



NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2024

Georgia

TRANSITIONAL OR HYBRID REGIME

34
/100

Democracy Percentage	33.93 _{/100}
Democracy Score	3.04 _{/7}

LAST YEAR’S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

34_{/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. See the methodology.



Author

- Anonymous

Score changes in 2024

- No score changes in 2024.

Executive Summary

Political polarization and party-led radicalization continued to shape Georgian politics in 2023. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party faced a choice between expanding its grip on power and advancing necessary reforms to achieve EU candidate status. Most opposition parties pushed their narrow political agendas and therefore failed to persuade the politically disenfranchised electorate to vote for them. Public opinion surveys showed that much of the electorate remained undecided on which party they would vote for, ¹ showcasing the failure of most political parties to attract new supporters. Polarization and partisanship has also pervaded the media landscape, including a number of key media outlets that have been accused of biased coverage. This divisiveness has also created a hostile environment for the media. Many journalists and media professionals have faced intimidation, violence, and harassment.

In December, the European Council granted Georgia EU candidate status. The EU hopes to use the accession process to spur democratic reforms and bring Georgia into the European orbit. According to observers, Georgia made halting progress in implementing the European Commission's (EC's) 12 priorities for reform. An EC progress report proposed new steps for Georgia, such as fighting disinformation, defusing polarization, and conducting credible elections in 2024.

Judicial reform is a key issue that Georgia must address to become an EU member. Despite some minor progress, both the Venice Commission and the EU have said Georgia must comprehensively reform the judiciary to tackle issues such as widespread judicial corporatism, which is known as the "Judicial Clan." The US State Department's decision to sanction Georgian judges over corruption allegations further highlights the fundamental problems in the judicial system. Most importantly, reforming the High Council of Justice (HCoJ) to address "judicial corporatism and self-interest" ² within the council remains a central issue. The EU may have granted Georgia candidate status for geopolitical reasons, but the strong pro-EU attitudes of Georgians, who also demonstrated their

support for Europe in March protests against a “foreign agents” bill to restrict funding for Georgian NGOs from foreign sources, might have also influenced the EU’s decision.

Corruption and informal influence on politics also remained key challenges in 2023. While petty corruption has nearly been eradicated, systemic high-level corruption remains a serious problem. In October, the GD withdrew its support for a de-oligarchization bill that the EU and Venice Commission criticized for targeting specific oligarchs rather than pursuing systemic reform. In November, the government approved a de-oligarchization action plan that takes a more systemic approach. Fair and objective implementation of the de-oligarchization measures remains a key priority.

Frequent conflicts between the president and the GD-led parliament threatened the system of checks and balances that help maintain Georgia’s democracy. President Salome Zurbishvili, a former GD ally, defied the party several times in 2023. Against the wishes of the GD, Zurbishvili pardoned the head of a television network that supported the opposition, advocated for Georgia’s EU candidate status in European capitals, and sided with the protesters against the adoption of the controversial “foreign agents” law. The conflict escalated in autumn when GD legislators attempted to impeach the president.

In March, the introduction of the GD’s foreign agents bill in the parliament sparked large-scale protests and caused the year’s greatest political crisis. The bill, which would create a registry for “agents of foreign influence,” ³ was unequivocally condemned by Georgia’s western partners as compromising the country’s democratic development and harming its EU prospects. ⁴ Young people largely drove the protests against the bill, while the opposition parties remained on the sidelines. Coupled with mounting international pressure, the youth protests forced the GD to withdraw the controversial bill to reduce tensions.

Security challenges and deteriorating conditions in the Russian-occupied zones exacerbated political tensions in 2023. The irregular border demarcation process along the administrative boundary lines between Georgia and the Russian-controlled enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (commonly referred to as “borderization”) persisted throughout the year. This process was marked by

occasional killings, ⁵ abductions, and other incidents. In November, for example, Russian troops shot a Georgian citizen dead near the South Ossetia border. ⁶ In response, the GD government adopted a mild tone towards Russia and blamed the precarious situation in the occupied zones on the legacy left by the former government. ⁷ The opposition accused the government of pursuing a collaborative and conciliatory policy with Russia. ⁸ Frequent incidents in the occupied zones continue to complicate the political situation and exacerbate party-driven radicalization.

