

Georgia's bumpy road to democracy

On track for a European future?

SUMMARY

Georgia is often considered a frontrunner among Eastern Partnership countries. Despite Russia's continued de facto occupation of one-fifth of the country's territory, until recently Georgia performed relatively well in terms of political stability, pluralism and economic growth. The country is staunchly pro-Western, with aspirations to join both the EU and NATO.

Like Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia signed an association agreement with the EU in 2014. The agreement envisages a free trade area, as well as economic and political reforms that will result in far-reaching integration between Georgia and the EU.

Despite this overall positive picture and Georgia's close partnership with the EU, there are many concerns about the country's progress towards democracy and the rule of law. Problems are highlighted by a political crisis, which escalated in November 2020 after opposition politicians claimed that the ruling Georgian Dream party had rigged parliamentary elections, and decided to boycott the parliament.

The crisis reflects the longer-standing issue of excessive concentration of power, weakening many of the checks and balances that are necessary for a healthy democracy. Despite reform efforts, institutions that are supposed to be independent of the executive have become subservient to the often opaque interests of the ruling party. EU mediation is helping to resolve the stand-off between government and opposition, but the political landscape is still highly polarised.



Post-election protests in front of the Georgian parliament, November 2020.

IN THIS BRIEFING

- Background
- EU-Georgia relations
- A mixed track record on democracy and the rule of law
- 2019-2021 political crisis: Ruling party versus opposition
- The European Parliament and Georgia

Background

History repeats itself in Georgia

After breaking from the Soviet Union in **1991**, Georgia was racked by civil war. The election of former Soviet Foreign Minister, [Eduard Shevardnadze](#), as president in **1995** brought stability but also corruption and authoritarian tendencies. The **2003** parliamentary elections were widely denounced as fraudulent, triggering outrage and a 'Rose Revolution' that overthrew Shevardnadze.

The Rose Revolution brought Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM) to power. Saakashvili implemented important reforms and made significant progress in curbing corruption. However, it was under his presidency that Georgia fought a brief but disastrous war with Russia, in **2008**. Critics of Saakashvili [pointed](#) to his increasingly authoritarian rule, which used the courts and government-friendly media to repress the opposition. Elections in **2012** and **2013** cost the UNM its parliamentary majority and Saakashvili his presidency. In place of the UNM came a coalition led by the Georgian Dream party.

Like the UNM before it, Georgian Dream has a track record of strong economic performance and reforms. However, critics accuse it of the same kind of authoritarian drift seen under its predecessors, with legal and administrative harassment of opposition politicians and media. The latest political crisis began with anti-government protests in **June 2019**, followed in **November 2020** by an opposition boycott of parliament.

The separatist territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia



Supported by Russia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia have resisted Georgian government control ever since the country became independent. In August 2008, skirmishes between Georgian and South Ossetian forces escalated to a [war](#) in which Russia intervened on the side of the separatists. Several days of fighting, during which Russian troops forced the Georgian army into retreat, ended with a ceasefire mediated by the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy. After the war, Russia recognised both as independent states; only a handful of other countries (including Syria, Nicaragua and Venezuela) have followed suit. Both territories are critically dependent on Moscow

for political and economic support. This is especially true of South Ossetia, which has effectively become [part of Russia](#): South Ossetian armed forces and customs have been merged with Russia's, the vast majority of residents now have Russian citizenship, large numbers have emigrated to the neighbouring Russian region of North Ossetia, and Russia pays social benefits and civil service salaries. Altogether [7 000](#) Russian soldiers are stationed at military bases in the two territories.

Borderisation is the process of turning the Administrative Boundary Line separating the two territories from the rest of Georgia into a hard border. Separatists and border guards from Russia's [FSB security agency](#) have built barbed wire fences, watchtowers and other structures on long stretches. Residents who cross into separatist areas except at official crossing points face imprisonment and fines. Some 34 villages were [affected](#) as of late 2018,

The EU and Georgian separatist territories
Since 2008, the EU has a [Monitoring Mission](#) in Georgia. Apart from keeping track of the situation along the boundaries dividing separatist territories from the rest of Georgia, the mission also aims to help normalise relations between the two sides and build confidence. Like most of the international community, the EU does not recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and it has repeatedly [declared](#) its support for the territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders.

with an estimated 800-1 00 families from Georgian-government-controlled areas losing access to farmland and woodland on the other side of the border. Some have lost their livelihoods and are forced to rely on government handouts; others can no longer meet relatives or tend family graves. Even official crossing points are periodically closed for months at a time – for example, on the pretext of swine flu in 2019, or the pandemic in 2020. As well as hardening the border, Russian border guards have also [moved](#) sections of South Ossetia's border hundreds of metres into Georgian territory, giving separatists control over a section of a strategically important oil pipeline.

There are serious concerns about the situation of ethnic Georgians from the two territories. After the war with Russia, nearly [260 000](#) fled to Georgian government-controlled territory, and [over half](#) have not yet found permanent housing to replace the homes they left behind. Those remaining are denied access to education in their native language.

