



Home Office

# **Country Policy and Information Note**

## **Georgia: Political parties and affiliation**

**Version 1.0**

**May 2021**

# Preface

## Purpose

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and analysis of COI for use by Home Office decision makers handling particular types of protection and human rights claims (as set out in the [Introduction](#) section). It is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of a particular subject or theme.

It is split into two main sections: (1) analysis and assessment of COI and other evidence; and (2) COI. These are explained in more detail below.

## Assessment

This section analyses the evidence relevant to this note – i.e. the COI section; refugee/human rights laws and policies; and applicable caselaw – by describing this and its inter-relationships, and provides an assessment of, in general, whether one or more of the following applies:

- A person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm
- The general humanitarian situation is so severe as to breach Article 15(b) of European Council Directive 2004/83/EC (the Qualification Directive) / Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights as transposed in paragraph 339C and 339CA(iii) of the Immigration Rules
- The security situation presents a real risk to a civilian's life or person such that it would breach Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive as transposed in paragraph 339C and 339CA(iv) of the Immigration Rules
- A person is able to obtain protection from the state (or quasi state bodies)
- A person is reasonably able to relocate within a country or territory
- A claim is likely to justify granting asylum, humanitarian protection or other form of leave, and
- If a claim is refused, it is likely or unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers **must**, however, still consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case's specific facts.

## Country of origin information

The country information in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), dated April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation's (ACCORD), [Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual, 2013](#). Namely, taking into account the COI's relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

The structure and content of the country information section follows a [terms of reference](#) which sets out the general and specific topics relevant to this note.

All information included in the note was published or made publicly available on or before the 'cut-off' date(s) in the country information section. Any event taking place or report/article published after these date(s) is not included.

All information is publicly accessible or can be made publicly available, and is from generally reliable sources. Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion. Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information, and
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources.

Multiple sourcing is used to ensure that the information is accurate, balanced and corroborated, so that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture at the time of publication is provided of the issues relevant to this note.

Information is compared and contrasted, whenever possible, to provide a range of views and opinions. The inclusion of a source, however, is not an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a brief footnote; full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the [bibliography](#).

## Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve our material. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this note, please email the [Country Policy and Information Team](#).

## Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The [Independent Advisory Group on Country Information](#) (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to support him in reviewing the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of approach of COI produced by the Home Office.

The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office's COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. The IAGCI may be contacted at:

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Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's pages of the [gov.uk website](#).

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# Assessment

Updated: 11 May 2021

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Basis of claim

- 1.1.1 Fear of persecution and/or serious harm by state actors due to a person's actual or perceived political opinion.

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### 1.2 Points to note

- 1.2.1 This Note includes information about media outlets and journalists reporting on political events.
- 1.2.2 This Note does not cover the situation in the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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## 2. Consideration of issues

### 2.1 Credibility

- 2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- 2.1.3 Decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

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### 2.2 Exclusion

- 2.2.1 Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons for considering whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts and merits.
- 2.2.2 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection.
- 2.2.3 For further guidance on the exclusion clauses and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instructions on [Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33\(2\) of the Refugee Convention](#), [Humanitarian Protection](#) and [Restricted Leave](#).

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### 2.3 Convention reason(s)

- 2.3.1 Actual or imputed political opinion.
- 2.3.2 Establishing a convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of an actual or imputed Refugee Convention reason.

- 2.3.3 For further guidance on Convention reasons see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.4 Risk

### a. Introduction

- 2.4.1 Georgia has a multiparty political system, with new parties able to form and operate. Women and ethnic and religious minorities are able to participate in politics. Georgian Dream has been in power since 2012; the current prime minister is Irakli Garibashvili. The president, Salome Zurbichvili, was backed by Georgian Dream. The main opposition party is the United National Movement (UNM). The political landscape is polarised and highly adversarial (see [Introduction](#), [Current government](#), [Georgian Dream](#), [United National Movement \(UNM\)](#), [Polarisation](#)).

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### b. State treatment

- 2.4.2 Freedom of assembly is generally respected, although the police have been known to respond to demonstrations forcefully. In June 2019, a member of the Russian Duma was seen sitting in the chair of Georgia's parliamentary speaker during a visit. This led to anti-government protests involving 10,000 to 30,000 people who objected to the government's accommodating approach to Russia. After some protesters attempted to storm the parliament building police responded with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon, which led to at least 2 people losing an eye and injuries for 240 people in total, including 40 journalists. 342 people were arrested and 121 individuals were imprisoned without trial. Video footage and witness testimonies showed that police fired indiscriminately into the crowd. There were reports that some individuals were mistreated both during and after their detention (see [Anti-government protests: 2019](#), [Police](#) and [Detention and prosecution](#)).
- 2.4.3 The government tried to bring calm in the aftermath of the June 2019 protests by making political concessions, including the promise of a fully proportional electoral system for the parliamentary elections of 2020, but then backtracked. This led to further protests in November 2019 which were again dispersed by the police, with Georgia's ombudsman assessing the methods used and proportionality of force as 'questionable.' Following the arrest of Nika Melia, leader of the UNM, in 2021 (see below), several thousand opposition supporters demonstrated in Tbilisi, demanding the release of 'political prisoners' (see [Anti-government protests: 2019](#), [Police](#), [Anti-government protests: 2021](#) and [Freedom of assembly](#)).
- 2.4.4 Parliamentary elections were held in October and November 2020. There were instances of voter intimidation, vote-buying and violence in the period leading up to the election, with both Georgian Dream and the opposition accused of wrongdoing. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) deployed a Limited Election Observation Mission to Georgia and reported that 'overall, fundamental freedoms were respected.' The OSCE ODIHR further specified that freedoms of assembly, association and

expression were ‘mostly respected.’ However, there were reports of intimidation of party supporters and public sector employees and aggression towards election observers. The opposition accused Georgian Dream of voter intimidation and fraud, refused to accept the election results and boycotted the second round of elections in November (see [Parliamentary elections of 31 October 2020: issues](#)).

- 2.4.5 In February 2021, the leader of the UNM, Nika Melia, was arrested on the grounds that he had refused to pay an increased bail fee which related to an accusation against him that he had incited violence during the anti-government protests of June 2019. Riot police used tear gas to disperse supporters of Mr Melia’s, who were with him at the party headquarters at the time of his arrest. About 20 people were arrested but later released. Mr Melia denies the charges against him. On 13 April 2021 a court ruling extended Mr Melia’s detention. Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned in February 2021, in protest at Melia’s arrest, saying it would fuel political division in the country. However, the Georgian government and opposition party leaders signed an accord in April 2021 which aimed to break the existing political deadlock. Amongst other measures, the agreement seeks to find a way to release Nika Melia and Giorgi Rurua, owner of an opposition television station, from detention (see [Arrest of Nika Melia](#) and [Accord of April 2021](#)).
- 2.4.6 Both the political opposition and civil society criticised the process for recruiting Supreme Court judges for being non-transparent and politically motivated. Freedom House reported that, although there are ongoing judicial reforms, there is executive and legislative interference in the courts which amounts to a ‘substantial problem.’ Observers from the Council of Europe and other institutions criticised the appointment of 14 Supreme Court justices in December 2019 on the grounds that they did not demonstrate the knowledge or impartiality required. Senior High Council of Justice members and court chairs allegedly stifle critical opinions within the judiciary and resist efforts to strengthen judicial independence. There have been instances of prosecution and detention of government opponents in recent years that were considered politically motivated. Corruption is not always addressed effectively due to a lack of independence among law enforcement bodies and the judiciary, and those who are close to the Georgian Dream leadership are rarely prosecuted successfully (see [The judiciary](#), [Due process](#), [Detention and prosecution](#) and [Corruption](#)).
- 2.4.7 There are concerns about political influence in the media. During the 2018 presidential elections and through the year 2019, divisive posts on social media were a key challenge. In December 2019, Facebook announced that it had taken down hundreds of accounts for posing fraudulently as news outlets supporting Georgian Dream; they were traced to the government and an advertising agency. In May 2020, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy identified further such media activity supporting Georgian Dream. Broadcast media is diverse but very politically polarised. During the elections of October 2020, the public channels were found to give equal amounts of coverage to different political parties, but private channels were partisan (see [Social media](#) and [Television and journalism](#)).



