



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

Georgia

61

/100

PARTLY FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	24/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	37/60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

63/100 **Partly Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



Note

The numerical scores and status listed here do not reflect conditions in the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are examined in separate reports.

Overview

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

Key Developments in 2019

- In June, thousands of people gathered in Tbilisi to protest Russian influence in Georgia after an incident in which a Russian lawmaker appeared in the speaker’s chair at the Georgian Parliament to address an interparliamentary assembly of Orthodox Christian legislators. The government used excessive force to disperse the protesters, leading to further protests over the following months. Responding to opposition demands, the speaker of Parliament resigned after the initial protest, and the government that month pledged to hold parliamentary elections under a fully proportional system in 2020.
- Minister of Internal Affairs Giorgi Gakharia became prime minister after Mamuka Bakhtadze stepped down in September.
- In November, Parliament failed to pass the amendments necessary to enact the promised proportional electoral system, prompting renewed protests.
- A dispute over the ownership of one of the country’s largest television stations, Rustavi 2, was resolved when the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decided in July that the Georgian courts had acted fairly in their handling of the matter. As a result, progovernment owners took control of the

station, and most of the staff left to join a new outlet, Mtavari Arkhi, in September.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

2/4

Georgia has a dual executive, with the prime minister serving as head of government and the president as head of state. Under constitutional changes approved in 2017, the president elected in 2018 is to serve a six-year term, after which presidents will be chosen by a 300-member electoral college comprising national lawmakers and regional and local officials. The president formally appoints the prime minister, whom Parliament nominates.

In 2018, Salome Zourabichvili, an independent former foreign minister supported by the ruling Georgian Dream party, won about 60 percent of the vote in the second round of the presidential election, defeating Grigol Vashadze, a former foreign minister running for the opposition United National Movement (UNM). While the electoral environment was largely peaceful, significant problems in the preelection period and voter intimidation on election day marred the quality of the runoff. Abuse of administrative resources as well as limited instances of vote buying and ballot-box stuffing were reported. Outside many voting stations, the presence of Georgian Dream activists created an intimidating atmosphere. Just days before the runoff, a charitable foundation controlled by former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, the chair of Georgian Dream, promised to write off the debts of over 600,000 Georgians—about one in six eligible voters.

Minister of Internal Affairs Giorgi Gakharia became prime minister in September 2019 after Mamuka Bakhtadze stepped down. Bakhtadze, formerly the finance minister, had replaced Giorgi Kvirikashvili as prime minister in June 2018 after the latter resigned over policy disagreements with Ivanishvili.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

3/4

Georgia's unicameral Parliament is composed of 150 members, with 77 selected through nationwide proportional representation and 73 in single-member districts. Members serve four-year terms.

In the 2016 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream won a total of 115 seats, including 71 of the majoritarian contests. The UNM garnered 27 seats, all through the proportional vote. Smaller parties and an independent took the remainder. An observer mission from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) found the elections competitive and largely fair, but noted that administrative funds were used for campaign purposes and that changes to rules governing party registration were made too close to the elections. A small number of violent incidents were reported during the campaign period and the first round of polling.

A3 0-4 pts

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

3/4

The country's electoral laws are generally fair, and the bodies that implement them have typically done so impartially. However, after the 2018 presidential election, the OSCE monitoring mission highlighted important gaps in the electoral legislation,

including the need for stronger safeguards against campaign finance violations, abuse of administrative resources, and voter intimidation.

Under 2017 constitutional amendments, Parliament was set to be elected entirely by proportional representation beginning in 2024. Under pressure from mass protests in June 2019, the government promised to accelerate the change so that it would take effect for the 2020 elections. However, the necessary constitutional amendments failed to pass in November, prompting renewed protests. Georgian Dream subsequently suggested several alternatives and a general opposition to fully proportional elections, casting doubt on whether even the 2024 balloting would be held under a fully proportional system.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

2/4

Georgia hosts a dynamic multiparty system, and new political parties have often been able to form and operate without major obstacles. However, a pattern of single-party dominance since the 2000s has inhibited the development and stability of competing groups, and conditions appeared to grow worse in 2019. In July, Mamuka Khazaradze, the founder of one of Georgia's two largest banks, was arrested together with his business partner on a money laundering charge. While the alleged crime dated to 2008, the arrest came two weeks after Khazaradze stated his intention to form a new political party inspired by the June protests, prompting statements of concern about politicized prosecutions from the US embassy, human

rights groups, and other observers. Khazaradze formally announced the creation of the new movement, called Lelo, in September. His criminal case was ongoing at year's end.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to the arrest of an opposition figure two weeks after he announced plans to establish a new political party.

B2 0-4 pts

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

3/4

Georgia last underwent a peaceful transfer of power between rival groups in 2012–13, when Georgian Dream defeated the UNM in parliamentary and presidential elections. The UNM splintered in 2017, leaving behind two smaller parties that were less capable of mounting a credible opposition. Georgian Dream won most mayoral and gubernatorial seats, including the Tbilisi mayoralty, in that year's subnational elections. However, in the 2018 presidential vote, the UNM's Grigol Vashadze won enough votes to force a runoff.

