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# Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy

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## Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy

Georgia is one of the United States' closest partners among the post-Soviet states that gained their independence after the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. Building on a history of strong development aid and security cooperation, the United States deepened its strategic partnership with Georgia after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014. U.S. policy expressly supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity against Russian occupation of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition, Georgia has been a leading recipient of U.S. foreign and security assistance in Europe and Eurasia.

Georgia's relations with Russia have been tense since the last years of the Soviet Union. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia to prevent the Georgian government from reestablishing control over the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which broke away from Georgia in the early 1990s and became informal Russian protectorates. Russia maintains its occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in part to preserve influence over Georgia and prevent it from joining NATO. The pursuit of NATO and European Union (EU) membership is a goal enshrined in Georgia's constitution.

The originally center-left but increasingly national-conservative Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GD) party has governed since 2012. Since 2021, some political developments have contributed to domestic tensions and U.S. and EU expressions of concern; these developments include the collapse of an April 2021 EU-brokered agreement on political and judicial reforms, the imprisonment of former President Mikheil Saakashvili and other opposition figures, and newly strident criticism of U.S. and EU policies by some senior government officials. EU concerns were reflected in a June 2022 decision to defer granting Georgia EU candidate status. In the decision, the EU "recognized the European perspective" of Georgia, together with that of Ukraine and Moldova, but did not name Georgia a candidate country as it did the other two. The EU said it would grant candidate status to Georgia after the country addresses a set of 12 governance priorities.

Georgia's response to Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022-2023 has been the subject of some debate. Polls indicate widespread support for Ukraine among the Georgian population, and the Georgian government officially condemns Russia's invasion. At the same time, the Georgian government has maintained a measured approach in criticizing Russia, stating that it seeks to avoid possible reprisals or economic losses. The government has promoted increased trade and travel with Russia and permitted an influx of Russian nationals in the wake of Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine starting in 2022.

Since Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, Congress has expressed firm support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Since FY2017, annual foreign operations appropriations have prohibited foreign assistance to governments that recognize the independence of Abkhazia or South Ossetia and have restricted funds from supporting Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (most recently, in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023; P.L. 117-328, §7047(c)). Some Members of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress and previous Congresses have expressed support for Georgia's democracy and governance reforms and the deepening of its ties with Europe and the United States.

Since FY2018, Georgia has been one of two countries in Europe and Eurasia (the other country is Ukraine) for which Congress has specified that funds be made available for assistance—most recently, in P.L. 117-328, Section 7046(a)(1). For FY2022, planned State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) assistance for Georgia totaled \$153 million in regular and supplemental funding. FY2023 appropriations include not less than \$132 million in assistance for Georgia. For FY2024, the State Department/USAID budget request includes \$121 million in assistance. The United States also provides assistance to Georgia through Department of Defense programs.

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## Introduction

Georgia is one of three countries in the South Caucasus, a region between the Black and Caspian Seas separated from Russia by the Greater Caucasus mountain range and bordering Iran and Turkey (see **Figure 1**).<sup>1</sup> Historically situated between rival empires, various Georgian kingdoms and principalities were incorporated into the Russian Empire beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Georgia enjoyed a brief period of independence from 1918 until its forcible incorporation into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or Soviet Union) in 1921-1922. Georgia gained independence in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1991, Georgia has faced two territorial conflicts over the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These regions, in addition to being home to ethnic Georgians, are also home to ethnic groups that more closely identify with ethnic kin in Russia's North Caucasus. After a short war with Georgia in 2008, Russia unilaterally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and stationed military forces in these regions.

Georgians speak and write a distinct Caucasian language, with a written literary form that emerged at least as early as the fifth century. The Georgian Orthodox Church, to which most Georgians belong, is autocephalous (independent), with roots that date back to the fourth century.

Since Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, Congress has expressed firm support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Some Members of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress and previous Congresses also have expressed support for Georgia's democracy and governance reforms and the deepening of its ties with Europe and the United States.