Georgia has made efforts to promote reconciliation through people-to-people contacts. Since 2010, South Ossetian and Abkhazian residents have had [access](#) to Georgian healthcare. In 2018 Tbilisi launched its '[A step to a better future](#)' programme; this includes measures enabling Abkhazian and South Ossetian residents to do business in Georgia and attend Georgian schools and universities even without Georgian passports (which most had to give up as the separatist authorities do not allow dual citizenship). The programme was [welcomed](#) by the EU and Georgia's other international partners, but separatist authorities [dismissed](#) it as a mere PR stunt. Even before the pandemic, its implementation was hampered by frequent border closures.

EU-Georgia relations

Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations

Georgia has followed a strongly pro-western course since independence. The goal of 'full integration' into the EU and NATO is [constitutionally](#) enshrined, and although membership of both organisations is still a long way off, Georgia has arguably progressed further on its Euro-Atlantic path than any other former Soviet republic, barring the Baltic States. In a February 2021 [poll](#), 78 % and 83 % of respondents respectively supported NATO- and EU membership.

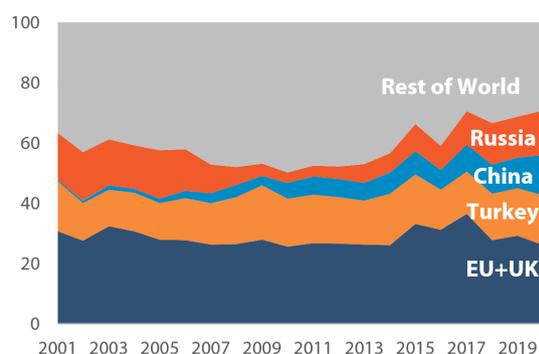
In 2002, then President, Eduard Shevardnadze, [requested](#) an invitation to join NATO. At its Bucharest summit in [April 2008](#), the Alliance confirmed that Georgia would become a member once it met the necessary conditions. Since then, NATO has repeatedly [expressed](#) its support for Georgia's membership aspirations. Military cooperation includes a [package](#) of measures to help Georgia modernise its armed forces, and Georgian participation in NATO-led operations in [Afghanistan](#). However, following Russian [threats](#) and the 2008 war, NATO has [held off](#) from offering a membership action plan.

The EU has [not declared](#) its position on EU membership prospects for Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries. However, in December 2020 the Georgian parliament unanimously [adopted](#) a resolution that set applying for EU membership in 2024 as a foreign policy priority; the following month, Georgian President, Salome Zourabishvili, [visited](#) Brussels in support of this objective. Even if the EU accepts Georgia's application, accession will not happen soon; Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia have been [candidate countries](#) for over a decade, and are not [expected](#) to join before 2025.

EU-Georgia relations are increasingly close

Even without any clear indication of whether or not Georgia might eventually become an EU Member State, its relations with the EU have become increasingly close. In 1996, the two sides signed a [partnership and cooperation agreement](#), which came into force in 1999. The [European Neighbourhood Policy](#), launched in 2004, was a step towards still closer cooperation, with EU support for Georgia's political and economic reforms. In 2009, the EU launched its Eastern

Figure 1 – Georgia's main trade partners
% of total foreign trade



Source: [ITC Trade Map](#).

Partnership as the eastern dimension of the latter policy, including Georgia and five other former Soviet countries. Since 2014, Georgia has [participated](#) in the EU's common security and defence policy (CSDP) crisis management missions to the Central African Republic and Mali.

The next step came with the 2014 [association agreement](#), which came into force in 2016. The agreement envisages far-reaching economic integration, with a deep and comprehensive free trade area that eliminates most tariffs and quotas. Despite this, EU-Georgia [trade](#) has mostly stagnated since 2013; nevertheless, the EU is still Georgia's main trade and investment partner, accounting in 2019 for [one-quarter](#) of

its trade in goods and [half](#) of its foreign investment flows.

EU financial support for Georgia

For 2017-2020, the EU's Single Support Framework channelled [€453 million](#) of aid from the European Neighbourhood Instrument to Georgia, equivalent to around €110 million a year or 0.7 % of Georgia's GDP. This funding is [used](#) to issue loans to small business, modernise Georgian agriculture, provide legal aid, train police and judges, build new transport infrastructure ([18 TEN-T projects](#) including roads, railways and ports, with a total investment of €3.4 billion), and develop renewable energy. The EU recently reallocated [€183 million](#) of this funding to help Georgia tackle the health and economic effects of the pandemic.

In addition to bilateral aid, Georgia also receives grants from several [regional programmes](#) for Eastern Partnership countries: EU4Business, EU4Energy, EU4Environment, EU4ClimateChange, EU4Innovation, EU4Youth and EU4Digital, as well as the Black Sea Basin cross-border cooperation [programme](#).