Although 2023 saw no major elections, the parliamentary elections in 2024 will be a defining moment for Georgia's democratic future and its prospects for EU accession. However, neither the ruling party nor the opposition appear to be approaching the crucial elections in the spirit of depolarization and consensus-based politics—a major precondition for Georgia's EU accession. The ruling party seemed preoccupied with preserving control of the government by further concentrating power, delaying an array of crucial reforms in many areas (most importantly in the judiciary), and developing strategic ties with illiberal powers like China that could insulate Georgia from the West's democratic pressure. The opposition parties appeared fragmented and concentrated on narrow political agendas rather than advancing a strategic vision that could attract the disillusioned electorate.

Former president Mikhail Saakashvili remained imprisoned throughout the year, which continued to cause controversy. Saakashvili's health has declined in prison and authorities have failed to provide the former president with adequate healthcare, according to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. ⁹ International partners, including the US State Department and members of the EU Parliament, have urged Georgia to provide better care to Saakashvili ¹⁰ or allow his transfer to another country for better treatment. ¹¹ In November, the European People's Party's political assembly passed an urgent resolution on political prisoners in Europe that labeled the charges against Saakashvili "politically motivated" and urged the authorities to protect his health and "immediately release him." ¹² Meanwhile, Saakashvili continued to comment on politics from the hospital and called on current and former members of his erstwhile party, the United National Movement (UNM), to unite behind him. ¹³

Georgia continued to take an ambiguous stance on the Russia-Ukraine war in 2023. While Georgian authorities apparently complied with international financial sanctions against Russia, they refused to impose bilateral sanctions on Russia. ¹⁴ The government and the ruling party accused the so-called radical opposition and “wealthy NGOs” of being part of a “global war party,” alleging that they were intent on the “Ukrainization of Georgia” ¹⁵ and sought to embroil Tbilisi in a war against Russia. On the other hand, opposition parties accused the ruling party of collaborating with Russia.

The polarization and political corruption that plague Georgia’s political system also affected local government throughout 2023. Over the year, opposition politicians and activists faced numerous assaults, beatings, and instances of intimidation. Opposition politicians also frequently boycotted city council meetings across the country. While transparency and accountability in public spending within municipalities remain problems, allegations of corruption in procurements have been reported by local NGOs throughout Georgia.

At-A-Glance

National Democratic governance in Georgia is shaped by deep political polarization, with a government focused on preserving power and a fractured opposition. There were no significant electoral reforms passed this year, and the country is not fully prepared for the crucial 2024 parliamentary elections. Against the backdrop of weak opposition parties, civil society has remained a key political force. For example, youth protesters successfully stopped the enactment of a Russia-style foreign agents law that threatened NGOs. The media landscape remains vibrant and multifaceted but is highly polarized and shaped by political polarization, partisanship, and party-led radicalization. On local democratic governance, authorities took steps to improve e-governance, but transparency in public financing and corruption in procurements remain problematic. Corruption, corporatism, and political interference in the judiciary remain major impediments to democratic governance. The government has failed to enact comprehensive judicial reforms and judicial corporatism has persisted. While Georgia remains a regional leader in combating petty corruption, the perception of impunity regarding high-level corruption continues to pose a serious challenge.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

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

2.25
/7.00

- Throughout the year, the relationship between the ruling GD and its Western partners remained strained. In May, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili delivered a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Hungary, which provoked the ire of the Party of European Socialists (PES). ¹⁶ The PES considered terminating the GD's observer status. ¹⁷ This ongoing tension between the PES and the GD culminated in the GD's May announcement that it would relinquish its observer status. Irakli Kobakhidze, chairman of the GD, defended the party's decision to depart from the PES, attributing it to the PES's "ideological transformation" from classic democratic socialism to a "pseudo-liberal platform." ¹⁸
- In 2023, the schism between President Salome Zurbashvili and the ruling GD party deepened. Zurbashvili opposed the controversial foreign agents' law, embarked on her own diplomatic mission to vouch for Georgia's EU candidate status in European capitals, ¹⁹ pardoned the head of the pro-opposition television network Mtavari, ²⁰ and vetoed a number of the ruling party's bills. ²¹ The government responded by filing a complaint with the Constitutional Court in September to impeach the president. ²² In October, the court ruled that the president's visits to Europe were unconstitutional because she exercised "her powers of representation in foreign relations" without the approval of the government. ²³ The decision paved the way for the parliament to begin impeachment proceedings. Unsurprisingly, Parliament voted against the impeachment. ²⁴ The EU criticized the impeachment effort as polarizing and damaging to Georgia's EU accession prospects. Some observers argued that the impeachment was "an attempt to divert the public's attention from other problems." ²⁵ While the legality of the impeachment case was debatable, the political rationale in attempting to impeach the president for visits that were intended to gather support for Georgia's EU candidacy was questionable. ²⁶
- In September, another institutional conflict arose between the government and the National Bank after the latter upheld the financial sanctions imposed on Otar Partskhaladze, a former prosecutor general, by the US State