### Georgia at a Glance

**Population:** 3.74 million (2023 est.)  
**Comparative Area:** 69,700 sq km., slightly larger than West Virginia  
**Capital:** Tbilisi  
**Ethnic Composition:** 87% Georgian, 6% Azerbaijani, 5% Armenian (2014 census)  
**Religion:** 83% Georgian Orthodox, 11% Muslim, 3% Armenian Apostolic (2014 census)  
**GDP/GDP per capita:** \$24.6 billion/\$6,672 (2022 est.)  
**Top Exports:** copper ores, motor vehicles, beverages, iron and steel (2022)  
**Leadership:** Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, President Salome Zourabichvili, Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze, Foreign Minister Iliia Darchiashvili, Parliamentary Chairman Shalva Papuashvili  
**Source:** National Statistics Office of Georgia. Data does not include the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

## Politics and Governance

Over the course of more than three decades of Georgia's independence, observers generally have characterized the country as having a "hybrid" political system, containing both democratic and

<sup>1</sup> The other two countries in the South Caucasus are Armenia and Azerbaijan. Historical surveys of the Caucasus include Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Thomas De Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Historical surveys of Georgia include Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012); and Stephen Jones, *Georgia: A Political History Since Independence* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

nondemocratic elements.<sup>3</sup> The U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom House considers Georgia to be one of four “partly free” post-Soviet states which gained their independence after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.<sup>4</sup>

Georgia has a parliamentary system of governance. The ruling Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GD) was founded as a center-left party but in recent years has evolved in a more national-conservative direction. GD first came to power in 2012 as the leading party in an electoral bloc and governed alone from 2016 to 2022.<sup>5</sup> In 2019, GD lost about one-fifth of its parliamentary deputies, following disputes about judicial and electoral reforms.<sup>6</sup> GD currently retains a governing majority with the support of the small People’s Power parliamentary group, which is openly critical of European and U.S. policy toward Georgia.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure I. Georgia**



**Sources:** Map created by CRS. Map information generated using data from the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, DeLorme, Department of State, and Esri.

<sup>3</sup> The U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom House ranks postcommunist states by a “democracy” score that ranges between 1 (least democratic) and 7 (most democratic). Georgia’s “democracy score” in 2023 is 3.04 (transitional or hybrid regime). Scores reflect the state of affairs at the start of the year. Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2023*.

<sup>4</sup> The other three are Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Freedom House ranks all countries in the world by a “global freedom” score, which includes measures of political rights and civil liberties. Georgia’s “freedom score” in 2023 is 58 out of 100 (down from 64 between 2015 and 2018). Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023*.

<sup>5</sup> In 2016, Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GD) won reelection with a supermajority of more than 75% of parliamentary seats.

<sup>6</sup> *OC Media*, “Georgian Dream Loses Constitutional Majority as MPs Leave Party,” February 22, 2019; and Nika Gamtseidze, “Several MPs Leave Ruling Team as Parliament Rejects Bill on Electoral Amendments,” *Messenger Online*, November 15, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Kornely Kakachia and Nino Samkharadze, *People’s Power or Populist Pawns? Examining Georgia’s New Anti-Western Political Movement*, Georgian Institute of Politics, December 2022; and Rusudan Machaidze, “People’s Power’: Anti-Western Movement in the Service of the Ruling Party of Georgia,” *JAM News*, March 2, 2023.

Officially, Georgia's most powerful executive is the prime minister. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili assumed office in February 2021 (Garibashvili also served as prime minister from 2013 to 2015 and as minister of defense from 2019 to 2021). Garibashvili is a longtime associate of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, former GD party chairman and a former prime minister, who is widely believed to exert an influential behind-the-scenes role in Georgia's politics.<sup>8</sup>

Georgia's head of state, President Salome Zourabichvili (or Zurabishvili), was elected in 2018.<sup>9</sup> The Georgian president is commander in chief of the armed forces and has the power to veto legislation and dissolve parliament under certain circumstances. Zourabichvili is to be Georgia's last directly elected president; her term ends in 2024. Due to constitutional reforms that entered into force in 2018, the president is to be elected subsequently by members of parliament (MPs) and local government representatives.