To date, the European Investment Bank has issued [€1.85 billion](#) in loans to Georgia, on top of [€4.2 billion](#) from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Priorities include private sector competitiveness, renewable energy, infrastructure and, since 2020, recovery from the pandemic.

Since 2008, the EU has adopted four packages of [macro-financial assistance](#) in the form of low-interest loans to help the Georgian government meet its external financing needs. The largest and most recent of these, approved in May 2020, provides up to €150 million – again, in order to help Georgia deal with the pandemic.

EU-Georgia people-to-people contacts are flourishing

Since March 2017, Georgian nationals no longer need a visa to travel to Schengen area countries on short visits, and by 2020, [900 000](#) of them had taken advantage of this new arrangement. In 2019, [over 1 100](#) Georgian university students and staff visited EU countries on Erasmus+ exchanges lasting up to one year, and 750 of their EU peers travelled in the opposite direction. Since 2018, an EU-funded [European School](#) in Tbilisi offers a two-year education programme including European studies to 35 secondary school students a year from the six Eastern Partnership countries.

Political and economic reforms aligning Georgia with EU standards

Although it stops short of the full harmonisation with EU legislation required from candidate countries, the 2014 association agreement goes much further than most of the EU's agreements

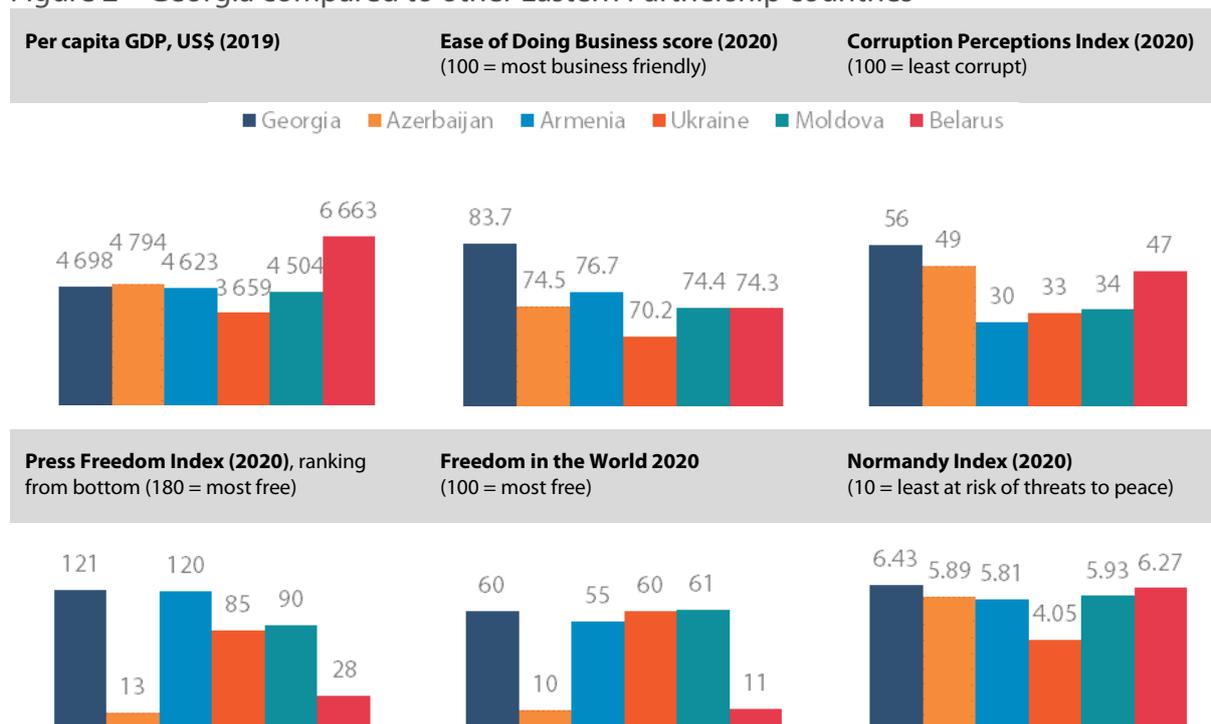
with third countries, as it requires Georgia to align with EU standards in a wide range of domestic and foreign policy fields. EU documents, such as the March 2021 [statement](#) of the EU-Georgia Association Council and the February 2020 joint European Commission/High Representative [report](#) on implementation of the agreement, point to steady progress. There are numerous areas where Georgia has moved closer to EU norms, such as labour law, company law, food safety, phytosanitary standards, e-commerce, competition law, public procurement, intellectual property protection, waste management, quality assurance in higher education and audiovisual media. Examples of reforms include: stronger provisions on sexual harassment in the revised labour code; a state inspectorate to investigate complaints against police and prison officers of torture and degrading treatment; plans to devolve tasks and finances to local authorities; internal audit systems in all ministries; and a new customs code.