Department. After facing mounting criticism from the ruling party, the bank reversed its stance and ruled that a guilty verdict from a Georgian court was necessary to impose international sanctions on a citizen of Georgia. ²⁷ This led to a political crisis. Many high-ranking officials, including three vice presidents of the National Bank, resigned in protest. ²⁸ In response, the IMF delayed its stand-by arrangement ²⁹ in Georgia. ³⁰ President Zurabishvili temporarily defused the crisis when she revoked Partskhaladze's Georgian citizenship in October. However, according to some reports, he had already managed to transfer many of his financial assets to his family members. ³¹

- Throughout the year, opposition parties faced numerous challenges, including an uneven playing field with the ruling party. Opposition parties also struggled to attract undecided voters due to their failure to present a clear vision and concrete policies that would make them an appealing alternative to the GD, as well as occasional intraparty struggles and defections. In January, during leadership elections within the largest opposition party, UNM, Nika Melia was replaced by Levan Khabeishvili. ³² Many observers viewed the outcome as an indication of former party members' continued influence, ³³ including former defense minister David Kezerashvili, who owns shares in the opposition TV network Formula and was allegedly involved in a billion-dollar scamming network, according to a BBC investigation. ³⁴ In a TV interview shortly before the interim elections, Nika Melia himself alleged that former Interior Minister Ivane Merabishvili and ex-Defence Minister Davit Kezerashvili were secretly conspiring against him, including in the upcoming party leadership race. ³⁵ Melia asserted that the November 9 demand for internal party elections, which the party accepted, was completely orchestrated by Merabishvili and Kezerashvili, long-time allies of the party's founder and former president Mikheil Saakashvili, in an effort to ensure Melia's competitor Levan Khabeishvili secured the leadership position. ³⁶
- Political polarization has been a major problem in recent years and persisted in 2023. The GD's decision not to lower the 5 percent threshold for representation in Parliament ahead of the 2024 elections could deepen polarization and benefit both the GD and the UNM—the two parties most often accused of deepening political divisions in Georgia. ³⁷ These parties, along with their splinter groups and media allies, exacerbate polarization by demonizing their political opponents and refusing to cooperate with each

other. Consequently, societal polarization and bipartisan political radicalization are intertwined in Georgia. Smaller parties struggle to survive due to the intense polarization, as well as the 5 percent threshold. But aside from a few mergers, the opposition appeared to lack a cohesive strategy to win the 2024 elections.

- Georgia took some key steps towards EU accession in 2023. After receiving a recommendation from the European Commission in November, the European Council awarded Georgia EU candidate status in December. ³⁸ However, the government only partially fulfilled the 12 priorities set by the European Commission and its progress in most areas was assessed as limited. The EU will likely intensify its pressure on Georgia to make democratic reforms as it advances in the accession process. Consequently, the government will need to demonstrate more substantial progress in reforming the judiciary and the electoral framework, as well as combating disinformation and polarization and conducting credible parliamentary elections in 2024. ³⁹

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.	3.00 /7.00
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- Georgia’s electoral system largely meets international standards. However, the electoral landscape is marked by the ruling party’s dominance, an asymmetric playing field between the government and opposition, and party-driven polarization and political radicalization. Holding fair, credible parliamentary elections in 2024 will be essential to maintaining Georgia’s democratic trajectory and progressing in its EU accession efforts. Ensuring “a free, fair, and competitive electoral process, especially in 2024,” thoroughly addressing the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations from December 15, 2022, ⁴⁰ and finalizing electoral reforms were key 2023 recommendations from the European Commission to help qualify Georgia for EU accession. ⁴¹ These recommendations involve delineating electoral constituencies, adjusting regulations for media campaigns, and adopting measures to deter voter intimidation. ⁴² These reforms, if implemented

properly, will increase the transparency and democratic quality of the elections and make the playing field more competitive.