- 2.4.8 There are concerns about freedom of the press due to the prosecution and detention of some individuals managing outlets critical of the government. There have been instances of journalists being summoned by law enforcement bodies for questioning and asked to identify their sources. There are allegations of journalists being attacked by political party representatives during the October 2020 election campaign. There were reports that police deliberately targeted journalists with water cannon and rubber bullets during public demonstrations (see [Television and journalism](#)).
- 2.4.9 Civil society is active and diverse, but NGOs critical of the government have been verbally attacked by the authorities (see [Civil society](#)).
- 2.4.10 In conclusion, Georgians are able to choose which political parties to support and engage freely in political activity. Members of the judiciary and the media may be subjected to political pressure and influence. Civil society groups which oppose the government may come under verbal attack from the government. Journalists may be subjected to questioning or targeted with forceful dispersal measures during demonstrations. An ordinary member or supporter of a political party or a protestor may be at risk of detention or of forceful dispersal by the police if taking part in a demonstration, or a degree of intimidation during an election campaign. However, none of these groups would, in general, receive treatment sufficiently serious by its nature or repetition as to amount to a severe violation of a basic human right. Nevertheless, each case must be considered according to its individual facts, with the onus on the person to demonstrate that their profile and/or activities are such that they are likely to be at risk of persecution and/or serious harm, on account of their actual or perceived political opinion.
- 2.4.11 High-profile government opponents and managers of media channels opposed to the government may be subjected to politically-motivated prosecution and detention with a politically-biased judiciary. However, in order to establish a claim on this basis, a person would need to demonstrate a flagrant violation or a flagrant denial of Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (right to a fair trial). In general, conditions in Georgia are not such as to reach this very high threshold. The onus is on the person to demonstrate otherwise (see [Due process](#)).
- 2.4.12 For further information, see the [Asylum Instruction on considering human rights claims](#).
- 2.4.13 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.5 Protection

- 2.5.1 The Georgian authorities held a criminal investigation into the handling of the protests of June 2019, which led to the prosecution of 4 police officers on charges related to a disproportionate use of force. However, it was reported that the investigation focussed on ordinary police officers, but did not fully address the responsibility of those in command (see [Anti-government protests: 2019](#), [Police](#) and [Impunity](#)).

- 2.5.2 The Prosecutor General's Office carried out an investigation into attacks on journalists during the protests of June 2019 and questioned several journalists as part of the process (see [Television and journalism](#)).
- 2.5.3 However, investigations into abuse by law enforcement officials and security forces showed limited effectiveness and impunity remained an issue (see [Impunity](#)).
- 2.5.4 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state they will not, in general, be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.
- 2.5.5 For further guidance on assessing the availability of state protection, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.6 Internal relocation

- 2.6.1 If the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state, they are unlikely to be able to relocate to escape that risk.
- 2.6.2 For further guidance on internal relocation see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.7 Certification

- 2.7.1 Where a claim is refused, it is likely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 2.7.2 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

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# Country information

Section 3 updated: 25 March 2021

## 3. Government

### 3.1 Formation of government

- 3.1.1 In the 'Freedom in the World' 2021 report, covering the year 2020, Freedom House noted that, 'Parliament introduced a new mixed electoral system in June, which was implemented in the elections held that autumn. Under the new system, most seats are filled through proportional representation, and the vote threshold for entering Parliament via proportional representation was lowered from 5 percent to 1 percent.'<sup>1</sup>
- 3.1.2 Al Jazeera explained that '...any party that secures 1 percent of votes will enter the legislature' and that 40.6% of votes are required for the formation of a one-party government<sup>2</sup>.
- 3.1.3 The CIA World Factbook described Parliament as follows: '...unicameral Parliament or Sakartvelos Parlamenti (150 seats; 120 members directly elected in a single nationwide constituency by closed, party-list proportional representation vote and 30 directly elected in single-seat constituencies by at least 50% majority vote, with a runoff if needed; no party earning less than 40% of total votes may claim a majority; members serve 4-year terms)<sup>3</sup>

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### 3.2 Current government

- 3.2.1 In the 'Freedom in the World' 2021 report, Freedom House explained that 'Georgia has a dual executive, with the prime minister serving as head of government and the president as head of state.'<sup>4</sup>
- 3.2.2 The current president is Salome Zourabichvili, who took up office on 16 December 2018. She was an independent candidate, backed by Georgian Dream<sup>5</sup>. The BBC Country Profile of 22 February 2021 stated:

'Georgian Dream has ... reduced the presidency to a ceremonial post, and all future presidents are expected to be chosen by an electoral college, not the public.

'Ms Zourabichvili stood for the post as an independent in 2018, with the backing of Georgian Dream, beating pro-Saakashvili opposition challenger Grigol Vashadze in the run-off. She is due to serve a six-year term.'<sup>6</sup>
- 3.2.3 The prime minister is Irakli Garibashvili<sup>7</sup>. The BBC Country Profile of 22 February 2021 noted:

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>2</sup> Al Jazeera, [Georgia vote: what you need to know...](#), 30 October 2020

<sup>3</sup> CIA World Factbook, [Georgia](#) (Government, Legislative branch), last updated: 24 February 2021

<sup>4</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>5</sup> CIA World Factbook, [Georgia](#) (Government, Executive branch), last updated: 24 February 2021

<sup>6</sup> BBC, [Georgia country profile](#), 22 February 2021

<sup>7</sup> BBC, [Georgia country profile](#), 22 February 2021

'Defence Minister Irakli Garibashvili formed a government in February 2021, following the resignation of Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia over plans to arrest opposition leader Nika Melia.

'The opposition has refused to recognise the results of the October parliamentary elections, and Mr Gakharia feared an arrest would escalate tensions.

'Mr Garibashvili is unlikely to be able to reconcile the two sides. He is close to the controversial founder of the ruling Georgian Dream party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and adopted a confrontational attitude to the opposition during an earlier term as prime minister in 2013-15.'<sup>8</sup>

- 3.2.4 See [Parliamentary elections of 31 October 2020: parties and outcome](#), [Parliamentary elections of 31 October 2020: issues](#) and [Arrest of Nika Melia](#) for further information about these issues.

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Section 4 updated: 4 May 2021

## 4. Political parties

### 4.1 Introduction

- 4.1.1 In the 'Freedom in the World' 2021 report, Freedom House noted, 'Georgia hosts a dynamic multiparty system, and new political parties have often been able to form and operate without major obstacles.'<sup>9</sup>

- 4.1.2 The report further noted:

'No laws prevent women or ethnic and religious minorities from participating in politics. Electoral reforms introduced in June 2020 included a gender quota for the proportional representation component of parliamentary elections; at least one in every four candidates on a party's list must be a woman. Nevertheless, women and minority groups and their interests remain underrepresented at all levels of government. Although a woman did become president in 2018, women won only 31 seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections. Ethnic minority groups make up an estimated 13 percent of the population, with ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis forming the largest communities. Some 17 candidates from these groups ran in the 2020 elections, though only a fraction of them won seats.'<sup>10</sup>

- 4.1.3 In February 2021, 10News (an American news website) reported:

'Both Georgian Dream and United National Movement are pro-Western and have the stated goals of establishing better relations with possible eventual membership in NATO and the European Union.

'But the UNM denounces Ivanishvili's [Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of Georgian Dream] ties to Russia and claims the party pursues pro-Russia policies. The issue is highly contentious in light of a five-day war between

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<sup>8</sup> BBC, [Georgia country profile](#), 22 February 2021

<sup>9</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>10</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

Georgia and Russia in 2008 and Russia's control of the separatist Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>11</sup>

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## 4.2 Georgian Dream

4.2.1 The Georgian Dream coalition was formed in 2012 by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili<sup>12</sup>.

4.2.2 In the 'Freedom in the World' 2021 report, Freedom House stated:

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

'Ivanishvili's policy influence has also been 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.'<sup>13</sup>

4.2.3 In February 2021, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting quoted Thornike Gordadze, a lecturer at the Paris Institute of Political Studies, who suggested that Georgian Dream's politics are driven by the interests of its oligarch founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili:

"The Georgian Dream government is a typical post-Soviet agglomeration of personalities with no clear ideology, values or geopolitical orientation," he said. "The party is entirely dominated by an oligarch, whose wealth equals 40 per cent of Georgia's GDP. The personal and financial security of this oligarch is the main objective of this party, as members are loyal to their informal leader and not to the state institutions or the constitution of Georgia."<sup>14</sup>

4.2.4 On 1 November 2020, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported:

'Many Georgians accuse the government of mishandling the economy, selective justice, weak foreign policy, and falling short of democratic standards, including the brutal dispersal of protests.

'Georgian Dream defeated the ENM [United National Movement] in the 2012 parliamentary elections and has been the ruling party ever since. However, the party lost its constitutional majority in 2019 after some lawmakers defected amid protests alleging it had failed to follow through on electoral promises, including electoral reforms.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 10 News, [Georgian opposition leader arrested...](#), 23 February 2021

<sup>12</sup> RFE/RL, [Georgian Dream claims win...](#), 1 November 2020

<sup>13</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>14</sup> IWPR, [Georgia's Political Crisis Intensifies](#), 23 February 2021

<sup>15</sup> RFE/RL, [Georgian Dream claims win...](#), 1 November 2020

- 4.2.5 In February 2021, New Europe, an independent news outlet reporting on the EU, provided an opinion on the Georgian Dream party:

‘According to the most cynical political traditions in Georgia’s political history, the Georgian Dream completely squandered the political capital that they earned when the public gave them a massive mandate in 2012. The voters who helped the Georgian Dream sweep to power a decade after the Rose Revolution never received the social justice they were promised. Instead, they were forced to live through an unfocused economic program, clannish rule in the judiciary system, rampant nepotism in the civil service, decreased direct foreign investments, a devaluation of the national currency, and clear signs of state capture. Furthermore, there are no signs that the ruling party has any plan to overcome the poverty and hopeless situation in Georgia.’<sup>16</sup>

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### 4.3 United National Movement (UNM)

- 4.3.1 The UNM was founded in 2001 by Mikheil Saakashvili<sup>17</sup>.

