

Georgia Country Report

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Executive Summary

Since its independence in 1991, Georgia has been developing a free market economy and a pluralist democracy.

A small country located in the Caucasus region, Georgia borders Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey. Since gaining independence in 1991, Georgia has struggled with political instability and ethnic and territorial conflicts. During the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze, democratic and economic reforms faltered. After the 2003 Rose Revolution and 2004 elections that brought President Mikheil Saakashvili to power, Georgia began to go through a comprehensive institutional reform.

In August 2008, the ongoing conflict between Georgia and the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia escalated into war between Russia and Georgia. The conflict continued for five days before a ceasefire agreement was brokered. The issue of the two separatist territories remains the major obstacle in Georgia-Russian relations.

The 2012 parliamentary election was won by the Georgian Dream coalition, headed by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who became prime minister. The 2013 presidential election was won by Georgian Dream candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili, who emphasized that Georgia would continue its European and Euro-Atlantic integration while simultaneously trying to ease tensions with the Russian Federation. The current Prime Minister of Georgia is Giorgi Kvirikashvili, who previously served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Economic Development.

Georgia's foreign policy priority is to maintain close ties with Europe and the United States. Its long-term goals include membership in the EU and NATO.

The Georgian government has promoted close trade ties with Israel. The Georgian Jewish community, whose history extends back 2,600 years, is flourishing; interfaith and government relations are good, and there is no tradition of popular or state-sponsored anti-Semitism.

Statistics

Population: 4,931,226 (July 2015 est.)

Size: 69,700 sq. km

Capital: Tbilisi

Major cities: Tbilisi, Poti, Batumi, Sokhumi

Jewish population:

Approximately 13,000

2009 Aliyah (emigration to Israel): 333

1989-2006 Aliyah: 22,849

Head of State:

President Giorgi Margvelashvili

Head of Government: Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili

Foreign Minister:

Mikheil Janelidze

Ambassador to United

States:

Archil Gegeshidze

U.S. Ambassador to Georgia:

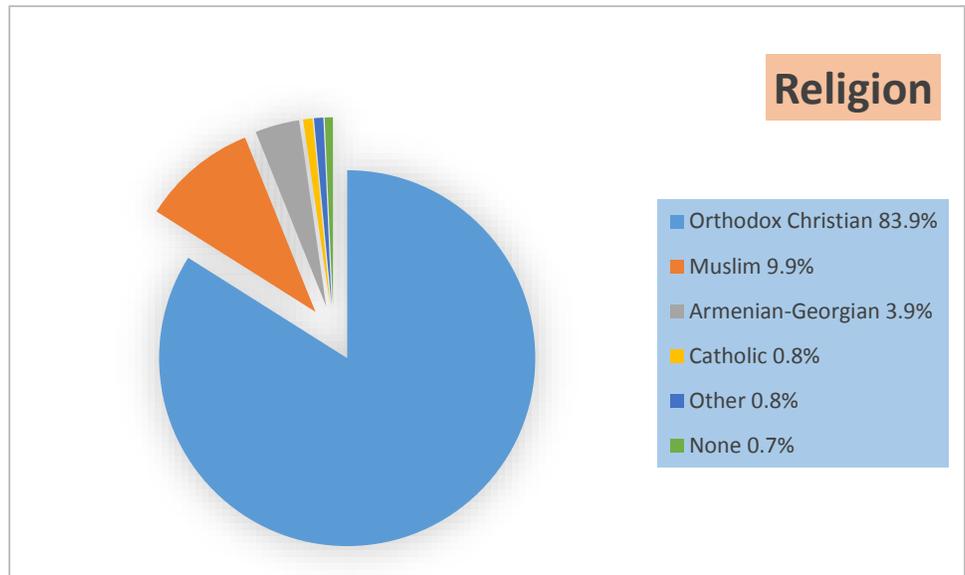
Ian C. Kelly

Freedom House Rating:

Partly Free

History

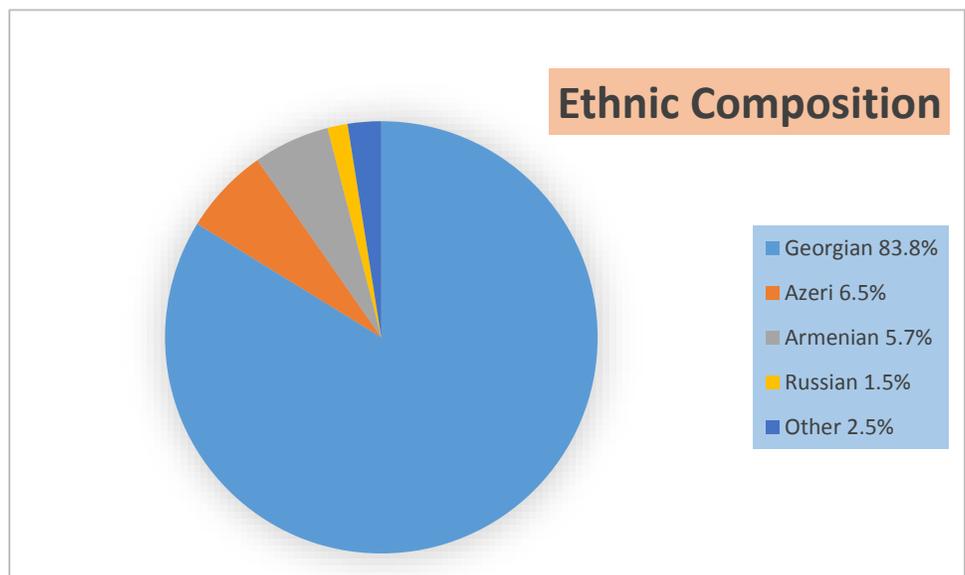
Georgia, located in the southern Caucasus region, is slightly smaller than South Carolina and occupies a strategic position between Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and the Black Sea. An ancient country, Georgia traditionally has been dominated by stronger neighboring powers, including Rome, Persia, Byzantium, Arabs, Mongols, and Turks. A Christian enclave in a largely Muslim region, Georgia sought Russian protection in the 18th century, and was incorporated piecemeal into the Russian Empire in the early 19th century. Georgia declared independence from the USSR on April 9, 1991, but then suffered prolonged political and economic turbulence and civil strife. Soviet domination and recent Russian policies have left a legacy of strong anti-Russian attitudes, reinforced by Russian support for local separatists.



Political Situation

The Georgian constitution establishes the Parliament, which is a 150 seat unicameral legislature in which members serve four-year terms, and an independent judiciary. According to recent amendments to the constitution, the power has been distributed almost evenly between the President, Prime Minister, and the Parliament. The president, elected every five years by popular vote to a maximum of two terms, is the head of state. The prime minister is the head of government.

Thanks to its strong ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity, Georgia was one of the first Soviet Republics to push for outright independence in the late 1980s, following the April 9, 1989 brutal suppression of a peaceful demonstration in Georgia's capital by Soviet troops. Georgia officially declared its independence



in April 1991, shortly before the Soviet Union's fall. Prominent nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected president in May 1991, but quickly became an erratic and authoritarian ruler; he was overthrown in early 1992 and forced to flee the country after a coup led by pro-opposition military and paramilitary units.

Eduard Shevardnadze, Gorbachev's former Foreign Minister and former Georgian Communist Party leader, returned to Georgia in 1992 and emerged as de facto president, twice defeating armed attempts by Gamsakhurdia's supporters to regain power. In 1995, Shevardnadze was elected President of Georgia, and won reelection in 2000. During his presidency, Georgia adopted a constitution, established government institutions, and became a member of most major international organizations such as the UN, Council of Europe, and World Trade Organization. The country also became a major transit route for Caspian Basin oil and gas to Turkey and Europe. However, Shevardnadze's administration was widely criticized for corruption and for Georgia's lack of economic progress.

The disputed outcome of the November 2003 parliamentary elections resulted in massive nonviolent anti-government demonstrations in Tbilisi, which soon spread throughout Georgia. Local and international observers claimed that Mikheil Saakashvili, the young head of the opposition United National Movement, had won the election. Shevardnadze's attempt to manipulate the election results directly led to mass protests known as the Rose Revolution, leading to Shevardnadze's resignation.

The newly-elected President Saakashvili introduced a slate of reforms targeting endemic corruption, working to reform the police and the judiciary, and building accountable government institutions and new infrastructure. However, many felt his agenda disadvantaged certain property rights and democratic freedoms, including the freedom of speech. These shortcomings contributed to the rise of popular discontent.

In November 2007, massive public protests erupted against Saakashvili's presidency. A peaceful public demonstration was put down violently by riot police, and the major opposition media outlet was shut down. Saakashvili announced an early presidential election for January 2008 and was reelected with close to 53% of the vote. While many in the opposition claimed the elections were manipulated, the international community declared that the elections complied with basic international standards.