- In February, Parliament passed revisions to the Electoral Code that extended gender quotas for both parliamentary and municipal elections by an additional four years, through the 2032 elections. **43** The revised regulations mandate that for the October 2024 elections, and any subsequent parliamentary elections before 2028, a woman must occupy every fourth slot on the proportional representation lists of political parties. **44** For elections after 2028, parties must place women in every third spot on their candidate lists. **45** The authors of the bill from the GD argued that the initiative would increase gender representation and promote women's political participation. Supporters from the GD parliamentary group said the measure would enhance women's representation and encourage their political involvement. **46** Women's advocacy groups welcomed the amendments and called for a greater expansion of quotas, citing the persistently low representation of women in Parliament. **47**
- In June, Parliament passed significant changes to the electoral code that shifted the power to appoint the chairperson and seven members of the Central Elections Commission (CEC) from the president to the speaker of Parliament. **48** The bill also reduced the number of parliamentary votes needed to elect the CEC head from 100 to 76 (representing half of all votes). **49** Notably, these modifications conflict with the principles of the five-point plan brokered by European Council President Charles Michel and signed by the GD and a number of opposition parties in 2021. **50** The plan had recommended requiring a two-thirds majority to elect the CEC chairperson. **51** President Zurabishvili vetoed the amendments in June, arguing that the "election of the chair and members with 76 votes instead of 100 eliminates the need for consensus-based decisions and increases the risk of polarization." **52** However, the ruling party overrode the veto and the amendments became law. The law faced criticism from the European Commission, which said it was not "in line with the Commission's opinion" and in conflict with "numerous recommendations." **53**
- There were no nationwide elections in 2023. In April, the CEC conducted by-elections for a seat in the Poti-Senaki-Khobi single-mandate constituency, as well as five city council and two mayoral elections. **54** GD candidates dominated in all races, while most major opposition parties decided not to

field candidates for various reasons. ⁵⁵ These included a lack of confidence in the electoral system and a focus on seemingly more important issues, such as implementing the EC’s 12 reform recommendations and conserving their resources for the parliamentary elections in 2024. ⁵⁶ Notably, the CEC introduced electronic voter registration and electronic voting for these elections. ⁵⁷ The new technologies made the voter registration process faster, although malfunctioning new devices slowed the process on election day in some areas. ⁵⁸ Local election observers said the absence of opposition candidates made the elections “almost non-competitive,” but the group reported that polling was peaceful and conducted “without significant violations of electoral regulations.” ⁵⁹ Only one opposition party, Free Georgia, fielded a candidate for the parliamentary seat in Poti, Senaki, and Khobi, while no opposition candidates ran for mayor in Terjola and Tsageri.

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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.	4.00 / 7.00
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- The annual EU enlargement progress report released in November characterized Georgian civil society as “well developed, diverse, vibrant and continu[ing] to enjoy the freedom to operate, albeit in an increasingly hostile environment.” ⁶¹ The legal framework, including light registration and reporting requirements, a special tax regime, and strong freedom of association, creates an environment conducive to robust civic activity. ⁶² However, civil society organizations (CSOs) struggle to remain financially viable, , and often lack grassroots support, which contributes to low public trust towards them. ⁶³
- The “foreign agents” bill introduced in March by the People’s Power party, part of the ruling coalition, sparked a major crisis for civil society. The draft law envisioned the creation of an “agents of foreign influence” registry with the Justice Ministry, which would include media outlets and NGOs that receive 20 percent or more of their annual revenues from “foreign powers.”

- 64** This could include revenues from “foreign government agencies, foreign citizens, legal entities not established under Georgian legislation, and foundations, associations, companies, unions, and other organizations or associations under international law.” **65** The bill caused outrage at home and abroad and sparked large-scale protests. Georgia’s international partners warned that the bill’s passage would undermine democracy, jeopardize Georgia’s EU accession, and damage Tbilisi’s ties with the West.
- Although traditional CSOs have been active in Georgia for some time, a growing culture of grassroots mobilization and civic activism—especially among young people—reached a new peak in 2023, as Generation Z entered the political arena and led protests against the “foreign agents law.” **66** Traditional CSOs supplemented the protests through coordination and awareness-raising activities. 400 CSOs united to sign a petition in protest of the foreign agents bill. **67** The GD withdrew its support for the bill to defuse internal and external pressure and the parliament voted against it with 35-1 in the second reading. **68**
 - One of 12 reform priorities set out by the EC required to get the candidacy status encouraged closer government consultation with civil society. **69** The EC noted in its progress reports that the government invited civil society representatives to participate in the implementation process for the 12 priorities, including two conferences on implementation that brought together CSO representatives and government officials. **70** In October, the Georgian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) **71** signed a memorandum of cooperation with Parliament. **72** However, CSOs still had little policy impact in 2023, as the government largely disregarded their views on legislation and appointments. **73** Moreover, the government’s inflammatory and derogatory rhetoric against CSOs worsened in 2023 and undermined them, as evidenced by the “foreign agents” bill controversy. **74**
 - While Georgia has relatively progressive antidiscrimination laws, they are unevenly implemented. Minority groups remain subject to occasional physical and verbal harassment. In July, the Tbilisi Pride Festival was abruptly cancelled and participants had to be evacuated due to an attack by a violent mob of several thousand far-right protesters and the authorities’ failure to ensure the safety of festival participants. **75** The mob stormed the event, destroying and stealing equipment. The police were unable or unwilling to

stop the mob’s onslaught. The climate worsened when members of the ruling party and government escalated their use of anti-LGBT+ rhetoric throughout the year. They emphasized traditional values and criticized what they described as “violence by the minority against the majority.” ⁷⁶