- 4.3.2 On 1 November 2020, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty noted that the UNM nominated former President Mikheil Saakashvili as its candidate for Prime Minister in the elections of October 2020 and reported on his terms in office:

‘Saakashvili rode the wave of the pro-Western Rose Revolution to the presidency in 2004 and served two terms in office marked by anti-government demonstrations as well as a failed war against Russia over the breakaway Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008.

‘Following Georgian Dream’s parliamentary victory in 2012 and the subsequent arrest of some former high-ranking members of his cabinet on charges of abuse of power, Saakashvili left the country in 2013.

‘A Georgian court in January 2018 convicted the former president of hiding evidence in the killing of a banker and [he] was sentenced to three years in prison. In June of that year he was also convicted of abuse of power and sentenced in absentia to six years in prison. The 52-year-old Saakashvili is in exile in Ukraine...’<sup>18</sup>

- 4.3.3 New Europe published the following in February 2021:

‘The steady support that the UNM has received in every election since 2012 indicates that the party continues to have electoral support, generally at the voters’ expense, mainly from the UNM’s strong party identification, which stems from the positive changes that the UNM brought to the country from 2004 to 2006, the first two years that the party and its leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, were in power.

‘Since being defeated by the Georgian Dream nine years ago, ... however, the UNM has never been able to capture enough votes or widespread public back [sic] to catapult the party back into power. The main reason why the UNM has relatively low popular support can be traced back to cases where it was accused of abuse of power while it was still in office.

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<sup>16</sup> New Europe, [Understanding Georgia's current political situation](#), 26 February 2021

<sup>17</sup> ECFR, [Separate ways: Contrasting elections in Georgia and Moldova](#), 19 November 2020

<sup>18</sup> RFE/RL, [Georgian Dream claims win...](#), 1 November 2020

'The UNM, particularly during the second of its time as the ruling party, was regularly accused of and tied to human and property rights violations, mass incarcerations, crackdowns on protestors and opposition groups, and widespread illegal surveillance. These major transgressions significantly neutralized the significant social and economic reforms of the UNM's early years, many of which can still be felt in present-day Georgia. However, the authoritarian and lawless behavior of the UNM's leader in recent years, the increasingly erratic Saakashvili, makes the party's future less credible for voters when it comes to a de-facto implementation of a balance of power and general democratic rule.'<sup>19</sup>

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#### 4.4 Smaller opposition parties

4.4.1 In the 'Nations in Transit 2020' report, covering the year 2019, Freedom House stated:

'In September [2019], 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 ..., just two weeks after he announced his intention to launch the new political organization. ... 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.'<sup>20</sup>

4.4.2 The article published in February 2021 by New Europe stated:

'Political parties that have recently emerged have all shared the fate of the more established parties in regards to credibility. The founder of the liberal Lelo party, Mamuka Khazaradze, is ... strongly affiliated with the country's strict banking policy and the confiscation of property for creditors because of unpaid debts.

'The right-wing libertarian positions of the party known as Girchi are unacceptable in most cases and, generally, do not represent the wishes of the majority of the population.'<sup>21</sup>

4.4.3 The same article published in February 2021 by New Europe reported that, 'One of the other main opposition parties, European Georgia, represents a splinter group that broke away from the UNM in 2016. European Georgia chose to emphasize its key differences with the UNM, but still carries the stigma for the majority of Georgians of having been a part of the UNM for a dozen years from 2004 to 2016.'<sup>22</sup>

4.4.4 In their report, 'Nations in transit 2020,' covering the year 2019, Freedom House continued, '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.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> New Europe, [Understanding Georgia's current political situation](#), 26 February 2021

<sup>20</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>21</sup> New Europe, [Understanding Georgia's current political situation](#), 26 February 2021

<sup>22</sup> New Europe, [Understanding Georgia's current political situation](#), 26 February 2021

<sup>23</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

- 4.4.5 The same report observed: ‘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 [2019] national polls, stood at 56 percent. The opposition remained weak and fractured in 2019, missing the window of opportunity opened by the government’s unpopularity.’<sup>24</sup>

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## 4.5 Polarisation

- 4.5.1 In their report, ‘Nations in transit 2020,’ covering the year 2019, Freedom House noted that ‘Polarization and radicalization of politics and the media space have become a new normal in Georgian political life.’<sup>25</sup>
- 4.5.2 The same report continued: ‘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 ... 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.’<sup>26</sup>
- 4.5.3 The report further explained that ‘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.’<sup>27</sup>
- 4.5.4 In the ‘Freedom in the World’ 2021 report, covering the year 2020, Freedom House noted that, ‘...a pattern of single-party dominance since the 2000s has inhibited the development and stability of competing groups.’<sup>28</sup>
- 4.5.5 In October 2020, Al Jazeera stated, ‘According to Edison Research’s pre-election poll, 70 percent of Georgians prefer a coalition to a one-party government. Ghia Nodia, a Georgian political analyst, says the public is seeking to change the country’s experience of “one dominant power” being replaced by another at every election since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.’<sup>29</sup>

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Section 5 updated: 4 May 2021

## 5. Key events

### 5.1 Timeline

- 5.1.1 The following timeline includes some of the key events in the recent history of Georgia:

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<sup>24</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>25</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>26</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>27</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, National democratic governance), 6 May 2020

<sup>28</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>29</sup> Al Jazeera, [Georgia vote: what you need to know...](#), 30 October 2020



1991	Georgian parliament declared secession from the Soviet Union after independence was overwhelmingly supported in a referendum <sup>30</sup> .
November 2003	Discontent over rampant corruption and ineffective government services, plus an attempt by the Government to manipulate parliamentary elections in November 2003, led to widespread protests that led to the resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been president since 1995 <sup>31</sup> .
2004	The 'Rose Revolution:' Mikheil Saakashvili and the United National Movement (UNM) came to power <sup>32</sup> .
October 2012	Georgian Dream came to power (and has remained in power ever since). Bidzina Ivanishvili became Prime Minister <sup>33</sup> .
October (first round) and November (second round) 2018	Presidential elections <sup>34</sup> . Salome Zourabichvili subsequently became President on 16 December 2018 <sup>35</sup> .
20 - 21 June 2019	<p>Anti-government protests took place in front of parliament when a member of the Russian Duma, Sergei Gavrilov, was viewed sitting in the chair of Georgia's parliamentary speaker. Between 10,000 and 30,000 people gathered in front of Parliament, and after some attempted to storm the building, police responded violently, with tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons<sup>36</sup>.</p> <p>To appease the demonstrators and following firm action taken to end the protests of June, the parliamentary speaker resigned on 21 June, and the government promised to introduce a fully proportional electoral system for the 2020 elections. However, the government led by Georgian Dream 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, the government underwent yet</p>

<sup>30</sup> BBC, [Georgia country profile](#), 22 February 2021

<sup>31</sup> CIA World Factbook, [Georgia](#) (Introduction, Background), last updated: 24 February 2021

<sup>32</sup> CIA World Factbook, [Georgia](#) (Introduction, Background), last updated: 24 February 2021

<sup>33</sup> CIA World Factbook, [Georgia](#) (Introduction, Background), last updated: 24 February 2021

<sup>34</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2018](#), 13 March 2019

<sup>35</sup> CIA World Factbook, [Georgia](#) (Government, Executive branch), last updated: 24 February 2021

<sup>36</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

	another reshuffle in September, and Gakharia was promoted to prime minister <sup>37</sup> .
November 2019	Georgian Dream backtracked on its significant promise of fully proportional electoral lists by 2020, leading to protests by opposition and civil activists <sup>38</sup> .
31 October 2020	Parliamentary elections took place, with Georgian Dream elected <sup>39</sup> . The opposition refused to recognise the election results <sup>40</sup> .
18 February 2021	Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned in protest over plans to arrest the leader of the main opposition party, the UNM, Nika Melia <sup>41</sup> .
22 February 2021	Irakli Garibashvili became Prime Minister <sup>42</sup> .
23 February 2021	Nika Melia, leader of the UNM, was arrested <sup>43</sup> .
26 February 2021	Protests took place in Tbilisi involving several thousand opposition supporters. A statement from Nika Melia was read out, calling for the release of political prisoners <sup>44</sup> .
20 April 2021	The Georgian government and opposition party leaders signed an agreement which paved the way for the release of two jailed opposition figures (Nika Melia, leader of the UNM, and Giorgi Rurua, owner of an opposition-affiliated television station), set out various electoral and judicial reforms and would allow parliament to function more normally after months in which many opposition MPs have refused to take their seats following disputes related to the country's October national election <sup>45</sup> .

