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_July_2019_political%20prese..., P.10
- 9 “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia. December 2019,” IRI, 2019, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_December%202019_P...
- 10 “Public Attitudes in Georgia Results of July 2019 survey. Political Poll Results,” NDI, 2019 https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_July_2019_political%20prese..., P.29
- 11 After being reappointed as the leader of the GD formally Mr. Ivanishvili is no more an informal leader, however his actual influence on political processes in the country outweighs his formal position by a wide margin.
- 12 “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia. May 20 – June 11, 2019,” IRI, 2019, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia_poll_2.pdf, P.34
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