- Throughout the year, there were reports of violence against students, civil society activists, opposition politicians, and intellectuals critical of the government. ⁷⁷ The ruling party allegedly encouraged some of this violence against its critics. ⁷⁸ In September, foreign-agents- law protester Lazare Grigoriadis was sentenced to 18 months in prison for assaulting his father in 2021. ⁷⁹ Critics believe the case was politically motivated and a government effort to tarnish the image of young grassroots protesters and silence dissent by reviving old charges against Grigoriadis. ⁸⁰ In March, GD leader Irakli Kobakhidze said Grigoriadis had a “confused orientation,” which was widely interpreted as a veiled antigay slur. ⁸¹
- In October, Parliament passed a law that restricts the use of tents and other temporary structures at public demonstrations. ⁸² The legislation gives law enforcement extensive authority to break up protests or apprehend demonstrators that violate the law, who could face fines of 500 lari (\$190) or up to 15 days in jail. ⁸³ Since encampments have played a key role in antigovernment protests in recent decades, the so-called “tent law” could diminish the effectiveness of future protests.

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.	3.25 / 7.00
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- Press freedom continued to be an important issue, considering Georgia’s EU accession process. The EU’s annual enlargement report published in November commended the availability of “critical media reporting” in Georgia and acknowledged the country’s commitment to upholding freedom of expression and freedom of speech. ⁸⁴ However, the report also highlighted concerns about a “hostile environment” for the press, which has been perpetuated by “continued public attacks and discrediting rhetoric against journalists and media professionals.” ⁸⁵ Between January and

November, Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia) recorded approximately 45 incidents of “violence, harassment, and intimidation attempts” against journalists, as well as 14 criminal cases against perpetrators. ⁸⁶ Journalists face harassment from both the government and opposition parties. These dynamics reveal a complex media environment where the solid legal framework and media pluralism are undermined by political polarization that feeds hostility towards journalists.

- The government and the ruling party continued to attack critics in the media throughout the year. In March, GD Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze accused former defense minister and controversial businessman David Kezerashvili of funding the independent media conglomerate Palitra Media. ⁸⁷ Palitra Media denied the accusations and CSOs issued a statement in support of the company that said the accusations were “an open and undisguised campaign to discredit independent media outlets and civil society organizations, as well as any groups that are not directly dependent on Georgian Dream.” ⁸⁸
- In June, President Zurabishvili pardoned Nika Gvaramia, the director general of the pro-opposition television network Mtavari. Gvaramia had been in prison since 2022, serving a three-and-a-half year sentence for abuse of power that many international observers said was politically motivated. ⁸⁹ Shortly before he was pardoned, the Supreme Court upheld Gvaramia’s prison sentence, a decision that domestic and international observers said was also politically motivated. ⁹⁰ Several members of the European Parliament ⁹¹ and international human rights and press freedom organizations ⁹² appealed to President Zurabishvili to pardon Gvaramia. The EU hailed the president’s pardon as “an essential step towards depolarization in Georgia.” ⁹³
- In October, Parliament adopted a new law that allows the government to block content that it considers obscene, hateful, vulgar, or supportive of terrorism. ⁹⁴ Broadcasters previously blocked such content themselves, without government involvement. ⁹⁵ The law also expands the National Communications Commission’s powers to impose penalties on broadcasters for a wider range of infractions. Opponents of the new law have expressed concerns that it could limit free speech, threaten the independence critical media outlets, put media professionals in legal jeopardy, and lead to censorship. ⁹⁶ TI Georgia soon after published its Annual TV Advertising