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## 5.2 Presidential election of 2018

5.2.1 In the 'Freedom in the World' 2021 report, Freedom House set out the following:

'In 2018, Salome Zourabichvili, an independent former foreign minister supported by Georgian Dream, won about 60 percent of the vote in the

<sup>37</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>38</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Electoral process), 6 May 2020

<sup>39</sup> Georgia Today, [Georgia's 2020 Parliamentary Elections...](#), 5 November 2020

<sup>40</sup> BBC, [Georgia profile - Timeline](#), 29 January 2019

<sup>41</sup> BBC, [Georgia PM Giorgi Gakharia...](#), 18 February 2021

<sup>42</sup> PR Newswire, [Irakli Garibashvili confirmed as new Prime Minister...](#), 22 February 2021

<sup>43</sup> BBC, [Nika Melia, Georgian opposition leader...](#), 23 February 2021

<sup>44</sup> Jamestown Foundation, [Protests in Georgia increase...](#), 1 March 2021

<sup>45</sup> Politico, [EU Brokers Deal to End Political Deadlock in Georgia](#), 20 April 2021

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 and 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 Georgian Dream chairman, promised to write off the debts of over 600,000 Georgians—about one in six eligible voters.’<sup>46</sup>

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### 5.3 Anti-government protests: 2019

5.3.1 In the ‘Nations in transit 2020’ report, which covered the year 2019, Freedom House observed:

‘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. 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, 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.’<sup>47</sup>

5.3.2 Also reporting on the anti-government protests of June 2019, Al Jazeera noted that ‘At least two people lost an eye and dozens received other injuries ... when police used water cannon and rubber bullets to disperse protesters...’<sup>48</sup>

5.3.3 The Freedom House ‘Nations in transit 2020’ report, covering events of 2019, noted that this spontaneous demonstration took place on 20 June 2019 and that demonstrators seemed to be supported by United National Movement parliamentarians<sup>49</sup>. Furthermore, ‘The brutal crackdown sparked continuous protests organized mostly by youth.’<sup>50</sup>

5.3.4 The report further noted events of November 2019:

‘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

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<sup>46</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>47</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>48</sup> Al Jazeera, [Georgia vote: what you need to know...](#), 30 October 2020

<sup>49</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia), 6 May 2020

<sup>50</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia), 6 May 2020

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. Moreover, a worrying 59 percent of respondents did not think of Georgia as a democracy—a dramatic shift in the past year.<sup>51</sup>

5.3.5 In the same report, Freedom House stated:

'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.'<sup>52</sup>

5.3.6 See [Parliamentary elections of 31 October 2020: issues](#) for further information about anti-government protests following these elections. See [Arrest of Nika Melia](#), who was accused of inciting protests, for further information on this subject. See [Police](#) for further information about police handling of protests. See [Detention and prosecution](#) for information about detentions and prosecutions following the protests.

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5.4 [Parliamentary elections of 31 October 2020: parties and outcome](#)

5.4.1 CIA World Factbook noted that Parliamentary elections were held on 31 October and 21 November 2020 (and are next to be held in October 2024)<sup>53</sup>.

5.4.2 Al Jazeera reported that two electoral blocs and 48 parties participated in the elections, adding that Georgian Dream's 'main rivals' were United National Movement, European Georgia party and the Lelo party<sup>54</sup>.

5.4.3 CIA World Factbook recorded the results of the elections as follows:

'per cent of vote by party - Georgian Dream 48.2%, UNM 27.2%, European Georgia 3.8%, Lelo 3.2%, Strategy 3.2%, Alliance of Patriots 3.1%, Girchi 2.9%, Citizens 1.3%, Labor 1%;

'seats by party - Georgian Dream 90, UNM 36, European Georgia 5, Lelo 4, Strategy 4, Alliance of Patriots 4, Girchi 4, Citizens 2, Labor 1'<sup>55</sup>

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5.5 [Parliamentary elections of 31 October 2020: issues](#)

5.5.1 Having launched a long-term observation mission to the 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia in March 2020, the Georgian Young Lawyer's

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<sup>51</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>52</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>53</sup> CIA World Factbook, [Georgia](#) (Government, Legislative branch), last updated: 24 February 2021

<sup>54</sup> Al Jazeera, [Georgia vote: what you need to know...](#), 30 October 2020

<sup>55</sup> CIA World Factbook, [Georgia](#) (Government, Legislative branch), last updated: 24 February 2021

Association (GYLA) published a report covering violations identified from June to August 2020, in which it noted:

‘The steps taken by the state to mitigate the effects of the crisis have proved to be particularly problematic. Every government must undertake an obligation to draw a sharp line between the state and political parties at such times. Unfortunately, this was not the case in Georgia. The Government personalized the anti-crisis activities, thus promoting the perception of its affiliation with them. Consequently, the actions conducted by the Government have been, on certain occasions, observed as a part of a pre-election campaign or even manipulation of voters.

‘According to the law, only those political activities that take place sixty days prior to the polling day shall be considered as an election campaign. In certain cases, the ruling party exploited this provision and used public resources in their activities shortly before the restrictions came into force. The aforementioned practice undermines confidence in the electoral process.

‘During the reporting period, multiple cases of vote buying were recorded carried out by both government officials and opposition parties. The most large-scale vote buying is the humanitarian aid provided by the political party “Lelo” through the “Movement for the Future – Momo” across the country. Other cases are related to the parties “Georgian Dream”, “Progress and Freedom” and “Alliance of Patriots of Georgia”.

‘As in the previous elections, the GYLA observation mission noted several incidents of violence in the pre-election environment. The organization believes that state authorities must investigate these cases effectively and in a timely manner. This will substantially improve the pre-election situation and have a further preventive effect in conducting the campaign peacefully in the coming months.

‘With the election approaching, there have been single cases of interference with pre-election activities when representatives of opposition parties, including “Lelo” and the “Movement for the People,” were not allowed to conduct planned activities. These cases create additional tension in the election environment and contradict the principle of fair political competition. In this respect, an unjustified termination of the authority of an opposition member of Khelvachauri Municipality City Hall is worth noting.

‘Overall, GYLA’s observers have identified violations perpetrated by both the ruling party and the opposition, which are as follows:

- Five cases of ignoring the requirement to separate the state and political party (including the anti-crisis plan developed for the elimination of the consequences of COVID-19);
- Five cases of vote buying and alleged vote buying;
- Six cases of Violent Actions, Making Tense Pre-election Environment and Hampering Preelection Agitation.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> GYLA, [2020 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia...](#), 2020

5.5.2 On election day, GYLA posted more than 800 observers across the country, covering up to 2,250 precincts in total. GYLA made the following observations on the election day:

‘In the opinion of the GYLA, the day of the parliamentary elections of 31 October 2020 passed with significant shortcomings at every stage of the polling day. The tense atmosphere during the day affected both voter behavior and the monitoring of the process itself. Violence and problems related to free expression of voters’ will are among the leading characteristics of yesterday’s elections. Added to this is the disorganization of precinct election commissions (PECs), including in the area of enforcement of the rules issued to contain the pandemic.

‘The polling day revealed negative trends that were related to:

- Control of voters’ will (during the entire day, one could observe concentration of individuals in areas adjacent to polling places, which created an atmosphere of surveillance during the polling process and interfered with free expression of voters’ will);
- Violation of the principle of the secrecy of the vote;
- Violation of inking and voting rules; there were a number of cases of voting without inking and/or repeated voting by one and the same person, as well as cases of allowing voters to enter polling places and cast a vote with irrelevant documentation;
- Violations related to the mobile [ballot] box;
- Movement of unauthorized individuals around the territory of precincts.

**‘The GYLA’s ability to observe certain precincts was limited.** There were incidents when our observers became objects of aggression and physical assault. In a number of cases, the observers were not allowed to enter a remark in the log-book and register a complaint at the precinct. Two observers were forced to leave the precincts.

‘An observer of the GYLA became an object of pressure from the united opposition and organizations affiliated to them.

‘In the second half of the day, the tense atmosphere **was especially evident at polling stations and in areas outside them**, which, in some cases, grew into physical confrontation and violence. There were cases of violence against journalists and interference with their activities, which the GYLA assessed negatively and called on the MIA [Ministry of Internal Affairs] to respond in a timely and effective manner.