B3 0-4 pts

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

2/4

Ivanishvili, the wealthy businessman who founded Georgian Dream in 2011, resigned as prime minister and as the ruling party's chairman in 2013, but he remained its primary financial backer and continued to control it informally. His successors as prime minister and party chairman were close confidants and former employees of institutions he controlled, suggesting that he played a large role in determining the country's leadership. Ivanishvili was reelected as chairman of Georgian Dream at a party congress in 2018.

Recent elections have featured allegations of various forms of vote buying and intimidation, including pressure on public employees and recipients of social benefits to support the ruling party.

B4 0-4 pts

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

2/4

No laws prevent women or members of minority groups from participating in political processes, but in practice these groups and their interests are underrepresented at all levels of government. Although a woman was elected president in 2018, women currently hold just 21 of 150 seats in Parliament. There are seven members of national minorities in Parliament, whereas such minorities make up an estimated 13 percent of the population.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

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

2/4

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

Ivanishvili's policy influence is also visible in the authorities' generally favorable treatment of his financial and business interests, and in particular the multibillion-

dollar Georgian Co-Investment Fund (GCF), which was unveiled in 2013 and is active in large real-estate development projects in Tbilisi.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	2/4
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While the country has made significant progress in combating petty corruption, corruption within the government remains a problem. In some cases it has allegedly taken the form of nepotism or cronyism in government hiring. Effective application of anticorruption laws and regulations is impaired by a lack of independence among law enforcement bodies and the judiciary, and successful cases against high-ranking officials who are on good terms with the Georgian Dream leadership remain rare.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	3/4
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Government operations are generally subject to scrutiny by auditing bodies, the media, civil society organizations, and the public. However, the Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), a Georgian advocacy group, reports that access to public information has been uneven since 2010. In 2018 the institute reiterated its calls for a stronger law on access to information and urged greater transparency regarding officials' income declarations. Civil society activists have also expressed concern about a lack of transparency regarding rezoning and land sales in Tbilisi.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

2 / 4

Georgia's media environment is pluralistic but frequently partisan. The public broadcaster has been accused of favoring the government in its coverage. In July 2019, a long-running legal dispute over the ownership of the opposition-aligned television station Rustavi 2 was decided at the ECHR. The panel found that the Georgian court cases surrounding Rustavi 2's ownership had been conducted fairly. As a result, control of the station was transferred to Kibar Khalvashi, a former owner who was more sympathetic to the ruling party. Khalvashi announced in August that he hoped to sell the station, but a subsequent auction yielded no buyers. Meanwhile, a new director appointed by Khalvashi dismissed some key employees, and a large share of the staff quit to join a new station, Mtavari Arkhi (Main Channel), which began broadcasting in September. In October, other previous owners of Rustavi 2 filed a suit claiming they were unfairly forced to sell, setting the stage for a new ownership battle in the courts.

Also during the year, several media outlets that are critical of the government complained of political pressure in the form of trumped-up charges and selective enforcement of tax laws.

In December 2019, the social media company Facebook announced that it had taken down hundreds of Georgian accounts and pages, many of which fraudulently posed as media outlets and news organizations and carried criticism of the opposition and local civil society organizations. The company traced the entities to a Georgian advertising agency and the Georgian Dream government.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

2/4

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion but grants unique privileges to the Georgian Orthodox Church, including immunity for its patriarch. Georgia's religious minorities—among them Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Muslims—have reported discrimination and hostility, including from Georgian Orthodox priests and adherents, and are insufficiently protected by the state. Some minority religious groups have faced difficulty gaining permits from local officials to construct houses of worship. In September 2019, a court ruled that the denial of a construction permit for a new mosque in Batumi was discriminatory, though it did not instruct the mayor's office to issue the permit.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

3/4

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

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	3/4
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Georgians generally enjoy freedom of expression, including in their online communications. However, watchdog groups have expressed concerns in recent years that various security-related laws empower state agencies to conduct surveillance and data collection without adequate independent oversight. A 2017 law created a new electronic surveillance agency under the umbrella of the State Security Service that would have the authority to fine service providers for failure to cooperate with its work. Privacy advocates questioned whether the law complied with earlier Constitutional Court rulings on state surveillance practices.

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

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	2/4
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Freedom of assembly is often respected, but police sometimes respond to demonstrations with excessive force.

In June 2019, protests erupted in Tbilisi after Russian lawmaker Sergey Gavrilov appeared in the speaker's chair of the Georgian Parliament to address a meeting of

the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, which brings together Orthodox Christian legislators from different countries. Some of the protesters attempted to push their way inside the Parliament building, and police responded by shooting tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons into the crowd without a prior warning. Hundreds of people were injured, including more than 30 journalists, and at least two protesters were permanently blinded in one eye. Subsequent protests proceeded more peacefully, but police again used water cannons and tear gas to disperse protesters who gathered outside the Parliament building in November after lawmakers failed to pass promised electoral reforms.

