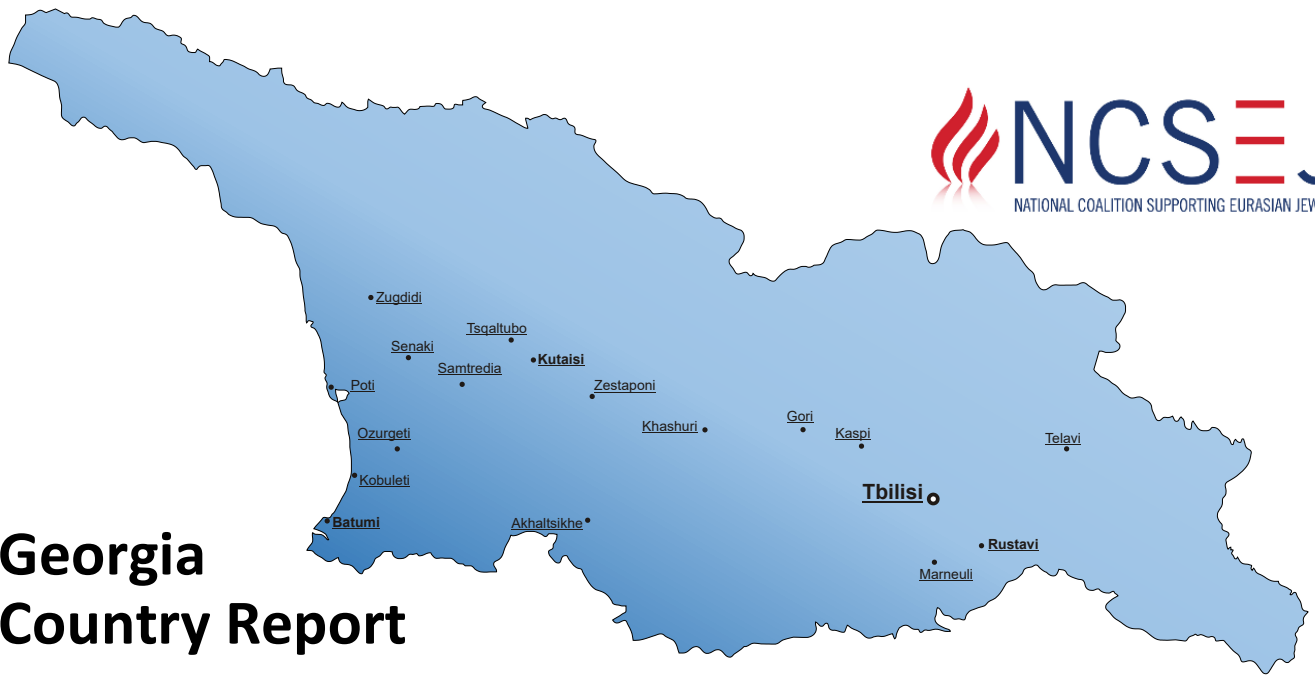


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# Georgia Country Report

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## Executive Summary

*Since its independence in 1991, Georgia has steadily developed a free market economy and a pluralistic democracy.*

*A small country located in the Caucasus region, Georgia borders Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey. Georgia has struggled with political instability, including a civil war, 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 institute comprehensive institutional reforms.*

*In August 2008, the ongoing conflict between Georgia and the breakaway 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 Georgian Dream coalition, headed by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, won the 2012 parliamentary election, and Georgian Dream’s Giorgi Margvelashvili won the 2013 presidential election. Margvelashvili’s platform emphasized Georgia’s continued European and Euro-Atlantic integration efforts, while simultaneously trying to ease tensions with the Russian Federation.*

*Salome Zourabichvili, an independent backed by the Georgia Dream Party, won the 2018 presidential election. The current prime minister is Mamuka Bakhtadze, a past Minister of Finance.*