EU macro-financial assistance guides the convergence process by making loans [conditional](#) on Georgia following certain priorities with regard to public finances, the financial sector, the labour market, healthcare, vocational education and training, and the business environment. By joining the EU's [Energy Community](#) in 2017, Georgia committed itself to aligning with certain key EU energy laws. That said, progress in the latter area has been slow, with Georgia having met just [36%](#) of its commitments by November 2020.

A mixed track record on democracy and the rule of law

Georgia – A frontrunner in the Eastern Partnership

Figure 2 – Georgia compared to other Eastern Partnership countries



Data: World Bank ([per capita GDP](#); [Ease of Doing Business](#)); [Transparency International](#); [Reporters Without Borders](#); [Freedom House](#), [European Parliament](#).

Georgia does better than its Eastern Partnership peers on most economic and political indicators.

EU documents on Georgia, such as the above-mentioned Commission/High Representative report, generally paint a positive picture of the country's political and economic reforms. The country is politically stable, a functioning multiparty democracy, and until recently, the economy was performing well, with steady growth averaging nearly 5% since 2010. The World Bank [praises](#) Georgia for its sound macroeconomic framework and attractive business environment, reflected in

its high ranking in the [Ease of Doing Business](#) index – 7th out of 190 countries; in Europe, only Denmark does better. Despite this mostly favourable economic situation, [unemployment](#) was high even before the pandemic – 18 % in the first quarter of 2020; it has since risen to over 20 %. The percentage living below the national poverty line has fallen over the past decade, but according to the most recent available figures, was also relatively high, at 19.5 % in 2019.

A fragile democracy: Imbalanced and polarised political landscape

Optimism about Georgia's generally positive prospects and its relations with the EU is tempered by several serious challenges relating to democracy and the rule of law. Although power has changed hands several times since independence, Georgia's political landscape has tended to be dominated by a single party – the United National Movement from 2004 to 2012, and Georgian Dream since then, with only weak competition from the opposition. Georgian Dream won an outright parliamentary majority in 2012 (85 out of 150 seats), which increased in 2016 to 115 seats – just over the three-quarters threshold needed to amend the constitution. In 2020, that majority shrank to 90 – still enough to give the party a commanding lead. Opposition parties are weak and divided, with no single prominent leader. Former ruling party UNM has split several times, but is still the largest opposition party. In 2020, it led the Strength is in Unity coalition, which won 36 seats.

Even before the current opposition boycott of parliament (see below), Georgian Dream's electoral dominance limited the parliament's capacity to hold the government to account. Parliamentarians [rarely use](#) accountability mechanisms such as Minister's Hour to put probing questions to the government, and between 2018 and 2020 the parliament only set up one investigative committee.

Critics of Georgian Dream point to the excessive influence of the party's founder, [Bidzina Ivanishvili](#), Georgia's wealthiest man; Ivanishvili stepped down as prime minister in 2013, but his successors, including current PM, Irakli Garibashvili, are all close allies, and there is [evidence](#) that he also helps choose ministers. If this is true, the fact that important decisions are taken behind the scenes by an individual who has no formal government position and is not answerable to parliament is a concern. In 2018, Freedom House NGO [identified](#) such 'informal governance' as one of the main impediments to Georgia's democratic functioning. In January 2021, Ivanishvili resigned from the chair's post of the party, which he had held since 2018, but many still see him as the [driving force](#) behind the party.

Georgian Dream, and Georgian political parties in general, are characterised by a [hierarchical structure](#) dominated by a small group of leaders, with little internal democracy or transparency. Few Georgians are members of or have much confidence in political parties; in a February 2021 [poll](#), just 27 % had favourable views of their activity, the second lowest score out of 17 Georgian institutions (in top three places were the army, the church and the media).

The imbalance between governing and opposition parties, the failure of parliament to hold government to account, the opaque role played by informal influences in shaping political decisions, and public disaffection with party politics all threaten to undermine Georgia's progress towards democracy and the rule of law. Excessive concentration of power allows the ruling party to exert political influence over institutions that in a healthy democracy are supposed to act independently as checks and balances to government power. According to an [assessment](#) of Georgia's governing institutions by Transparency International in 2020, only three – the State Defender (ombudsman), State Audit Office and Electoral Commission¹ – are operating effectively; other institutions are subject to considerable political influence, and for most of them the situation has deteriorated since the previous assessment was last carried out in 2015.

Georgia's coronavirus success story

Georgia managed to [contain](#) the spread of coronavirus, remaining Covid-19-free for most of 2020. A second wave hit in autumn 2020 but was brought under control, and infections are now much lower than in neighbouring Armenia and Azerbaijan. On the other hand, the economic impact was severe, with an [11.5 %](#) year-on-year contraction in January 2021; one in seven people is now reliant on benefits. However, sound public finances and favourable conditions for the private sector mean that Georgia is well placed for economic recovery once the pandemic ends.