In August 2008, the conflict between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia escalated into a war between the two countries. The outcome of the five-day war was Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The United States condemned Russia's actions, and in an effort to support Georgia, provided a \$1 billion economic aid package.

The 2012 parliamentary elections resulted in the victory of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgia Dream coalition over President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement, depriving Saakashvili of a parliamentary majority. While denigrated as pro-Russian by Saakashvili's supporters, Ivanishvili's government has remained committed to continuing closer integration with the West. At the same time, the new government has pushed to reduce tensions with Russia. After coming to power, the new government initiated investigations of former officials who were believed to have violated the law. The

prosecutions were criticized by human rights watchdogs and international organizations as politically motivated.

In the 2013 presidential election, Giorgi Margvelashvili, the Georgian Dream party candidate, defeated David Bakradze, of the United National Movement. President Margvelashvili reconfirmed the Georgian strategic imperative to both intensify its European and Euro-Atlantic integration and ease tensions with the Russian Federation.

In December 2015, Giorgi Kvirikashvili, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, replaced Irakli Garibashvili as the Prime Minister of Georgia.

Economic Situation

Georgia's economy is based primarily on tourism, transport, and energy infrastructure. Winemaking remains a traditional part of Georgia's agricultural industry.

Despite a severe economic downturn in the 1990s, Georgia, with the help of the World Bank, IMF, EU, and the United States, has made substantial economic progress since 2000, achieving steady economic growth and curtailing high inflation.

In 2003, a complex set of anti-crisis measures took effect that led to structural reforms, allowing Georgia to achieve robust economic growth, averaging 6.1% annually. These reforms helped to liberalize trade, improve the business climate, and modernize infrastructure. GDP per capita quadrupled, from \$920 in 2003 to \$3,500 in 2012. However, a downturn in the world economy in 2014-2015 caused the depreciation of the national currency and reduced overall economic growth.

Currency: 2.15 Lari = \$1
GDP: \$16.53 billion (2015 est.)
GDP per capita: \$3,670 (2015 est.)
GDP Growth: 2.8 % (2015 est.)

Georgia's economic recovery had been adversely impacted by the separatist disputes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Unemployment remains one of the most significant public policy challenges in Georgia. The unemployment rate in 2015 was 14.3%.

Georgia occupies a prime location for trans-shipment of oil and gas from the Caspian Basin and Central Asia into Europe. Projects include the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum oil and gas pipelines that run from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey.

South Ossetia

South Ossetia is an area directly south of the main Caucasus range. Although part of Georgia, the majority of its inhabitants are Ossetians who are ethnically Russian. During the Soviet period, South Ossetia was a generally peaceful autonomous region within Georgia. Inter-ethnic tensions began to

increase in the late Soviet era; nationalist movements emerged in both the South Ossetian and Georgian communities.

In November 1989, the South Ossetian Supreme Court voted to unite South Ossetia with North Ossetia, its Russian counterpart. In response, the Georgian Parliament revoked the decision and abolished South Ossetia's autonomy.

Open warfare erupted in late 1991 between Georgian and South Ossetian forces, resulting in around 1,000 fatalities and the displacement of 60,000 to 100,000 refugees.

In 1992, Georgia accepted a ceasefire in order to avoid conflict with Russia, the Ossetians' traditional protector. Georgia and South Ossetia agreed to avoid violence and Georgia pledged to remove trade sanctions from South Ossetia. Russia, Georgia, and South Ossetia created a peacekeeping force to supervise the area, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) created a monitoring mission. Since then, South Ossetia has emerged as a de facto but unrecognized mini-state outside of central Georgian control and with increasingly close ties to Russia.

Tensions rose again in 2004 after President Saakashvili's inauguration, leading to fresh outbreaks of violence and a new ceasefire agreement. Following his 2004 election, Saakashvili repeatedly offered the South Ossetian government autonomy within Georgia, but his offer was refused, despite European and American support for his peace plans. Russia, which backs South Ossetian independence, has made it easy for South Ossetians to obtain Russian passports.



South Ossetian authorities held a referendum in November 2006, which favored independence, but was not recognized internationally.

In August 2008, tensions between Russia and Georgia over the South Ossetian territory erupted into an eight-day war. After the war, Russia recognized the region as independent. Relations between Georgia and its breakaway region are currently tense, with very limited cross-border movement.

Georgia has continued to press for the withdrawal from South Ossetia of Russian troops, who are widely viewed as supporting the separatist authorities and preventing the reestablishment of Tbilisi's jurisdiction.