*Georgia’s foreign policy priority is to maintain close ties with Europe and the United States. Its long-term goals include gaining European Union and NATO membership.*

### Statistics:

**Population:** 3,907,800  
(March 2019 est.)

**Area:** 69,700 sq. km

**Capital:** Tbilisi

**Major cities:** Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Poti, Batumi

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### Head of State:

President Salome Zourabichvili

**Head of Government:** Prime Minister Iraki Garibashvili

**Foreign Minister:** David Zalkaliani

**Ambassador to United States:** Davit Bakradze

**U.S. Ambassador to Georgia:** Kelly C. Degnan.

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### Jewish population:

Approximately 6,000

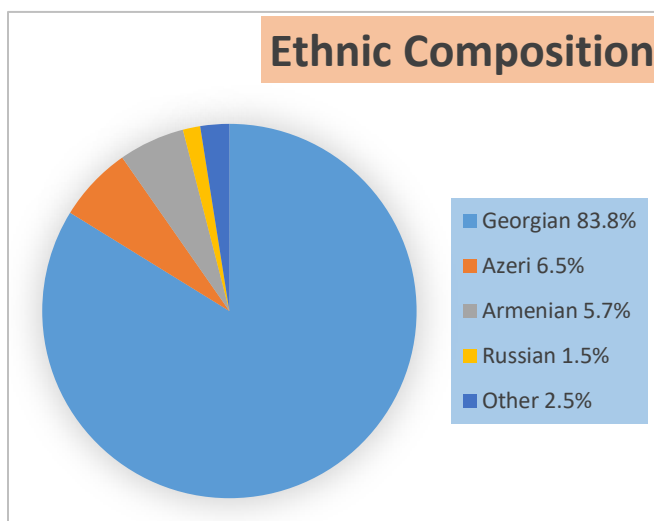
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### Freedom House Rating:

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 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was incorporated piecemeal into the Russian Empire in the early 19<sup>th</sup> 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.



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 precipitated a mass protest movement known as the Rose Revolution, which resulted in Shevardnadze's resignation.

The new President-elect 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 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 violently put down by riot police, and the major opposition media outlet (Imedi TV) 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.

In the October 2016 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream party won 115 seats in the parliament (constitutional majority). The United National Movement received 27 seats, while a newly-founded Alliance of Patriots of Georgia entered the parliament as a third party for the first time with 6 seats.

Presidential elections were held in Georgia on 28 October 2018, the seventh presidential elections since the country's restoration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The previous elections in October 2013 resulted in a victory for Giorgi Margvelashvili of the Georgian Dream coalition.

Following amendments to the constitution in 2017, the 2018 election was be the last direct presidential vote; after 2018, presidents will be elected by the 300-member College of Electors.

In the summer of 2019, protests in Georgia demanded a change to a more proportional system (removing the single-seat constituencies) and secured a promise from Georgian Dream party leader Bidzina Ivanishvili to do so. In November 2019, however, individual members of parliament voted against a bill to change the electoral system, sparking renewed protests.

After the failure of the proposed amendments to be passed with 75% of votes from parliamentary deputies, the government and the opposition held several rounds of talks, and in early March 2020, a memorandum of understanding was issued from all of the political parties.

On 29 June 2020, electoral reforms were adopted by the Georgian Parliament, with 117 out of 142 members voting in support for the reforms.

## Politics

Georgia is a semi-presidential republic with executive, legislative, and judicial branches. According to recent developments, the leading Georgian political party, Georgian Dream, has amended the constitution of Georgia and significantly reduce the power of the President. Initiatives have also include abolishing majoritarian seats at the national parliament, indirect election of the presidency, and definition of marriage as a union between man and woman. The last two have been implemented while the former is still an ongoing process.

## Occupied territories

Twenty percent of Georgian territory is currently occupied by the Russian military, specifically the separatist regions of South Ossetia (Tskhinvali region) and Abkhazia. The annexation process is ongoing, Russian militants cross borders on a regular basis.



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.