Courts and law enforcement agencies are often politically biased

Political influence is especially prevalent in the judiciary, [described](#) by Freedom House NGO as 'the Achilles' heel of Georgia's democratic transformation'. The EU also [identifies](#) improving 'the independence and accountability of the judiciary' as one of the main challenges that the country faces. The High Council of Justice, whose members are elected or appointed by judges, the parliament and the president, presides over the judicial system; for example, it nominates or appoints judges to the Supreme Court, Appeals Court and district courts. The Council, whose decisions are often opaque, [apparently](#) tends to appoint judges based on loyalty towards the government or closeness to an elite group of judges rather than competence.

Georgia has taken some steps to remove political bias from the courts. Constitutional amendments adopted in 2017-2018 envisaged increasing the number of Supreme Court judges from eight to 28, and appointing them for life instead of 10 years. Supreme Court judges are nominated by the High Council of Justice, and approved by the parliament; the government also amended the law on the nomination procedure after consulting with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission.

In theory, all this should make Supreme Court judges more independent, but in practice, the effect has been to give the ruling party even stronger influence over this court. Georgian Dream will oversee the appointment of the 20 new judges, of whom 14 have been approved by parliament so far. Moreover, the revised nomination procedure is still opaque and does not follow Venice Commission [recommendations](#). Several of the new judges were highly controversial and were criticised even within the ruling party (in 2019, three parliamentarians [left](#) Georgian Dream over the issue), with accusations that loyalty to the government was being prioritised over competence.

In its 2021 [report](#) on Georgia, the EU is highly critical of the above reforms, urging 'that the selection procedure for Supreme Court judges is brought into line with European standards as soon as possible and that no further Supreme Court judges are appointed on the basis of the current legal framework'.

Similar concerns also apply to law enforcement agencies. In one of many allegedly political appointments, former Ivanishvili family lawyer, Shalva Tadumadze, became [Chief Prosecutor](#) in 2018, before graduating to the [Supreme Court](#) in December 2019. There are numerous politically motivated charges and judgments against opposition figures – such as Nika Melia for inciting violence (see below), banker [Mamuka Khazaradze](#) for money laundering, shortly after he decided to found a new opposition party, former Tbilisi mayor [Gigi Ugulava](#) (for embezzlement), and UNM-affiliated Mtavari TV station co-owner [Giorgi Rurua](#) (for illegal possession of firearms). In 2018, former President [Saakashvili](#) was convicted of abuse of power and sentenced in absentia (he is currently living in Ukraine) to six years in prison.

Excessive political influence and the lack of effective oversight help to explain abusive police [practices](#) such as planting of evidence, excessive use of force, and violence against detainees. A State Inspector's Office was set up in 2019 to investigate such abuses. This is a positive step, but some human rights organisations [feel](#) that inspectorate lacks the independence from the Prosecutor's Office that it needs to perform its tasks.

Despite impressive progress, high-level corruption persists

Georgia has made significant progress on curbing corruption. Whereas in 2003 the country came [124th](#) out of 133 countries in Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#), by 2020 it had advanced to 45th place out of 176 – ahead of other ex-Soviet countries and on a par with several EU Member States. Much of this progress was attributed to an [anti-corruption drive](#) launched by President Saakashvili after the 2003 Rose Revolution. Sweeping reforms included mass firings of corrupt civil servants, traffic police and [academics](#), who used to take bribes in exchange for admitting students to universities. Progress continued after Georgian Dream took power, but at a slower rate; since 2012, Georgia has only risen six places in the Corruption Perceptions Index

ranking. Reflecting the extent to which low-level corruption has disappeared, in 2019 just [1 %](#) of respondents reported paying a bribe over the previous 12 months – a figure [similar](#) to those recorded in most European countries and far lower than in neighbours such as Armenia (19 %) or Russia (27 %).

Impressive although this is, the political bias in Georgia's courts and law enforcement agencies towards the ruling party described in the previous sections has allowed high-level corruption to [persist](#), as senior government officials and those with close ties to the ruling party are only [rarely](#) prosecuted for graft. In 2018, a European Parliament [resolution](#) noted that 'high-level elite corruption' remained a serious issue, and called for the establishment of an independent anti-corruption agency to tackle it. In August 2020, a [bill](#) to this effect was introduced in the Georgian parliament, but without backing from the ruling party, it has not progressed since, and is not on the parliament's work programme for 2021.

Public administration effectiveness marred by political interference

Georgia's Civil Service [Law](#) requires civil servants to remain politically neutral. However, this is not always true in practice; in a 2019 UNDP [survey](#), 24 % of civil servants and 56 % of the public felt that the public administration was subject to political influence, a higher share than in the previous version of the survey from [2016](#). In 2019, [reports](#) emerged of pressure on public sector employees to participate in a pro-government rally. Although recruitment of civil servants should be strictly merit-based, an unusually high number of [dismissals](#) after Georgian Dream took power in 2012 (over 5 000) and the recruitment of over 6 000 new staff members in their place, mostly without competitive selection procedures, suggests that this is not always the case. There is evidence of significant nepotism in the form of civil service [appointments](#) for family members of high-ranking officials and ruling party politicians, as well as [government contracts](#) awarded to companies owned by relatives.