**‘Incidents of alleged vote buying** were observed in areas adjacent to polling places in Kareli and Khashuri (the observers identified cases of hand-to-hand transfer of money).’<sup>57</sup>

5.5.3 The OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) deployed a Limited Election Observation Mission to Georgia and noted that the elections:

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<sup>57</sup> GYLA, [Evaluation of the parliamentary elections of 31 October 2020](#), 1 November 2020

‘...were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected. Nevertheless, pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state reduced public confidence in some aspects of the process. The elections were conducted under a substantially revised legal framework that provided a sound basis for holding democratic elections, but further efforts to address shortcomings are needed. The technical aspects of the elections were managed efficiently, despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the dominance of the ruling party in the election commissions negatively affected the perception of their impartiality and independence, especially at the lower levels. The overall framework for campaign financing, including high spending limits, disadvantaged smaller and new parties.’<sup>58</sup>

5.5.4 The same report continued:

‘The freedoms of assembly, association, and expression were mostly respected, and contestants were generally able to campaign freely and without undue restrictions. However, intimidation of party supporters and public sector employees was reported widely. The line between the ruling party and the state was often blurred, contrary to OSCE commitments and international good practice. ... Furthermore, the ODIHR LEOM [Limited Election Observation Mission] noted that aspects of the legislation advantaged more established political parties to the detriment of newer and smaller ones.’<sup>59</sup>

5.5.5 The report further stated:

‘In the limited number of polling stations visited, the voting process was transparent and procedures were mostly followed. The widespread presence of party coordinators and activists, often acting on behalf [sic] of the ruling party, outside of most observed polling stations was considered intimidating by a number of ODIHR LEOM interlocutors. Several citizen observer organizations conducted long-term observation and deployed short-term observers on election day, contributing to overall transparency.’<sup>60</sup>

5.5.6 In the ‘Freedom in the World’ 2021 report, Freedom House reported on the elections as follows:

‘After the first round, preliminary Central Election Commission (CEC) figures showed some Georgian Dream candidates winning over 100 percent of the votes in their races, which the commission blamed on a technical error. A parallel tabulation from the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a nongovernmental organization (NGO), suggested major discrepancies, though ISFED disclosed an error in its own data in December.

‘... Voter turnout for the runoff stood at 26 percent, the lowest recorded since independence.’<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> OSCE, ODIHR, [Georgia, Parliamentary elections, 31 October 2020](#) (page 1), 5 March 2021

<sup>59</sup> OSCE, ODIHR, [Georgia, Parliamentary elections, 31 October 2020](#) (page 3), 5 March 2021

<sup>60</sup> OSCE, ODIHR, [Georgia, Parliamentary elections, 31 October 2020](#) (page 4), 5 March 2021

<sup>61</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

- 5.5.7 In the World Report 2021, Human Rights Watch reported that ‘Political tensions rose in Georgia following the October 31 [2020] parliamentary elections. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party maintained a parliamentary majority amid allegations of fraud, prompting the opposition to boycott the new parliament.’<sup>62</sup>
- 5.5.8 The same report continued, ‘Local election-monitoring groups called it “the least democratic and free among elections” held under GD rule. They criticized election-day incidents such as verbal and physical confrontations against journalists and observers, numerous cases of breach of voting secrecy, and vote-buying.’<sup>63</sup>
- 5.5.9 The report further noted, ‘In July, the EU delegation in Georgia welcomed the adoption of the election reform package and expressed regret that Georgia did not use this opportunity to address other electoral shortcomings, such as voter intimidation, dispute resolution, and commission compositions.’<sup>64</sup>
- 5.5.10 In February 2021, the BBC noted, ‘Georgia has been rocked by protests since parliamentary elections in October [2020], with the opposition accusing the ruling Georgian Dream party of rigging the poll and intimidating voters.’<sup>65</sup> The report added, ...‘opposition MPs continue to boycott parliament over October's disputed election results.’<sup>66</sup>

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## 5.6 Arrest of Nika Melia

- 5.6.1 On 23 February 2021, the BBC reported the arrest of Nika Melia, leader of the United National Movement:

‘Police in Georgia have arrested the country's main opposition leader, Nika Melia, in a violent raid on his party's headquarters. They used tear gas to disperse his supporters, some of whom had barricaded themselves inside with their leader. Mr Melia was eventually dragged out of the building in the capital Tbilisi by riot police.

‘The case against him dates back to anti-government protests in 2019, but comes amid a wider political crisis. Georgia has been rocked by protests since parliamentary elections in October [2020], with the opposition accusing the ruling Georgian Dream party of rigging the poll and intimidating voters...

‘Nika Melia, who leads the opposition United National Movement, is accused of inciting violence in street protests in June 2019, and a court last week ordered his arrest for refusing to pay an increased bail fee in the case. He denies the charges, and says they are "part of ongoing repressions against the opposition". He faces a nine-year sentence if convicted...

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<sup>62</sup> HRW, [World Report 2021](#) (Georgia, Parliamentary elections), 13 January 2021

<sup>63</sup> HRW, [World Report 2021](#) (Georgia), 13 January 2021

<sup>64</sup> HRW, [World Report 2021](#) (Georgia), 13 January 2021

<sup>65</sup> BBC, [Nika Melia, Georgian opposition leader...](#), 23 February 2021

<sup>66</sup> BBC, [Nika Melia, Georgian opposition leader...](#), 23 February 2021



‘According to local news reports, at least 20 people were also detained and later released. The raid has drawn swift condemnation from the US and UK embassies in Georgia.’<sup>67</sup>

5.6.2 Again on 23 February 2021, The Guardian reported:

‘The escalation has forced western countries to intervene – at least verbally – calling on both the opposition and the government to exercise restraint and avoid risking a political standoff that could descend into bloodshed....

“Shocked by the scenes at UNM headquarters this morning,” Mark Clayton, the UK ambassador to Tbilisi, wrote in a tweet. “Violence and chaos in Tbilisi are the last thing Georgia needs right now. I urge all sides to act with restraint, now and in the coming days.”

‘The US embassy had previously issued a “call on the authorities and the opposition to exercise maximum restraint in the wake of tonight’s ruling. Violence serves no one except those who want to undermine Georgia’s stability. This must be resolved peacefully.”

‘Georgian police officials defended Tuesday’s raid, saying they used “proportional force” against the opposition members.

‘A UNM leader told Agence France-Presse that police had also “stolen computer servers” from the party’s headquarters.’<sup>68</sup>

5.6.3 In April 2021, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported:

‘A court in Tbilisi has ordered the continued detention of the leader of the main opposition party, Nika Melia... Judge Nino Chakrnashvili handed down her decision on April 13 while hundreds of Melia's supporters rallied outside the court building demanding release of the leader of the United National Movement (ENM). Melia went on trial on April 8 charged with organizing “mass violence” during 2019 anti-government protests. Melia has rejected the charge, calling it politically motivated, which the ruling Georgian Dream party denies. The decision to arrest Melia after he refused to pay an increased bail bond led to the resignation of Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia in February. Gakharia said Melia's arrest was unacceptable if it threatened to fuel political divisions in the country of 3.7 million people... The 41-year-old politician faces up to nine years in prison if found guilty.’<sup>69</sup>

5.6.4 See [Anti-government protests: 2019](#) for further information on this subject. See [Accord of April 2021](#) for information about the possible release from detention of Nika Melia.

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## 5.7 Anti-government protests: 2021

5.7.1 In March 2021, Jamestown Foundation reported:

‘After the arrest of the UNM party chairperson, the opposition leaders declared that any substantive negotiations with the ruling party would be possible only after “the release of all political prisoners,” including Melia. “...

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<sup>67</sup> BBC, [Nika Melia, Georgian opposition leader...](#), 23 February 2021

<sup>68</sup> The Guardian, [Police arrest Georgian opposition leader after storming party HQ](#), 23 February 2021

<sup>69</sup> RFE/RL [Georgian Opposition Leader Remanded In Detention Amid Protests](#), 13 April 2021

‘At the same time, on Tbilisi’s central Rustaveli Avenue, in front of the national legislature, the opposition is holding a long-term anti-government protest. On February 26, at the beckoning and direction of UNM’s founder, former president Mikhail Saakashvili, and other opposition leaders, several thousand UO [United Opposition, which includes UNM] supporters converged on the parliament building. One of the UNM’s top officials, former Ukrainian National Police head Khatia Dekanoidze, read out Nikanor Melia’s statement the latter posted from prison. Namely, Melia called on “all freedom-loving Georgians” to take to the streets to “preserve the country’s independence” and with the aim of “achieving the release of political prisoners”—not only him but additionally television channel Mtavari Arkhi founder Giorgi Rurua ...

‘Demonstrators set up 11 tents near the parliament ... and then opposition leaders unveiled their plan for a “permanent protest movement.” This would involve picketing the parliament during plenary sessions, organizing “corridors of shame” for ruling GD deputies, picketing the State Chancellery (where the office of Prime Minister Garibashvili is located), rallying outside the city court that had ordered Melia’s arrest earlier this month, as well as holding large-scale actions on Rustaveli Avenue....

‘The first such action took place on March 1: several non-governmental organizations (NGO) staged a march toward the former residence of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who recently announced that he was leaving politics and stepping down as party chairperson of GD.’<sup>70</sup>

5.7.2 See [Television and journalism](#) for further information about Giorgi Rurua.

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## 5.8 Accord of April 2021

5.8.1 On 20 April 2021, Politico reported:

‘The Georgian government and opposition party leaders agreed [on 19 April] to end a political standoff and signed an accord brokered by European Council President Charles Michel.

‘The agreement paves the way for the release of two jailed opposition figures, sets forth an array of electoral and judicial reforms and, most crucially, will allow parliament to function more normally after months in which many opposition MPs had refused to take their seats because of lingering disputes related to the country’s October national election....