Separately in June, the government declined to guarantee protection for a planned LGBT+ pride rally in Tbilisi. A smaller event was held the next month instead.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because police used excessive force to disperse protesters outside Parliament in June, injuring hundreds of people.

E2 0-4 pts

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

3/4

The civil society sector in Georgia is fairly robust. Some groups are included in policy discussions, though others report facing political pressure, largely in the form of public criticism by government officials and opposition figures. A report released in April 2019 by the Media Development Foundation, a group that tracks content manipulation, identified a group of fraudulent troll accounts on social media that were used to support the government and attack its perceived opponents, including civil society organizations.

E3 0-4 pts

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

2/4

Workers are legally allowed to organize, bargain collectively, and strike, though there are some restrictions on the right to strike, including a ban on strikes by certain categories of workers. Legal protections against antiunion discrimination by employers are weak and poorly enforced.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	2/4
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Despite ongoing judicial reforms, executive and legislative interference in the courts remains a substantial problem, as does a lack of transparency and professionalism surrounding judicial proceedings.

Under the constitutional framework that took effect after the 2018 presidential election, the High Council of Justice nominates Supreme Court judges rather than the president; the judges are then approved by Parliament. A judicial self-governing body elects a majority of the council's members. In December 2018, the council presented a list of Supreme Court nominees, but a coalition of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) argued that it had used an opaque process and selected judges with tainted reputations. Later that month, the head of the legal affairs committee in Parliament resigned to protest what she called the “hasty and unacceptable” nomination process. The dispute continued for much of 2019. Finally, in December, Parliament confirmed the appointment of 14 justices to the Supreme Court, with opposition members refusing to participate in the vote. Observers from the Council of Europe and other institutions criticized the appointments, concluding that the candidates had failed to demonstrate the requisite legal knowledge and impartiality for their lifetime appointments.

A so-called fourth wave of judicial reform legislation was passed by Parliament in December 2019. It introduced a number of specific improvements over previous legislation, for example regarding disciplinary procedures for judges, though NGO observers called for amendments to address various deficiencies.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

2/4

The law guarantees due process, but the related safeguards are not always respected. The office of the country's public defender, or ombudsperson, has reported problems including a failure to fully implement Constitutional Court rulings on due process matters, administrative delays in court proceedings, the violation of the accused's right to a presumption of innocence, failure to observe rules surrounding detention and interrogation, and the denial of access to a lawyer upon arrest. A number of perceived opponents of the government have faced prosecutions in recent years that were widely seen as selective or politically motivated.

F3 0-4 pts

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

2/4

Human rights watchdogs and the ombudsperson continue to express concern about the physical abuse of detainees during arrest and in police custody, and have noted the lack of an independent system for supervising police conduct and addressing claims of mistreatment. A 2018 law established a new state inspector's office tasked with investigating police abuses, but it would not be independent from the prosecutor's office, a shortcoming that drew criticism from human rights groups. The new office went into operation in November 2019. Violence and harsh conditions in prisons remain a problem.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	2/4
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A 2014 antidiscrimination law provides protection against discrimination on the basis of various factors, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity, but it is enforced unevenly. Women and people with disabilities reportedly suffer from discrimination in employment, among other problems. LGBT+ people face societal discrimination and are occasionally the targets of serious violence.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	4/4
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There are ongoing restrictions on travel to and from the separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and individuals who approach their de facto borders can face short-term detention. Nevertheless, Georgians are otherwise free to travel and can change their place of residence, employment, and education without undue interference.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	3/4
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The legal framework and government policies are generally supportive of private business activity. However, protection for property rights remains weak, and deficiencies in judicial independence and government transparency hamper economic freedom.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

3/4

Personal social freedoms are generally respected. However, constitutional changes approved in 2017 define marriage as “a union between a man and a woman for the purpose of creating a family.” There is no law allowing civil unions for same-sex couples.

Domestic violence remains a problem in Georgia, and the response from police is often inadequate, though changing societal attitudes have contributed to more frequent reporting and some improvements in enforcement in recent years. Spousal rape is not specifically criminalized.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

2/4

Unsafe conditions and inadequate legal protections for workers continue to contribute to a high rate of workplace deaths and injuries, notably in the country’s mines. The average number of workplace deaths each year rose from 24 in 2002–05 to 41 in 2007–17, according to Human Rights Watch, which cited weakened regulations. The number of deaths reached 59 in 2018 before slipping to 38 in 2019.

Georgia is a source, destination, and transit country for human trafficking linked to sexual exploitation and forced labor, and displaced people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia are among the populations most vulnerable to trafficking. However, according to the US State Department's latest *Trafficking in Persons Report*, the government continued its enforcement efforts and improved its performance on victim identification.



On Georgia

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

61/100 Partly Free

Internet Freedom Score

75/100 Free

Other Years

2019

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