Media landscape: Pluralistic but polarised and under attack

Georgia came 60th out of 180 countries in the [2020 Press Freedom Index](#) – again, good by post-Soviet standards and on a par with several EU Member States. There are TV channels and newspapers representing diverse views, both pro-government and opposition. [Reportedly](#), public broadcaster Adjara TV, accused in the past of pro-government bias, has adopted a more balanced stance since 2016. However, this could change following the dismissals since 2019 of director [Natia Kapanadze](#) and several other [journalists](#) in an apparent attempt to give the ruling party more control over the channel's editorial policy; in 2020, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Media Freedom representative, Teresa Ribeiro, expressed [concern](#) about the impact of staffing changes at Adjara on state TV and radio channels.

Among privately owned media, objective reporting on political issues is in short supply – most outlets take a strongly partisan stance, which often [reflects](#) the politics and interests of their owners. OSCE/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) monitors following the 2020 parliamentary elections [noted](#) that media contributed to polarising the debate, hindering voters from making informed choices.

Rustavi 2, one of the country's most widely watched TV channels, has been the target of efforts to exert political control over the media. In the years after the Rose Revolution, Rustavi 2 was [taken over](#) by owners aligned with then-President Saakashvili. After Saakashvili went into opposition, the channel kept its alignment with his United National Movement party. In 2017, Georgia's Supreme Court ruled that Saakashvili's government had forced former owner Kibar Khalvashi to sell Rustavi 2 at below market value, and that it should therefore be restored to him. Although the ruling has since been [upheld](#) by the European Court of Human Rights, [critics](#) saw it as an attempt to silence the leading opposition media outlet, and indeed, many journalists have since left the channel to work elsewhere. One of them, ex-Rustavi 2 director, [Nika Gvaramia](#), went on to found the pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV channel; like many other journalists working for pro-opposition media, he now faces [criminal charges](#) (abuse of power and misappropriation of property).

The authorities' failure to protect reporters from violence and the polarised nature of Georgian politics has made the country a [dangerous](#) place to work for journalists. Several were injured while covering the [June 2019](#) protests and elections in [2020](#); some also [reported](#) receiving threats.

[Critics](#) accuse Georgia's National Communications Commission (GNCC), which regulates broadcasting and electronic communication, of partisan bias, noting that Mtavari Arkhi and other opposition-aligned media are more likely to be accused of offences such as [hate speech](#) and [disinformation](#) than government-friendly ones. The Venice Commission is [critical](#) of July 2020 amendments to the Law on Broadcasting giving the GNCC far-reaching powers to appoint 'special managers' to telecommunications companies tasked with enforcing its decisions.

Georgia is often targeted by pro-Kremlin [disinformation](#), which among other things plays on ethnic tensions while promoting distrust of the West and liberal values. However, disinformation also comes from Georgia itself. In [2019](#) and [2020](#), Facebook closed down hundreds of pages, accusing them of using fake profiles to spread messages; it claimed some were linked to Georgian Dream and others to opposition parties, reflecting Georgia's polarised politics.

2019-2021 political crisis: Ruling party versus opposition

Anti-Russia, anti-government protests in 2019

In June 2019, the Georgian parliament hosted the [Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy](#), a transnational organisation of Orthodox Christian MPs. The opening speech was delivered by Russian MP, Sergey Gavrilov. Against the backdrop of resentment at Moscow's continued occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, images of a Russian politician sitting in the chair of the Georgian parliament's speaker sparked mass protests. After a huge crowd attempted to storm the parliament, police used tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets; [240 people](#) including 30 journalists were injured, and two protesters were permanently blinded in one eye. Human rights organisations [criticised](#) the police response as excessive.

These 'Gavrilov night' protests, were initially triggered by anti-Russian feelings, but they soon turned into an expression of discontent with Georgian Dream, not least due to the party's perceived pro-Russia stance (in February 2021, former President Saakashvili [described](#) party founder Ivanishvili, who has extensive business interests in Russia, as 'Putin's slave'). While Georgian Dream has continued the pro-Western course of the preceding UNM government, it has also taken steps to [normalise](#) relations with Moscow. Although the two countries have yet to resume diplomatic relations, broken off during the 2008 war, in 2012 the newly elected Georgian Dream government launched a dialogue with Russia. The issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is not on the agenda of bilateral meetings between Georgian and Russian representatives; nevertheless, some progress has been made on facilitating trade and travel between the two countries. Since Russia [lifted](#) trade restrictions in 2013, Georgian exports to Russia have more than [doubled](#), and Russia is now Georgia's third largest trade partner. In 2015, Russia [simplified](#) visa application procedures for Georgians, and in 2016, Vladimir Putin even [suggested](#) that visa-free travel might become possible in future. Although normalisation has delivered benefits to Georgians, any suspicion of sympathy towards Moscow rankles, given the tense state of bilateral relations.