‘Indeed, the agreement ... [has] come up with various mechanisms to resolve the most difficult aspects of the political standoff in Georgia, including how to arrange the release from prison of Nick Melia, the leader of a main opposition party, United National Movement, and Giorgi Rurua, an owner of an opposition-affiliated television station.

‘The agreement stated: “The signatories commit to address, within one week of signing this agreement, the two cases of perceived politicized justice, either by an amnesty and/or by taking such steps as to produce an equivalent outcome.”

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<sup>70</sup> Jamestown Foundation, [Protests in Georgia increase...](#), 1 March 2021

“Equivalent outcome” was a clear reference to the possibility of a presidential pardon...

‘Melia’s party refused to endorse the agreement, but enough MPs, including from United National Movement, signed on individually that it meant parliament would finally be able to convene and function following the disputed election in October.

‘Giga Bokeria, a leader of the opposition European Georgia party who did not sign on to the deal, said the agreement was “incomplete and inadequate” because it failed to address the broader problem of politically motivated prosecutions and underlying weaknesses in the country’s political system. Bokeria also said that the president’s statement suggested that she was going along reluctantly. ...

‘The agreement ... calls for a menu of reforms, including a new power-sharing agreement in parliament, as well as a plan to raise the vote threshold required for lifting the parliamentary immunity of MPs. The agreement also calls for changes to the electoral system, including fully proportional parliamentary elections.

‘Perhaps most controversially, the deal sets a trigger for a potential snap parliamentary election if Georgian Dream, the governing party, fails to achieve a 43 percent threshold in local elections later this year. Some opposition groups had demanded an immediate snap election, citing the resignation of Giorgi Gakharia as prime minister in February.’<sup>71</sup>

- 5.8.2 See [Arrest of Nika Melia](#) for further information on this subject. See [Television and journalism](#) for further information about Giorgi Rurua.

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Section 6 updated: 4 May 2021

## 6. State actions and state bodies

### 6.1 Treatment of opponents

- 6.1.1 On 8 March 2021, Jamestown Foundation reported the following:

‘On March 6, TV Pirveli—an independent station critical of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and rumored to be affiliated with the leading opposition party, United National Movement (UNM)—aired recordings of an alleged telephone conversation between members of the current government and Bera Ivanishvili, the son of GD’s founder, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. The released tapes appeared to feature Bera, in 2017, tasking his father’s close confidants, Irakli Garibashvili (former minister of interior and the current prime minister) and Anzor Chubinidze (then and now serving as the chief of the Special State Guard Service), with cracking down on some youths who made online posts insulting him and the Ivanishvili family. In the recorded conversation, Garibashvili seems to encourage the punitive actions after learning of the disparaging posts. The highly sensitive leaked audio

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<sup>71</sup> Politico, [EU brokers deal to end political deadlock in Georgia](#), 20 April 2021

sent shock waves through Georgian society and put GD in an awkward political situation.<sup>72</sup>

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## 6.2 Police

### 6.2.1 In a review of 2019, 'Human Rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia,' Amnesty International reported:

'Police used disproportionate and indiscriminate force on 20 June [2019] to disperse an anti-government demonstration of thousands in Tbilisi. Police fired rubber bullets and tear gas after some participants tried to storm the Parliament building. Video footage and witness testimonies showed that police fired indiscriminately into the crowd failing to distinguish between the few violent protestors and the peaceful majority. Around 240 people were injured during the dispersal, including up to 40 journalists. More than 100 participants were detained on charges of confronting police and obstructing public order; most of them were released after having spent up to 15 days in administrative detention.'<sup>73</sup>

### 6.2.2 Reporting on the protests of June 2019 in their 'Nations in transit 2020' report, Freedom House noted:

'... 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. 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.

'The Georgian government was widely criticized for this excessive use of force.'<sup>74</sup>

### 6.2.3 Freedom House continued to describe events of 2019: '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. The November protests were again dispersed, wherein Georgia's ombudsman assessed the police's methods and the proportionality of use of force as "questionable." Meanwhile, 37 new arrests took place under the administrative code in 2019.'<sup>75</sup>

### 6.2.4 In the World Report 2021, reporting on the year 2020, Human Rights Watch noted, 'On November 8, police used water cannons, without warning, against dozens of peaceful protesters who had gathered outside the central election commission building to protest alleged election violations.'<sup>76</sup>

### 6.2.5 See [Anti-government protests](#) for further information on this subject. See [Impunity](#) for information about the release of those police officers who had been arrested following their actions during the anti-government protests.

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<sup>72</sup> Jamestown Foundation, [Can Russia capitalize...](#), 8 March 2021

<sup>73</sup> Amnesty International, [Human Rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Review of 2019](#), 2020

<sup>74</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia), 6 May 2020

<sup>75</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Judicial framework & indep...), 6 May 2020

<sup>76</sup> HRW, [World Report 2021](#) (Georgia), 13 January 2021

### 6.3 Detention and prosecution

- 6.3.1 In the report on ‘Human Rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia,’ covering events of 2019, Amnesty International reported on actions taken following the protests of June 2019: ‘Authorities launched a criminal investigation into the events, prosecuting 17 participants of the demonstration including one opposition member of parliament, on charges of participating in or organizing group violence, and four police officers on charges related to disproportionate use of force.’<sup>77</sup>
- 6.3.2 With reference to the protests of June 2019, Freedom House noted the following in the ‘Nations in transit 2020’ report, which covered events of 2019: ‘At year’s end, 15 protesters, including former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili, remained in custody, charged with organizing and leading the public unrest.’<sup>78</sup>
- 6.3.3 Reporting on the demonstrations of June 2019, the USSD HR Report 2020 stated that the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association concluded that the authorities had used “excessive and unnecessary force” against individuals in police custody and that police subjected some individuals to mistreatment during and after their detention<sup>79</sup>.
- 6.3.4 The same report continued:  
‘In a joint September 2019 statement, 16 local NGOs expressed alarm concerning what they termed an “increased number of politically motivated criminal investigations and prosecutions.” They cited as examples the criminal case against the two founders of TBC Bank..., the criminal cases against the former director of the television station Rustavi 2 and against the father of the owner of TV Pirveli..., and some cases of incarceration of those who in June 2019 protested Russia’s occupation of parts of the country’s territory, including opposition party leader Irakli Okruashvili....’<sup>80</sup>
- 6.3.5 See [Smaller opposition parties](#) for information about the position of Mamuka Khazaradze, former head of TBC Bank. See [Television and journalism](#) for information about Nika Gvaramia, former director of Rustavi 2, and for information about the father of the owner of TV Pirveli. See [Detention and prosecution](#) for further information on these subjects.
- 6.3.6 Covering the year 2020, the report continued:  
‘Opposition party members and family members of prisoners stated the government held political prisoners. On May 15, President Salome Zourabichvili pardoned and released from incarceration European Georgia leader Gigi Ugulava and Victorious Georgia founder Irakli Okruashvili. Opposition parties had demanded their release based on a March 8 pre-election agreement with the ruling Georgian Dream party. Opposition parties and the international community welcomed the pardons.

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<sup>77</sup> Amnesty International, [Human Rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia - Review of 2019](#), 2020

<sup>78</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>79</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#), 30 March 2021

<sup>80</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#) (Section E), 30 March 2021

‘The opposition continued to urge the release of opposition figure Giorgi Rurua, characterizing him as a political prisoner whose release was envisioned under the March 8 political agreement between ruling and opposition parties. In addition to election system changes, the agreement contained a provision that the government would address the appearance of political interference in the judicial system. On July 30, Rurua was sentenced to four years’ imprisonment on two charges. On August 4, nine NGOs expressed concerns the case against Rurua was politically motivated and stated, “Prosecution on political grounds has recently become a weapon to influence political opponents or critical media outlets.”

‘The government permitted international and domestic organizations to visit persons claiming to be political prisoners or detainees, and several international organizations did so.’<sup>81</sup>

- 6.3.7 See [Anti-government protests](#) for further information on this subject. See [Impunity](#) for information about the release of those police officers who had been arrested following their actions during the anti-government protests.

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## 6.4 The judiciary

- 6.4.1 In the ‘Nations in transit 2020’ report, covering the year 2019, Freedom House noted: ‘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.’<sup>82</sup>

- 6.4.2 The USSD HR Report 2020 stated:

‘Although the constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, there remained indications of interference in judicial independence and impartiality. Judges were vulnerable to political pressure from within and outside the judiciary.

‘The Public Defender’s Office, the Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary, and the international community continued to raise concerns regarding a lack of judicial independence. During the year they highlighted problems, including the influence of a group of judges primarily consisting of High Council of Justice members and court chairs that allegedly stifled critical opinions within the judiciary and obstructed proposals to strengthen judicial independence. NGOs referred to this group of influential and nonreformist judges as the “clan.” Other problems they highlighted included the impact of the High Council’s powers on the independence of individual judges, manipulation of the case distribution system, a lack of transparency in the High Council’s activities, and shortcomings in the High Council’s appointments of judges and court chairpersons...