International efforts to facilitate discussions on security and stability between representatives of South Ossetia, Georgia, and Russia have failed to bring the parties to an agreement on non-use of force.

Abkhazia

Abkhazia, a region in Georgia's northwest, saw the country's bloodiest post-independence fighting, in 1992-1993. During the Soviet era, Abkhazia was an autonomous republic inside Georgia. The titular Abkhaz ethnic group constituted 17% of the populace, while the Georgian community was a majority 45% of the total population of the autonomous republic.

After Georgia's independence in 1991, separatists announced their intention to break away and establish closer ties with Russia. Tbilisi attempted to re-impose central authority over Abkhazia in 1992. A thirteen-month war between Georgian government forces and Abkhaz separatists followed, which ultimately involved Russian troops and volunteers from other parts of the Caucasus, and resulted in widespread ethnic cleansing in which an estimated 10,000 Georgians were killed and up to 300,000 refugees fled to other regions of Georgia and beyond. The war ended in 1993 with the expulsion of Georgian troops from Abkhazia, the declaration of a ceasefire, and 1,500 primarily Russian peacekeepers deployed on both sides of the Georgia-Abkhazia administrative border.

Abkhazia's independence has never been recognized widely. It remains diplomatically and economically isolated with the exception of Russia, its main economic partner.

In August 2008, Abkhazian forces took control of the Kodori Gorge. Since establishing effective control over Abkhazia, Russia has introduced troops and set up military bases there. Georgia regards the presence of Russian troops in Abkhazia, as well as in South Ossetia, as an act of occupation.

Foreign Policy

With the exception of Russia, Georgia's relations with its neighbors are generally good. Georgia was a founding member of the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) regional alliance, which works to strengthen the independence of post-Soviet states. In May 2014, a group of Georgian MPs participated in the monitoring of the presidential elections in Ukraine. Georgia is also a part of major trans-regional energy and transport projects (BTC, SCP, BTK, etc.) that have drawn participating regional states closer.

Georgia began shaping its independent foreign policy priorities in the mid-1990s. Since then, the country has successfully sought membership in Western-led international organizations and developed a broad partnership and cooperation agenda with the United States and the EU. Georgia joined the Council of Europe in April 1999. The country also participates in bodies that promote integration into NATO, such as the NATO-Georgia Council, the Annual National Plan (ANP), Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC).

In June 2014, Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU. The implementation of the Association Agreement will significantly contribute to Georgian adoption of European legal standards, and development of trade, energy, and other important sectors that could lead to a significant increase of Georgian exports and GDP. To enhance the relationship, Georgia and the EU have also started to

implement a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). An EU-Georgia Association Agreement enters into force in July 2016.

Georgia has unequivocally expressed its full support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity during Ukraine's conflict with Russia, and has condemned Russia's violent actions against Ukraine's sovereignty.

Relations with the United States

The United States established diplomatic relations with Georgia in 1992. In 2000, the U.S. granted Permanent Normal Trade Relation status to Georgia.

The United States has helped Georgia recover from its civil strife and solve economic difficulties, though the total volume of bilateral trade remains small. U.S. aid focuses on Georgian economic and political reform.

Concern over international terrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks prompted creation of a \$64 million Train and Equip Program for Georgia. The program brought hundreds of American soldiers into Georgia in May 2002 to provide training and equipment to Georgian military and law enforcement agencies to combat drug trafficking and proliferation, and to secure Georgia's borders against terrorists.

Georgia supported the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq, pledging military support and use of the Vaziani military base. The Georgian government also supported Washington's position in UN Security Council deliberations. By 2008, Georgia had deployed 2,300 troops to Iraq.

Georgia has made an even larger troop contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. Over 1,600 Georgian troops served on the front at one time, and almost 11,000 Georgian soldiers participated in the mission overall, the largest troop contribution from any non-NATO member country.

Among many areas of cooperation between the U.S. and Georgia is cultural cooperation. In 2008, the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad and the Georgian government signed an agreement to protect American cultural heritage sites in Georgia.

In May 2005, President George W. Bush paid a historic visit to Georgia. President Bush expressed strong support for Georgian independence and sovereignty against the backdrop of Russian pressure. Overall, U.S. assistance to independent Georgia since 1991 totals approximately \$3 billion.

In July 2006, President Saakashvili made a reciprocal state visit to the United States and met with President Bush at the White House.

In September 2008, the United States passed a \$1 billion aid package for Georgia in response to the conflict with Russia. The United States is Georgia's largest bilateral aid donor.