A tussle over electoral reforms

Parliamentary elections are held in Georgia every four years, most recently in October and November 2020. Until 2020, 77 of the 150 seats were elected by proportional representation and 73 in single-member constituencies, with a second round for single-member constituencies where no candidate won more than 50 % of the vote. To win seats by proportional representation, parties had to exceed a threshold of 5 %. Given that Georgian Dream is much larger than any of the opposition parties, the combined effects of single-member constituencies and a high electoral threshold

tended to give it a disproportionately large share of the vote, helping it to win a three-quarters supermajority in 2016 despite scoring slightly less than half of the vote.

A transition to a fairer, fully proportional electoral system quickly became the key demand of the June 2019 protests in front of the parliament. After the government initially agreed to the change, Georgian Dream lawmakers dragged their feet about adopting the necessary constitutional and legislative changes, triggering further large [protests](#) in November 2019, which denounced the government's 'broken promises'.

Following the protests, EU and US ambassadors mediated [six weeks](#) of talks between government and opposition parties. The talks resulted in a [compromise](#) for the October 2020 parliamentary elections: these were held with 30 single-member seats and the remaining 120 elected by proportional representation, while the electoral threshold was reduced from 5 % to 1 %. The next elections in 2024 will be fully proportional. Following OSCE/ODIHR [recommendations](#) from the 2016 vote, electoral reforms also introduced a [gender quota](#) allocating at least one-quarter (from 2028, one-third) of seats elected by proportional representation to women; as a result, the number of [women parliamentarians](#) increased in 2020 from 25 to 30.

Opposition claims that the 2020 elections were rigged

In the first round of [elections](#) held in October 2020, Georgian Dream won 48 % of the vote – a similar share to 2016, giving it 60 out of 120 proportional representation seats, and 13 out of the 30 single-member constituencies. In the second round, Georgian Dream won all remaining 17 single-member seats, giving it a total of 90 members of parliament. The UNM-led Strength is in Unity coalition won 36 seats, with the remaining 24 seats split between seven opposition parties.

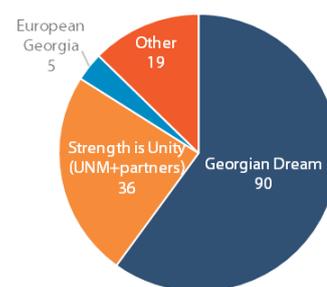
OSCE/ODIHR observers [acknowledged](#) several improvements in line with recommendations from previous elections, such as a gender quota and new conflict of interest rules for election commission members. Elections 'were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected'. Election officials generally respected voting procedures and managed technical issues efficiently despite the challenges of the pandemic.

However, election monitors' concerns echoed comments made during previous Georgian elections. For example, they noted frequent blurring of the line between state and ruling party, with Georgian Dream candidates campaigning in their official roles, despite a ban on electoral activities during working hours. Some voters perceived promises of a new Tbilisi park and sports facilities as vote-buying. Public sector employees reported being pressured to participate in Georgian Dream campaign events. There was an intimidating presence of party activists outside most polling stations. The dominant presence of ruling party representatives in election commissions raised doubts as to the latter's impartiality, and most complaints submitted to electoral authorities received summary treatment. Media coverage, although pluralistic, was highly polarised, and the lack of substantive debate was an obstacle to voters making informed choices.

Despite observers' generally positive assessment of the elections and little [evidence](#) of widespread fraud, on 3 November 2020 opposition parties [refused](#) to recognise the results of the first round of voting. The opposition boycotted the second round on 21 November and refused to take up their seats in the parliament.

The crisis took the tense confrontation between government and opposition to another level, further adding to the political polarisation, which, in the EU's [view](#), undermines Georgian democracy. For the EU, an 'inclusive parliamentary process' is a prerequisite for a closer partnership between Tbilisi and Brussels. The EU's statement echoes its concerns about similar opposition boycotts in candidate countries [Serbia](#) and [Albania](#).

Figure 3 – Georgian parliament after 2020 elections, main parties



Source: [Georgian Election Administration](#).

The crisis escalated still further in February 2021 with the arrest of Nika Melia, who had become UNM leader in December 2020. Melia was initially arrested during the June 2019 protests and [charged](#) with organising and inciting group violence before being released on bail. While still on bail, at a demonstration on 3 November 2020 Melia declared that he would no longer be 'shackled' and [removed](#) his electronic bracelet; after he refused to pay increased fees for violating the conditions of his bail, on 17 February 2021 a Tbilisi court ruled that he would have to go into custody. To escape arrest, Melia barricaded himself with supporters in the UNM party headquarters. The decision to arrest him was opposed by Prime Minister, Giorgi Gakharia, who stepped down on 18 February. Nevertheless, on 23 February police stormed the building and arrested Melia. While some international observers [acknowledged](#) that Melia had broken the law, many [felt](#) that the arrest provided further evidence of politically motivated justice.