‘In December 2019 parliament passed a “fourth wave” of judicial reform... The package... left the authority to select individual court chairs with the

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<sup>81</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#) (Section E), 30 March 2021

<sup>82</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

High Council of Justice; NGOs warned this power would allow the High Council to continue to influence individual judges...

'The long-standing practice of transferring judges from one court to another also remained a problem. The decisions regarding transfers were made by the High Council of Justice; however, these decisions were unsubstantiated. NGOs warned of transfers of judges without competition to the administrative chambers and boards two months prior to the October 31 parliamentary elections in the three most strategic and overcrowded courts, the Tbilisi and Kutaisi Courts of Appeal and the Tbilisi City Court. Administrative chambers adjudicate election disputes. Most of the judges transferred to administrative chambers panels were affiliated with the "clan," and almost all of them were associated with high-profile cases. NGOs reported the courts did not serve as an effective check over election administration bodies following the October 31 parliamentary elections while reviewing appeals against decisions made by the Precinct and District Election Commission. According to statistics published on November 12 by the High Court of Justice, 96 election disputes reached the court system. The courts sustained only 16 percent of them.'<sup>83</sup>

6.4.3 In the 'Freedom in the World' 2021 report, which covered the year 2020, Freedom House stated:

'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 rather than the president nominates Supreme Court judges; Parliament then approves the judges. A judicial self-governing body elects most council members. In December 2018, the council presented a list of Supreme Court nominees, but a coalition of 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. In December 2019, Parliament ultimately confirmed 14 Supreme Court justices, though opposition members refused to participate. Observers from the Council of Europe and other institutions criticized the appointments, saying the candidates did not demonstrate the requisite knowledge or impartiality to serve.

'Parliament passed further judicial reforms in September 2020, preempting an opinion from the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. In an October statement, the council's representatives noted that some of its recommendations had been implemented, but criticized Parliament's decision to preempt the review, which the government had requested.'<sup>84</sup>

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## 6.5 Due process

6.5.1 Article 40 of the Constitution of Georgia states:

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<sup>83</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#) (Section 1.E), 30 March 2021

<sup>84</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

‘1. An individual shall be presumed innocent until found guilty as provided for by law and by a final court judgement of conviction.

‘2. No one shall be obliged to prove his/her innocence. Burden of proof shall rest with the prosecutor.

‘3. A decision to commit an accused for trial, bill of indictment, and judgement of conviction shall be based only on incontrovertible evidence. Any suspicion that cannot be proved as provided for by law shall be solved in favour of the accused.’<sup>85</sup>

- 6.5.2 However, in the ‘Freedom in the World’ 2021 report, covering the year 2020, Freedom House noted that ‘A number of perceived opponents of the government have faced prosecutions in recent years that were widely seen as selective or politically motivated.’<sup>86</sup>

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## 6.6 Impunity

- 6.6.1 In the ‘Nations in transit 2020’ report, covering the year 2019, Freedom House noted that although 15 people who had taken part in the protests of June 2019 remained in detention at the end of the year, ‘By contrast, the three law enforcement officers charged with exceeding official power were later released on various grounds.’<sup>87</sup>

- 6.6.2 In its report ‘Human Rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia,’ covering events of 2019, Amnesty International reported that ‘Trust in prosecutorial and investigatory agencies decreased further as investigations into alleged human rights violations by state officials were not completed.’<sup>88</sup>

- 6.6.3 The USSD HR Report 2020 stated:

‘The effectiveness of government mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse by law enforcement officials and security forces was limited, and domestic and international concern regarding impunity remained high. As of November the Investigative Department of the State Inspector’s Service had commenced 256 criminal investigations; four of 256 cases investigated by the State Inspector’s Service were prosecuted, and convictions were obtained in three case... impunity remained a problem, including a lack of accountability for the inappropriate police force used against journalists and protesters during June 2019 demonstrations.’<sup>89</sup>

- 6.6.4 In its World Report 2021 Human Rights Watch stated:

‘Lack of accountability for law enforcement abuses persisted, particularly with regard to incidents that took place before the State Inspector’s Office became operational. The investigation into June 2019 events, when riot police fired rubber bullets and used tear gas against thousands of protesters outside the parliament building in Tbilisi, continued to be largely one-sided. According to the public defender, who was allowed to monitor the

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<sup>85</sup> [Constitution of Georgia](#), 24 August 1995

<sup>86</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>87</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Executive summary), 6 May 2020

<sup>88</sup> Amnesty International, [Human Rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia - Review of 2019](#), 2020

<sup>89</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#), 30 March 2021



proceedings, the investigation “only focused on the offenses committed by rank-and-file police officers but failed to objectively or fully assess command responsibility.”<sup>90</sup>

- 6.6.5 See [Anti-government protests](#) and [Police](#) for further information on these subjects.

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## 6.7 Corruption

- 6.7.1 In the ‘Freedom in the World’ 2021 report, Freedom House reported on events in 2020:

‘While petty corruption has become less common, corruption within government persists. In some cases, it has allegedly taken the form of nepotism or cronyism in government hiring and procurement. 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.

‘Businesspeople with links to Georgian Dream received COVID-19-related public contracts during 2020; between April and June, a contributor to President Zourabichvili’s campaign received several tenders, including a \$1.3 million deal with the Health Ministry. In April, a firm owned by another party supporter secured a contract to produce four million face masks for a foundation controlled by Ivanishvili.’<sup>91</sup>

- 6.7.2 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted that, ‘The Law on Conflict of Interest and Corruption in Public Service is in place, but practical enforcement is almost non-existent...

‘The integrity of MPs and other political officials is a concern in Georgia. There is a wide and strong public perception of the high level of corruption among the politicians. There are no specific integrity rules for MPs or members of the Government, and general conflict of interests and integrity rules that are applicable to them are not properly enforced, violations are not sanctioned.’<sup>92</sup>

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Section 7 updated: 4 May 2021

## 7. Societal freedoms and activities

### 7.1 Freedom of assembly

- 7.1.1 In the ‘Freedom in the World’ 2021 report, Freedom House stated that ‘Freedom of assembly is often respected, but police sometimes respond to demonstrations with excessive force.’<sup>93</sup>
- 7.1.2 The USSD HR Report 2020, covering events in 2020, stated:

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<sup>90</sup> HRW, [World Report 2021](#), 13 January 2021

<sup>91</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>92</sup> OECD, ‘[Anti-corruption reforms in Georgia](#)’, 2016

<sup>93</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

‘The constitution and law generally provide for freedom of assembly. Human rights organizations expressed concern, however, regarding provisions in the law, including the requirement that political parties and other organizations give five days’ notice to local authorities to assemble in a public area, thereby precluding spontaneous demonstrations. The Public Defender’s Office and NGOs reported that police sometimes restricted, or ineffectively managed, freedom of assembly...

‘While a number of protests took place during the year, there were reports that police restricted freedom of assembly at times...’<sup>94</sup>

- 7.1.3 See [Anti-government protests: 2019](#), [Anti-government protests: 2021](#) and [Police](#) for further information on these subjects.

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## 7.2 Freedom of expression

- 7.2.1 In the ‘Freedom in the World’ 2021 report, covering 2020, Freedom House stated that:

‘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 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.

‘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 politics.’<sup>95</sup>

- 7.2.2 The USSD HR Report 2020 stated, ‘During the year journalists, NGOs, and the international community raised serious concerns regarding the environment for media pluralism. In addition to raising such concerns, the Public Defender’s Office noted in its April parliamentary report covering 2019 that the country continued to lack proper statistics on offenses committed against journalists.’<sup>96</sup>

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## 7.3 Social media

- 7.3.1 In the ‘Nations in transit 2020’ report, covering the year 2019, Freedom House stated: ‘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. This trend

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<sup>94</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#), 30 March 2021

<sup>95</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>96</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#), 30 March 2021

continued in 2019 and may pose a challenge for democratic conduct of the next election in 2020.<sup>97</sup>

### 7.3.2 The same report noted:

‘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 [2019] demonstrations, grassroots youth movements became the subject of a targeted discrediting campaign on Facebook that claimed the movements were connected to the UNM.’<sup>98</sup>

### 7.3.3 In the ‘Freedom in the World’ report 2021, Freedom House stated that ‘In December 2019, Facebook announced that it had taken down hundreds of Georgian accounts and pages for fraudulently posing as media outlets and news organizations. Their content supported the Georgian Dream government, and Facebook traced them to the government and a Georgian advertising agency. In May 2020, ISFED [International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy] identified continued inauthentic pro–Georgian Dream social media activity.’<sup>99</sup>

### 7.3.4 The USSD HR Report 2020, published in March 2021, stated, ‘The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, but concerns remained regarding unauthorized surveillance.’<sup>100</sup>

### 7.3.5 The OSCE ODIHR reported on the election campaign of October 2020, noting that, ‘A vibrant campaign was conducted in media and online, with many contestants turning to Facebook to connect with voters, but there was little discussion of substantive issues.’<sup>101</sup>

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## 7.4 Television and journalism

### 7.4.1 In the annual report published in April 2020 and covering the year 2019, Amnesty International stated:

‘Concerns over media freedom persisted, specifically in cases of widely perceived, or as reported in opposition media, politically motivated prosecution of government critics.