Market Report for 2022, which highlighted media outlets’ tendency towards self-censorship due to the growing financial challenges they face and decreased revenues resulting from changes in the Broadcasting Law. ⁹⁷ The report also highlighted how progovernment television networks received twice as much advertising revenue as critical TV media outlets in 2022. ⁹⁸ The disparity was evident in 2023, as well: the main progovernment television network Imedi earned 33 million lari (\$12.5 million) from advertising in 2023, an increase of 8.6 million lari (\$3.3 million) from 2022. ⁹⁹ Pro-opposition networks reported more modest advertising earnings: TV Mtavari earned 7.9 million lari (\$3 million), a decrease of 2.2 million lari (\$800,000) from the previous year; Formula TV received 5.3 million lari (\$2 million), a decrease of 400,000 lari (\$150,000); and TV Pirveli also made 5.3 million lari (\$2 million), which was 500,000 lari (\$190,000) less than in 2022. ¹⁰⁰

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
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- In November, the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) published the 2023 Local Self-Government Index for Georgia, which assesses the transparency and accountability of local government. ¹⁰¹ According to the report, while scores have improved slightly since 2021 overall, the improvements were uneven across indicators. The scores for “proactive publication and public information” and “e-governance” improved, but the “promotion of citizen participation and accountability” score declined. ¹⁰²
- As several studies published in 2023 indicate, transparency and accountability of public spending in municipalities remain concerns. . ¹⁰³ TI Georgia has identified suspicious procurements in 2023 between city councils and limited liability companies (LLCs) in several regions (including Adjara, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kakheti, and Samegrelo-Zemo-Svaneti regions). ¹⁰⁴
- Local self-governance faced other challenges due to growing political polarization. In September, Irakli Edzgvradze, a UNM Tbilisi City Council

member, was assaulted near his home. ¹⁰⁵ Edzgveradze linked the incident to a dispute with GD council member Kote Zarnadze during a meeting earlier in the day. ¹⁰⁶ The police arrested six individuals in connection with the assault, including one employee of the Tbilisi City Hall. ¹⁰⁷ Additionally, three UNM party members were temporarily detained for their involvement in the incident. They were charged with petty hooliganism and each fined 2,000 lari (\$750). ¹⁰⁸

- Other incidents were reported at the Tbilisi City Council and other city councils across the country in 2023. The UNM faction boycotted several sessions of the Tbilisi City Council as a form of protest. ¹⁰⁹ In August, for example, the UNM withdrew from a City Council session that discussed proposed construction projects that the party opposed and accused Mayor Kakha Kaladze of prioritizing the agenda of GD council members, as well as “Russian oligarch” Bidzina Ivanishvili. ¹¹⁰
- UNM politicians also reported that their party members and activists were assaulted in the regions of Kaspi, ¹¹¹ Chokhatauri ¹¹² and Sagarejo. ¹¹³ The UNM claimed that, during a community meeting in Kaspi, GD City Council members and activists verbally harassed UNM Chairman Levan Khabeishvili and damaged his car. ¹¹⁴ Similarly, in Chokhatauri, UNM members said GD activists assaulted them while they distributed brochures protesting the sale of Dumbadze square. UNM official Davit Khavanadze was hospitalized as a result of the attack. ¹¹⁵ Khavanadze said the GD mobilizes criminal elements to intimidate and silence the opposition. ¹¹⁶ The UNM also reported that GD allies verbally and physically harassed UNM leaders during an event in Sagarejo. ¹¹⁷ Mtavari Arkhi, a broadcaster affiliated with the UNM, said several assailants were identified as municipal officials, including city council members and the chief of Sagarejo City Hall’s property management division. ¹¹⁸

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.	2.50 /7.00
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- Corruption and political and corporate interference in the judiciary threatened Georgian democracy in 2023. Throughout the year, numerous scandals, a lack of comprehensive reforms, and US sanctions against some key judges marred the judicial system.
- In March, Parliament elected Levan Isoleliani, a member of the Citizens party, as the new public defender. However, CSOs said Parliament “conducted [the election] without public involvement and participation” and “behind closed doors.” ¹¹⁹ The transparent nomination of the public defender and ensuring “the Office’s effective institutional independence” were among the European Commission’s 12 priorities. ¹²⁰ In its annual progress report published in November, the EC said Georgia had fulfilled this priority, despite the objections from civil society. ¹²¹
- In May and October, Parliament elected five non-judge members to the High Council of Justice (HCoJ). Nongovernmental actors formally nominated the candidates, but the selection and voting process was highly politicized due to the judicial corporatism in the HCoJ that remains a major unresolved issue. Four UNM members broke with the opposition, supported the first three candidates, and then left the party. ¹²² Their votes were essential to reach the 90 votes needed to elect the candidates. ¹²³ The episode underscored the weakness and incoherence of opposition parties, including the UNM. One of the candidates elected in October is the son of a Constitutional Court judge who ruled that President Zurabishvili’s trips to Europe were unconstitutional. ¹²⁴ Some observers therefore viewed the election of the judge’s son as a reward for his role in the impeachment process. ¹²⁵
- In March and October, the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) issued two opinions about the organic law on common courts. ¹²⁶ The amendments to the law focused on the transparency of judicial acts, the appointment and evaluation process of judges, and the election of the President of the Supreme Court, aiming to enhance the independence and accountability of the judiciary in Georgia. While the commission welcomed some improvements in its second opinion, it stressed that the government had not properly addressed several recommendations to reform the HCoJ, ¹²⁷ including “addressing effectively the persistent allegations of lack of integrity of the HCoJ; reconsidering its powers, functions, decision-making procedures, and the manner of election