Vice President Biden traveled to Georgia in 2009. President Obama hosted President Saakashvili in Washington, D.C., in 2012 and reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to uphold Georgia's territorial integrity. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Georgia in 2012.

In March 2014, a Georgian delegation headed by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili met with Vice President Biden and President Obama to discuss strengthening U.S.-Georgia strategic cooperation, including increasing trade and investment cooperation between the two economies. The U.S. also assured Georgia of U.S. support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel visited Georgia in September 2014, meeting with the President, Prime Minister, and Defense Minister, to discuss bilateral cooperation as well as coordination of efforts to combat international terrorism.

In October 2015, President Giorgi Margvelashvili paid his first visit to Washington D.C., meeting with Members of Congress and the U.S. administration. The primary focus of these meetings was further deepening of U.S.-Georgia relations.

Relations with Israel

Georgia and Israel have warm relations. Israel has an embassy in Tbilisi (also accredited to neighboring Armenia), and Georgia maintains an embassy in Tel Aviv. During his visit to Israel in January 1998, President Shevardnadze met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and signed a "declaration of friendship." Netanyahu returned the favor in March 1999 by visiting Tbilisi and signing a military cooperation agreement. Georgia has also purchased Israeli military equipment and relies on Israel to assist in trade relations with the United States, as Israel has free trade agreements with both the United States and the European community.

Several years ago, Georgia abolished visa requirements for Israeli citizens, and a fully reciprocal Georgia-Israel non-visa regime came into force in March 2014.

Israel has provided humanitarian aid to Georgia on several occasions. During an official visit to Georgia by Israeli President Moshe Katsav in January 2001, Israel initiated drought assistance for Georgian agriculture, and in 2002, Israel sent humanitarian assistance to earthquake victims. Israeli hospitals support the Tbilisi Diabetes Center through a twin-cities program.

Israel has engaged in extensive military cooperation with Georgia. It has sold Georgia armored vehicles, and Israeli Special Forces and private contractors have trained Georgian troops.

Former president Saakashvili made closer relations with Israel a priority, visiting Israel in July 2004 and again in November 2006. Saakashvili promoted Israeli tourism to Georgia, and attempted to spur foreign investment in Georgia by offering dual citizenship to Israelis originally from Georgia.

Georgia's participation in the region's strategic BTC oil pipeline has also attracted Israeli attention. In 2006 and 2007, Israel and Turkey reached a provisional agreement to carry Azerbaijani oil through Georgia and Turkey to the Israeli port of Eilat for shipment to Asian markets.

When Russian troops began moving into the South Ossetia region of Georgia in August 2008, the Jewish Agency became active in caring for the new needs of Georgia's Jewish community. Of the 200 Jews of Gori, a town adjacent to the battle zone, a large number immediately made *aliyah*.

President Obama met with President Saakashvili during his visits to the U.S. in January 2011 and January 2012. Meeting with the visiting Georgian President in April 2013, Vice President Joe Biden emphasized the United States' strong commitment to partnership with Georgia. In May 2013, Saakashvili met with Secretary of State John Kerry, who urged continued democratization. Prime Minister Ivanishvili maintained close cooperation with Israel, visiting in June 2013.

In early 2014, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Shimon Peres, and Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein, and signed a historic bilateral trade deal. The ministers also created a new joint economic commission on advancing cooperation in the areas of technology, water, agriculture, and education.

In October 2015, President Margvelashvili visited Israel, meeting with President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein.

Jewish Communal Life & Anti-Semitism

Jewish settlement in Georgia dates back 2,600 years. Once numbering as many as 100,000, the Jewish population has been declining for over fifty years, in large part as a response to Soviet-era restrictions and emigration spurred by the political and economic turmoil following independence. During Soviet rule, Georgian Jews comprised the majority of Georgians convicted of economic crimes and often received disproportionately more punishment.

During the 1970s and 1980s, some 30,000 Georgian Jews made *aliyah* while thousands more immigrated to other countries, an exodus of nearly one-fifth of Georgia's Jewish population.

Despite its rapid decrease in size and Soviet-era restrictions and persecutions, the Georgian Jewish community has maintained its identity and traditions. Inter-marriage rates are low and levels of Jewish knowledge and community involvement are higher than in many other former Soviet republics.