‘In August, media manager and outspoken government critic Nika Gvaramia was charged with abuse of authority during his time as director of a pro-opposition TV channel, Rustavi 2. In subsequent months, additional charges related to misappropriation of funds and fraud were pressed against him. Conspicuously, these charges followed a long-standing legal battle over Rustavi 2 ownership which passed into the hands of its former owners who were known for their support of the government.

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<sup>97</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Electoral process), 6 May 2020

<sup>98</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Civil society), 6 May 2020

<sup>99</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>100</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#) (Section 2.A), 30 March 2021

<sup>101</sup> OSCE, ODIHR, [Georgia, Parliamentary elections, 31 October 2020](#), 5 March 2021

‘Another high-profile case involved businessman Mamuka Khazaradze, charged with money laundering. He claimed the authorities had sent him a threatening letter in 2018 demanding that TV Pirveli, owned by his business partner, change its editorial policy. In August, the father of TV Pirveli’s owner was also charged under the same case of alleged money laundering.’<sup>102</sup>

7.4.2 In the ‘Nations in transit 2020’ report, which covered the year 2019, Freedom House stated that ‘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.’<sup>103</sup>

7.4.3 In its 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) stated:

‘Police violence against journalists is less frequent but continues, and threats are still common. The investigation into Azerbaijani dissident journalist Afgan Mukhtarly’s abduction in the Georgian capital in 2017 has yet to produce any convincing explanation of how it happened. After being kidnapped in Tbilisi, he mysteriously reappeared in police custody in Azerbaijan. His abduction shocked Georgians as their country has traditionally offered a refuge to dissidents from neighbouring countries.’<sup>104</sup>

7.4.4 In the ‘Freedom in the World’ 2021 report, which covered the year 2020, Freedom House noted that in December 2020, Georgian Dream introduced ‘... legislation that would deny public funding and free media airtime to parties that boycott Parliament sessions. The public defender’s office and the US ambassador to Georgia criticized the bill, which remained under consideration at year’s end.’<sup>105</sup>

7.4.5 The Freedom in the World 2021 report, which covered the year 2020, continued:

‘The media environment is pluralistic but partisan. The public broadcaster has been accused of favoring the government. Several staff members at Adjara TV and Radio, a publicly funded regional outlet, were dismissed or reassigned between March and July 2020 after Georgian Dream criticized the outlet’s editorial stance and employees protested over political interference; at least some of the affected staff members were later reinstated after further protests.’<sup>106</sup>

7.4.6 The same report referred to the transfer of Rustavi 2 television station to a former owner who was more sympathetic to Georgian Dream, stating: ‘A newly appointed director then dismissed key employees. A large share of the staff quit to join a new station, Mtavari Arkhi (Main Channel), which began broadcasting in September 2019. Its founder, Giorgi Rurua, was subsequently arrested on gun possession charges, which were considered

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<sup>102</sup> Amnesty International, [2019 report](#), 16 April 2020

<sup>103</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Independent media), 6 May 2020

<sup>104</sup> RSF, [2020 World Press Freedom Index, Georgia](#)

<sup>105</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>106</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

to be politically motivated, that November [2020]. Rurua received a four-year prison term in July 2020.<sup>107</sup>

7.4.7 The USSD HR Report 2020, published in March 2021, noted that ‘Some media outlets, watchdog groups, and NGOs continued to express concern regarding decreased media pluralism and continuing political influence in media. Concerns also persisted regarding government interference with some media outlets. Persistent allegations of political pressure on public broadcasters remained.’<sup>108</sup>

7.4.8 The report also stated:

‘There were attacks on journalists during the October election campaign allegedly by political party representatives. The GCJE [Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics], in a statement released in November, complained of verbal and physical abuse against media on Election Day by unknown assailants. On one occasion at a voting precinct, a journalist from online Publika.ge was assaulted and injured and his camera was broken. A criminal investigation was underway. In addition, a TV Pirveli journalist was hit in the face, and an On.ge reporter’s camera was damaged.

‘The GCJE also reported disproportionate use of force by law enforcement officials at a rally near the Central Election Commission. According to media reports, police injured four journalists and damaged their equipment. The GCJE alleged police intentionally targeted the media representatives with water cannons.

‘Throughout the year the Prosecutor General’s Office repeatedly claimed it continued to investigate attacks on journalists by law enforcement officers during the June 2019 protests in which several journalists were injured. Some journalists and NGOs claimed these injuries occurred as a result of the deliberate targeting of journalists. For example, GYLA [Georgian Young Lawyer’s Association] stated law enforcement officers “deliberately fired rubber bullets” at media representatives, despite their identification badges. According to the Charter of Journalistic Ethics, 39 journalists were among the 240 injured, and GYLA and TI Georgia asserted they should be recognized as victims. The Prosecutor General’s Office questioned several journalists as witnesses. As of year’s end, the Prosecutor General’s investigation continued.’<sup>109</sup>

7.4.9 The same report also noted that there were some reports of harassment against the media:

‘For example, NGOs considered the State Security Service of Georgia’s investigation of Mtavari Arkhi for a report it broadcast to constitute harassment. On June 20, a number of media observers announced they considered the investigation gross interference in the editorial independence of the media, creating a risk of self-censorship. TI Georgia and the Media Advocacy Coalition advised the government to use the GCJE or a self-regulatory body operating at the television channel instead of opening a criminal investigation. The investigation was opened under the charge of

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<sup>107</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>108</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#), 30 March 2021

<sup>109</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#) (Section 2.A), 30 March 2021

discrediting the government, inflaming mistrust toward the authorities, which is punishable under the criminal code...

'On October 21, a few days before parliamentary elections, Avtandil Tsereteli, father of the TV Pirveli owner, stated his life was threatened by some unknown persons if he did not change the station's editorial policy.

'Some watchdog groups, such as TI Georgia, expressed concern that law enforcement bodies summoned journalists for questioning and asked them to identify their sources. The law allows journalists to maintain the anonymity of their sources and not to be compelled to testify as a witness.'<sup>110</sup>

- 7.4.10 The OSCE ODIHR deployed a Limited Election Observation Mission (LEOM) to Georgia to observe the elections of October 2020; the report subsequently produced by the ODIHR stated:

'The diverse and pluralistic media environment was polarized along political lines and business interests. The results of the ODIHR LEOM media monitoring showed that all monitored private broadcasters were visibly partisan. While the main contestants were provided with comparable amounts of mainly neutral coverage on the public channels, the partisan editorial coverage by the main private broadcasters, a lack of debates between the ruling party and main political opponents, and the confrontational tone of the campaign coverage significantly reduced the voters' opportunity to make an informed choice. Furthermore, in the absence of genuine investigative programmes and analytical reporting, coverage of the campaign was at times limited to reporting of daily campaign activities and accusations made by the main political parties.'<sup>111</sup>

- 7.4.11 See [Accord of April 2021](#) for information about the possible release of Giorgi Rurua.

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## 7.5 Civil society

- 7.5.1 In the 'Nations in transit 2020' report, which covered the year 2019, Freedom House stated:

'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...

'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.

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<sup>110</sup> USSD, [HR Report 2020](#) (Section 2.A), 30 March 2021

<sup>111</sup> OSCE, ODIHR, [Georgia, Parliamentary elections, 31 October 2020](#) (page 3), 5 March 2021

Ivanishvili also accused these groups of supporting the opposition. Earlier, in March, then-parliamentary chair Irakli Kobakhidze accused local NGOs of being biased and collaborating with the opposition UNM.<sup>112</sup>

7.5.2 In the 'Freedom in the World' 2021 report, which covered the year 2020, Freedom House stated:

'The civil society sector 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.

'In January 2020, the judge presiding over the case against Giorgi Rurua [founder of a television channel who was arrested on gun possession charges, which were considered to be politically motivated, and sentenced to prison in July 2020] refused an amicus curiae [impartial advisor] brief offered by the TI [Transparency International, an NGO committed to combating corruption<sup>113</sup>] chapter in Georgia. The organization criticized the judge's conduct in a September statement, accusing him of demonstrating progovernment bias.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Freedom House, [Nations in Transit 2020](#) (Georgia, Civil society), 6 May 2020

<sup>113</sup> Transparency International, [Mission](#), 10 January 2010

<sup>114</sup> Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2021](#), 3 March 2021

# Terms of Reference

A 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is a broad outline of what the CPIN seeks to cover. They form the basis for the [country information section](#). The Home Office's Country Policy and Information Team uses some standardised ToRs, depending on the subject, and these are then adapted depending on the country concerned.

For this particular CPIN, the following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- Political parties
  - Party in power
  - Opposition parties
- State treatment of opposition supporters
- Influence of the state on the following:
  - Police
  - Judiciary
  - Media
  - Civil society
  - Freedom of assembly
  - Freedom of expression

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# Version control

## Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **1.0**
- valid from **12 May 2021**

## Changes from last version of this note

This is the first Country Policy and Information Note to be produced on this subject.

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