of members.” ¹²⁸ According to the Venice Commission and the EC, judicial corporatism remains the main challenge in the judicial system. ¹²⁹ CSOs are equally concerned with the influence of the “judicial clan,” an informal group in the justice system that is highly influential and connected to the government, in the HCoJ. ¹³⁰

- After the United States sanctioned Georgian judges in April, opposition parties attempted to establish a parliamentary commission to investigate the corruption allegations against the sanctioned judges. ¹³¹ However, the ruling party boycotted the initiative, labelling it as “an act of political solidarity with the judges” and the commission was scrapped when legislators failed to achieve a quorum in the plenary session of Parliament. ¹³² CSOs criticized the ruling party’s boycott of the commission as an attempt “to protect the interests of the [judicial] clan.” ¹³³
- Parliament implemented legislation to ensure that the courts “proactively take into account the judgments and decisions” of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) . ¹³⁴ The legislation aligned with one of the EC’s key priorities, which emphasizes that Georgian courts should consider ECtHR judgments. ¹³⁵ Throughout 2023, ECtHR registered 156 new cases filed against Georgia. ¹³⁶ When adjusted for population, this equates to a rate of 0.42 new applications per 10,000 people, which closely aligns with the European mean of 0.41. ¹³⁷ In 2020, the ECtHR decided 20 cases and delivered 17 judgments with regard to Georgia. Among these decisions, 12 found violations of the European Convention on Human Rights. ¹³⁸

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.	3.50 / 7.00
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- Although Georgia has largely eliminated low-level corruption, high-level corruption remains rampant, with prominent officials enjoying almost total impunity. ¹³⁹ As of November, TI Georgia had registered 151 “alleged cases of high-level corruption” over the last few years, involving at least “162 high-level public officials.” ¹⁴⁰ According to TI Georgia, more than 30 of these cases occurred in 2023.

- In its annual progress report published in November, the EU praised Georgia for making some progress in fighting corruption, particularly the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in 2022, which combines multiple anticorruption functions in a single agency. ¹⁴¹ Its responsibilities encompass crafting anticorruption strategies, disclosing assets of public officials, and overseeing the financial transactions of political parties, electoral candidates, and individuals with electoral ambitions. ¹⁴² Additionally, it manages a digital platform for whistleblowing and provides yearly reports to both Parliament and the Inter-Agency Anti-Corruption Council. ¹⁴³ Anti-Corruption Council as an independent body is supposed to facilitate the implementation of a unified anti-corruption policy by proposing recommendations “on a general anti-corruption policy, strategy and action plan” and asking for periodic reports. ¹⁴⁴ However, significant gaps remain. The Venice Commission’s December report said the ACB had “no investigative powers and no legal tools to address existing corruption cases.” The report also criticized the “inordinately strong influence of the Prime Minister over the selection of the head of the ACB,” which undermines “perceptions of its political neutrality as well as its ability to rigorously address high level corruption.” ¹⁴⁵ CSOs have echoed these concerns, contending that the effectiveness of the centralized approach hinges on the institution’s genuine autonomy and investigative authority. ¹⁴⁶ According to the report, Georgia must prioritize strengthening the ACB’s independence and capacity, addressing more high-level corruption cases, and streamlining the anticorruption legislation. ¹⁴⁷ Moreover, the government has not updated the National Action Plan since 2020 ¹⁴⁸ and Georgia is the sole country to decline an anticorruption assessment by the OECD. ¹⁴⁹ Georgia has also failed to keep up with the Open Government Partnership’s (OGP) two-year action plan cycle. ¹⁵⁰
- Informal governance and the need for de-oligarchization remained key issues throughout 2023. In 2022, the ruling party introduced a law similar to Ukraine’s de-oligarchization law, which labeled political adversaries as “oligarchs” but excluded Bidzina Ivanishvili because he did not hold a government position. ¹⁵¹ In June, The Venice Commission criticized the draft law for its personalized approach and warned that it could be misused to punish political rivals. ¹⁵² The commission said the law should instead take a systemic approach and include more comprehensive reforms. ¹⁵³

Despite the commission's negative evaluation and the EU's support for its recommendations, Parliament initially passed the law before it was rejected in a later session. Instead, in November, the government formulated a new de-oligarchization plan. One of the key provisions in the plan pertains to the funding of political parties. Per the plan, legal entities will be prohibited from making campaign donations, expenditure caps for each party will be lowered, and parties will be required to disclose their expenditure reports.