EU mediation leads to a breakthrough

The crisis led to a flurry of EU and US diplomatic activity, in an attempt to bridge differences between government and opposition. After [visiting](#) Tbilisi on 1 March, the European Council President, Charles Michel, [appointed](#) Swedish diplomat, Christian Danielsson, as his personal envoy and mediator in inter-party talks. One of the main sticking points was elections, with the ruling party rejecting opposition demands for a re-run.

After several rounds of talks, a breakthrough came on 19 April with an EU-brokered agreement signed by Georgian Dream and some opposition parties. Its [terms](#) include a review of the cases of Nika Melia and Giorgi Rurua, described by the opposition as 'political prisoners', changes to the rules for selecting Supreme Court judges, and in-depth reforms of the High Council of Justice, taking into account Venice Commission recommendations. From now on, parliament will elect the chair of the Central Election Commission by a two-thirds parliamentary majority, and approve the Prosecutor-General by a qualified majority, thus ensuring that these two appointments take opposition votes into account. If Georgian Dream wins less than 43 % of the proportional vote in autumn 2021 local elections, elections to the national parliament will be brought forward from 2024 to 2022. Following the deal, opposition members finally [entered](#) parliament on 27 April, where they will chair five parliamentary committees. An opposition representative will also chair one of the Georgian parliament delegations to international fora such as Euronest, the Parliamentary Association Committee (see below), and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The agreement is a positive step that reflects the continuing strength of EU influence in Georgia. If fully implemented, the reforms it envisages could go some way towards addressing the problem of politically motivated justice, one of the root causes of the political crisis. However, prospects for ending the political crisis are [dimmed](#) by the fact that the deal has not been signed by the two biggest opposition parties, the United National Movement and European Georgia, which between them hold 41 out of 60 opposition seats and are continuing their boycott (although [three individual members](#) of these two parties have returned to parliament). Although parliament is due to consider an amnesty for all those facing criminal charges linked to the June 2019 protests, UNM leader, Nika Melia, [says](#) he will not accept the amnesty as it will also apply to the 'criminal police officers and officials' who broke up the protests. He has however left prison, after the EU-funded European Endowment for Democracy [posted bail](#) for him.

The European Parliament and Georgia

European Parliament position on Georgia

The [Parliamentary Association Committee](#) comprises MEPs and Georgian parliamentarians; meeting twice a year, it monitors implementation of the EU-Georgia association agreement. On the Parliament's side, the committee is co-chaired by Marina Kaljurand (S&D, Estonia). MEPs also meet their counterparts from Georgia and other Eastern Partnership parliaments in the [Euronest Parliamentary Assembly](#); the assembly's most recent session was held online, on 19-20 April 2021.

The Parliament's standing rapporteur on Georgia is Sven Mikser (S&D, Estonia). Parliament resolutions, such as the [September 2020](#) resolution on the implementation of the EU-Georgia association agreement, commend Georgia's reform efforts and support its territorial integrity. The Parliament [advocates](#) even closer integration between the EU, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in 'further enhanced bilateral relationship formats'. Like the other EU institutions, the Parliament calls for greater dialogue between the political parties and insists on the need for further judicial reforms. On 21 April 2021, MEPs Sven Mikser, Marina Kaljurand and Viola von Cramon-Taubadel issued a joint [statement](#) welcoming the agreement between Georgian Dream and opposition parties.

Parliament's contribution to mediation of the political crisis

Travel restrictions due to the pandemic meant that MEPs were unable to meet their Georgian counterparts in person or participate in EU-led mediation. On 29 March, seven MEPs signed a strong joint [statement](#) warning that unless the crisis was resolved, there could be no return to business as usual, and that the EU might have to reconsider its financial support for Georgia. According to one of the signatories, [Marina Kaljurand](#) the statement was an important contribution to the EU's mediation efforts, sending a strong signal to Georgian political parties about the necessity for a compromise.

The 19 April agreement between ruling and opposition parties envisages that, once travel becomes possible again, both sides will participate in a [Jean Monnet dialogue](#). Hosted by the Parliament, such dialogues have helped to bridge political divides in Ukraine, North Macedonia and Serbia; they consist of a series of consultation sessions and meetings away from the media spotlight, typically in the secluded setting of the Jean Monnet House in France.

The Parliament's Democracy Support and Election Coordination [work programme](#) for Georgia also envisages discussions on topics such as electoral reforms, measures to empower women parliamentarians, and capacity building (for example, training for staff of the Georgian parliament). The lead MEP for these activities is Viola von Cramon-Taubadel (Greens/EFA, Germany).

ENDNOTES

¹ This positive assessment of the Electoral Commission's work, from March 2020, pre-dates the autumn 2020 elections, which highlighted some of the Commission's deficiencies.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2021.

Photo credits: © Evaldas / Adobe Stock.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