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.

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 of Russian troops from South Ossetia, 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, a region in Georgia's northwest, saw the country's bloodiest post-independence fighting, in 1992-1993. 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. The war 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. 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.

## **Economics**

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

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.

According to the World Bank, Georgia's economy grew by 5.3% in 2018, with the country's GDP valued at \$16.7 billion at the end of the year.

Georgia's key macroeconomic vulnerabilities include risks to external and fiscal sustainability, corruption, an over-reliance on tourism.

## **Human Rights**

According to the annual U.S. State Department human rights report on Georgia from 2018, concerns persist about abuses by law enforcement officials, corruption, and judicial independence.

In February 2017, Georgia's parliament adopted a new bill that made "insulting religious feelings" a civil offense. The bill was adopted in order to penalize criticism of religious leaders.

Ill-treatment and abuse by Georgian law enforcement officers are major issues of concern domestically. Local NGOs with the Public Defender Office of Georgia have tried to influence authorities to create an independent investigation mechanism, but the government has not yet adopted relevant legislation.

Legislation that allows state security services direct, unrestricted access to telecom operators' networks for surveillance purposes was ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in April 2017.

## **Foreign Policy**

With the exception of Russia, Georgia's relations with its neighbors are generally good. Georgia is a founding member of the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) regional alliance, which works to strengthen the independence of post-Soviet states. Georgia is also a part of major trans-regional energy and transport projects 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, and the Joint Training and Evaluation Center.

In June 2014, Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU. The implementation of the Association Agreement significantly contributed to the adoption of European legal standards as well as the development of trade, energy, and other important sectors that led 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). The EU-Georgia Association Agreement entered into force in July 2016. As of March 2017, Georgian citizens can freely travel to the European Schengen zone without a visa.

Georgia has a unique partnership with NATO in the defense and security fields despite the fact that Georgia is not a candidate country for joining the Euro-Atlantic alliance. NATO provides technical assistance to improve Georgia's military and defense capabilities. In September 2016, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Georgia for two days of meetings with Georgian government officials.

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 train and equip 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.

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.

Among many areas of cooperation between the U.S. and Georgia is cultural cooperation. In July 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 September 2008, the United States passed a \$1 billion aid package for Georgia in response to the conflict with Russia.

Vice President Biden traveled to Georgia in 2009. President Obama met with President Saakashvili during his visits to the United States in January 2011 and January 2012 and reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to uphold Georgia's territorial integrity.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Georgia in 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.

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.

In May 2017, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili met President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence as part of a three-day official visit to the United States. President Trump expressed Washington's "full support of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

In July 2017, Vice-President Mike Pence visited Georgia. During the visit, he reaffirmed Washington's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and denounced Russia's "aggression" and "occupation" of Georgian territory. Pence also met with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and addressed troops participating in NATO joint military exercises.

From 2015 through December 2019, the United States authorized nearly \$13 million in defense articles to Georgia via the Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) process. These included firearms, electronics, ammunition/ordnance, and fire control, laser, and imaging.

In 2019, The HALO Trust (HALO) completed U.S.-funded operations cleaning up the unplanned munitions explosion at the Primorsky munitions depot in Russian-occupied Abkhazia, clearing 143,673 square meters (36 acres) of land and destroying 23,407 pieces of unexploded ordnance. HALO's operations at Primorsky are continuing in 2020 with other donor funding.

Since 2009, the United States engaged with Georgia at a senior level through the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission, which Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo last hosted in June 2019.

## **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 a visit to Israel in January 1998, President Shevardnadze met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and signed a "declaration of friendship." Netanyahu made a reciprocal visit in March 1999 to Tbilisi and signed a military cooperation agreement. 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.

Several years ago, Georgia abolished visa requirements for Israeli citizens, and a fully reciprocal Georgia-Israel visa waiver 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.

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 of Israel (JAFI) 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*.

Prime Minister Ivanishvili visited Israel in June 2013. In early 2014, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili met in Israel 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.