154 The plan covers seven areas: anticorruption measures, transparency and accountability in public procurement, the formulation and implementation of an effective competition policy, justice, policies to combat money laundering and terrorist financing, monitoring of political parties' financial activities, and the strengthening of media pluralism and transparency. **155**

While some opposition politicians criticized the new action plan, **156** the EU advised Georgia to implement it "efficiently through a multi-sectorial, systemic approach." **157** In December, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili returned to formal politics, assuming the role of GD's "honorary chairman" and "main advisor." **158** He attributed his decision to the "complicated geopolitical situation" and the opposition's perceived failure to hold the government accountable, which he believes has increased the risks of corruption and dissent within the ruling party due to a lack of competition. **159** While the reasons for Ivanishvili's return to formal politics remain a subject of debate, some observers view it as a positive step in informal influences on Georgia's political processes. **160**

- In April, the US State Department sanctioned three current judges and one former judge for their "involvement in significant corruption," including abuse "of their positions as court Chairmen and members of Georgia's High Council of Justice (HCoJ), undermining the rule of law and the public's faith in Georgia's judicial system." **161** The sanctioned judges are considered members of the "judicial clan," a powerful group of judiciary members that frequently influences the outcomes of significant legal cases. **162** Analysts have observed that verdicts disproportionately favor the ruling GD party. **163** While there are few detailed reports of how the clan operates, the clan members are assumed to have "a close behind-the-scenes relationship" with the government members and the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, **164** have significant impact on recruitment policy in the justice system and influence high-profile cases. **165** Soon after the sanctions were issued, the US

ambassador explained that the judges' actions "undercut judicial and public processes by offering benefits to or coercing judges to decide cases in favor of political allies and manipulating judicial appointments to their benefit."

166 In response, Georgian officials asserted that the decision stemmed from "misinformation and corruption," accused the United States of meddling in Georgia's independent judiciary, and threatened to disclose the details of conversations with US officials. **167** Then-chairman of the GD Irakli Kobakhidze seemed to "threaten to leak information from calls with the US" that would presumably indicate how "misinformation and corruption" influenced the US State Department's decision to impose sanctions. **168**

- In September, the US imposed sanctions on former prosecutor general Otar Partskhaladze, who was allegedly a member of Bidzina Ivanishvili's inner circle. **169** In 2013, Partskhaladze briefly served as prosecutor general, having previously held various positions in the Ministries of Interior and Finance. However, he is predominantly known for his alleged involvement in several high-profile scandals, including the intimidation of an imprisoned former opposition leader during his tenure as prosecutor general, dubious business dealings, and the intimidation and assault of Georgian businessmen. **170** Additionally, he is accused of assaulting former auditor general Lasha Tordia, who was later granted political asylum in the US. **171** According to the US State Department, Partskhaladze was allegedly leveraged by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) to "influence Georgian society and politics for the benefit of Russia" and "personally profited from his FSB connection." **172** Authorities responded by compelling the National Bank to amend its regulations to give Partskhaladze more time to evade the sanctions. **173**

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Footnotes

- 1** "Taking Georgians' pulse Findings from March 2023 telephone survey," National Democratic Institute, May 2023, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202023%20te...
- 2** "Follow-up opinion to previous opinions concerning the organic law on common courts," European Commission for Democracy through Law, 9 October 2023, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-...>

- 3 European Commission, “Key findings of the 2023 Report on Georgia,” European Commission, 8 November 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/da/qanda_23_5626.
- 4 “Georgian Dream formally kill foreign agent draft law,” OC Media, 10 March 2023, <https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-kill-foreign-agent-draft-law/>.
- 5 “Russian Occupation Forces Kill One Georgian Citizen, Abduct Another,” Civil Georgia, 6 November 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/567764>.

More footnotes



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Country Facts

Population

3,713,000

Region

Eurasia

Global Freedom Score

58/100 **Partly Free**

Internet Freedom Score

76/100 **Free**

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