The distinction between Ashkenazi and Mountain Jews (Tats) often extends into religious and communal organizations, though relations are usually warm. Tbilisi is home to an estimated 11,000 Jews, and smaller communities remain in Kutaisi, Batumi, Rustavi, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Surami, Oni, Kareli, and Stalin's hometown of Gori. Almost no Jews remain in the war-torn provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Since Georgia's independence, the government has been supportive of the Jewish community. In 1994, President Shevardnadze issued a decree ordering the protection of Jewish religious, cultural, and historical monuments. In September 1998, the Georgian government sponsored a major celebration commemorating twenty-six centuries of Jewish life in Georgia. Over 50,000 people attended, including President Shevardnadze, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Katsav, and Israel's Ashkenazi and Sephardic Chief Rabbis. Amidst Hanukkah celebrations in 2005, President Saakashvili offered Georgian Jews in Israel dual citizenship.

Organized Jewish life has flourished since independence. There are thirty Jewish institutions, three Jewish newspapers, and a radio and TV station. Most communal organizations are based in Tbilisi. The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC/ "Joint") both have permanent representatives in Georgia. The JDC-supported Hesed Eliyahu distributes food and medical aid to the elderly, who comprise over 50% of the Jewish population. A branch of Hillel is active in Tbilisi.

The Rachamim Society, founded in 1990, supplies financial and medical support and organizes care for Jewish cemeteries and synagogues. It serves as the umbrella organization for Ashkenazi Jews. The Association of Georgian Jews (Derekh Yehudi) promotes property restitution and hosts community programs. Its focus is regaining property rights to a 19th century Ashkenazi synagogue that was converted into a club during the Communist era and later to a popular theater.



Tbilisi synagogue, now home to a popular theater company

Though the community's synagogues are regarded as distinctly Georgian or Ashkenazi, the services, and especially educational programs of the community, cater to both groups. Chief Rabbi of Georgia Ariel Levin is a native Georgian who received his ordination in Israel.

A Jewish day school, a library, several Sunday schools for children and adults, and a yeshiva college for men all contribute to the revitalization of Jewish life. Rabbi Levin opened a kindergarten in 2002 at his 86-student day school, Tiferet Tsvi. An educational center, also run by Rabbi Levin, teaches both secular and religious subjects and has recently started a program to train Jewish teachers for the community. A JDC-supported Open University offers high-level courses in Judaism.

Georgian Jewish history is preserved at the Jewish Ethnographic Museum. The Shalom Club, run by graduates of courses offered by the Israeli Foreign Ministry's Center for International Cooperation (MASHAV), coordinates community events and charity projects in cooperation with the Israeli Embassy.

Christian organizations have been supportive of the Jewish community as well. In January 2001, the Georgian Orthodox Church and Jewish community signed an agreement of mutual respect and support, continuing a tradition of warm interfaith relations in Georgia.

In 2003, JDC opened a new “Jewish House” for several of the community’s organizations: the Hesed Eliyahu Charitable Center, the Jewish Cultural Center, Hillel-Tbilisi, the Institute of Social and Communal Workers, editorial headquarters of the Jewish newspapers, and the Office of the Georgian-Jewish Folk Dance and Song Ensemble. Several hundred people including Georgian government officials, the ambassadors from Israel and the United States, and leaders of the Jewish community, including NCSEJ, attended the dedication ceremony.



The “Jewish House”

State media have published articles condemning anti-Semitism, and a state-sponsored radio station broadcasts a special program for Georgians living in Israel. The main problems facing Georgian Jewry are the same as for the general population: crime, corruption, unemployment, and inadequate health care and state services. Jewish organizations report that the Georgian government is very supportive of the right to emigrate freely.

In February of 2006, Rabbi Abraam Khvoles, a spiritual and civic leader who lived in Georgia more than a century ago, was honored with a new Georgian postage stamp, marking the first time a former Soviet republic issued a stamp honoring a rabbi.

In October 2014, former Prime Ministers Garibashvili and Ivanishvili, Minister of Culture Mikheil Giorgadze, and Tbilisi Mayor Davit Narmania reopened the David Baazov Museum of History of Georgian Jews after sixty years of inactivity.

On December 16, 2014, former Prime Minister Garibashvili lit the first candle of Hanukkah at the main Synagogue in Tbilisi. In his speech, he noted “the year marked twenty-six centuries of friendship between Georgians and Jews.”

Anti-Semitic incidents have been few in recent Georgian history. Cases of religious intolerance and persecution appear to focus on minority Christian denominations. Occasional hostility by Georgian Orthodox priests and local officials towards non-Orthodox believers at times spills over into physical attacks and destruction of property.