In 2017 Georgia and Israel celebrated the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. On January 9, 2017 President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin visited Georgia's capital Tbilisi for a two-day official state visit. He met the President of Georgia, the Prime Minister, Speaker of Parliament and other high officials of Georgian Government.

In July 2017 Prime Ministers Benjamin Netanyahu and Giorgi Kvirikashvili met in Jerusalem. Kvirikashvili underlined the special Georgia-Israel relationship, saying the two nations' friendship is 2,600 years old. Netanyahu accepted an invitation from Kvirikashvili to visit Georgia. After the meeting, Kvirikashvili visited Yad Vashem, where he laid a wreath to honor the memory of victims of the Holocaust.

Israel-Georgia defense and trade ties continue to develop positively. During his September 2018 visit to Georgia, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman signed agreements with his Georgian counterparts regarding cooperation on cybersecurity and fighting terror. Israel and Georgia are also exploring the possibility of instituting free trade measures between the two countries.

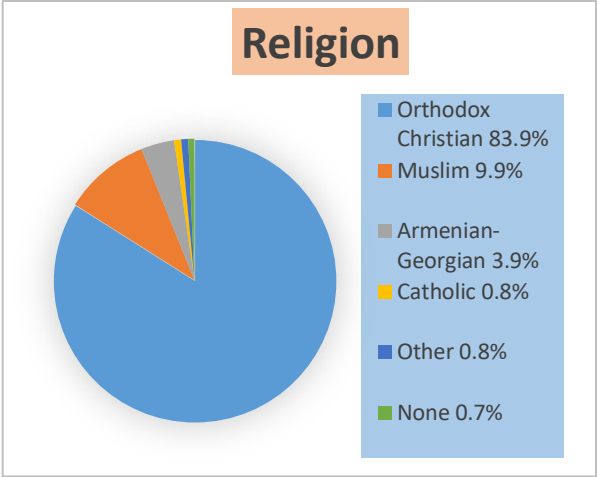
Tourism, an important income sector for Georgia, has increased dramatically in the past two decades, from fewer than 400,000 tourist entrances in 2000 to nearly 6.5 million in 2017. Before the 2020 onset of the coronavirus crisis, which affected tourism globally, Georgia's proximity and attractiveness made it one of Israel's most preferred travel destinations. In 2017 alone, over 115,000 Israelis visited Georgia

## **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 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, but 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 (charity center) 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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

Though the community's synagogues are regarded as distinctly Georgian or Ashkenazi, religious and social services (especially educational programs), 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 men's yeshiva college 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 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" to house 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: corruption, unemployment, and inadequate health care and state services. Jewish organizations report no government restrictions on emigration.

In February 2006, Rabbi Abraham 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, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, Minister of Culture Mikheil Giorgadze, and Tbilisi Mayor Davit Narmania reopened the David Baazov Museum of the History of Georgian Jews after sixty years of inactivity.

In December 2014, Prime Minister Garibashvili lit the first Chanukah candle at Tbilisi's main synagogue, and spoke, noting "the year marked twenty-six centuries of friendship between Georgians and Jews." In December 2016, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili hosted a Chanukah event with a delegation of Israeli lawmakers, the Deputy Head of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel, and the Chairman of Parliament of Georgia.

In 2017, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili again celebrated Chanukah with the local Jewish community. During the event, the Prime Minister stressed the "exemplary" friendship between Georgia and Israel that dated back thousands of years. In 2018, newly elected President Salome Zourabichvili hosted the Israeli Ambassador for Chanukah. She too highlighted the important relationship between Georgia and Israel, as well as the cultural and historic place of the country's Jewish community.

In April of 2018, The Government of Georgia recognized 26 centuries of Georgian-Jewish relations as intangible cultural heritage. The Prime Minister made the announcement in Tbilisi's David Baazov Museum of History of the Jews of Georgia to mark the important day and the decision.