Georgia's unicameral parliament has 150 members. The 2018 constitutional reforms established a fully proportional (party list) system beginning in 2024, with a threshold for entering parliament of 5% of the vote. For the 2020 parliamentary elections, the parliament established a transitional election system by which 120 seats were elected by party list and 30 seats by majoritarian district. The threshold for entering parliament was set temporarily at 1% of the vote.<sup>10</sup>

## Recent Parliamentary and Local Elections

According to official results, GD won 60% of seats (90 out of 150) in 2020 parliamentary elections. GD placed first in the party list vote (with 48%), and GD candidates won 13 of 30 majoritarian seats in the first round. Opposition parties boycotted a second round, helping GD secure victory in all of the majoritarian races.

GD's main competitor was the opposition bloc Strength in Unity, led by the center-right United National Movement (UNM), a former ruling party once led by ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013). The UNM officially received 27% of the party list vote and 36 seats total (24%). UNM splinter party European Georgia-Movement for Liberty came in third, with 4% of the vote (and five seats). Six other opposition parties were elected to parliament, each with four seats or fewer (see **Figure 2**).

The 2020 elections were mired in controversy. Opposition parties accused the authorities of electoral fraud and for months refused to enter parliament. International observers characterized the election results as "competitive" and stated that "overall, fundamental freedoms were respected." At the same time, observers expressed concerns about various shortcomings, including an appeals process that was a central focus of opposition complaints.<sup>11</sup> After the elections, opposition parties organized several protests, including a demonstration outside the Central Election Commission that police dispersed with the use of anti-riot equipment, including

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<sup>8</sup> Bidzina Ivanishvili first formally retired from politics in 2013, after serving as prime minister for 13 months. He returned as GD chairman from 2018 to 2021. Isabelle Khurshudyan and Inna Lazareva, "In Georgia, an Oligarch with Echoes of Trump Says He's Leaving Politics. Many Don't Believe Him," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2021; and Khatia Ghoghoberidze, "How Does Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili De Facto Rule Georgia?," *JAM News*, June 27, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Prior to first entering the Georgian government as a minister of foreign affairs in 2004, Zourabichvili was a French national and diplomat.

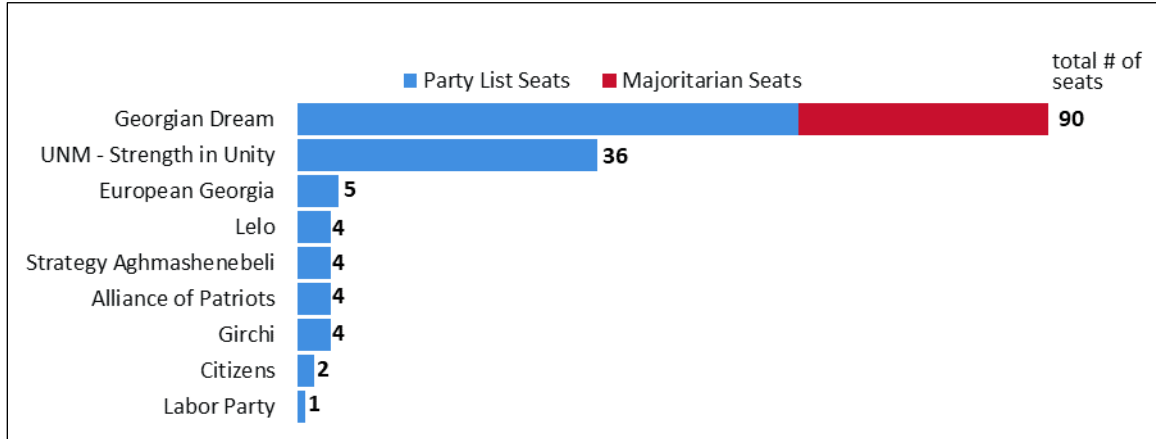
<sup>10</sup> The shift to a more proportional election system in 2020 resulted from a March 2020 interparty agreement facilitated by the United States, Germany, the European Union (EU), and the Council of Europe. *OC Media*, "Georgian Government Reaches Agreement with Opposition over 2020 Election," March 9, 2020; and Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgia Adopts Landmark Election Reform," *Eurasianet*, June 29, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observation mission was limited in size due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic. OSCE/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Georgia Parliamentary Elections, 31 October 2020*, March 5, 2021.



water cannons.<sup>12</sup> Members of the diplomatic community, including the U.S. and European Union (EU) ambassadors, sought to negotiate a resolution to the dispute.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 2. October 2020 Parliamentary Elections**



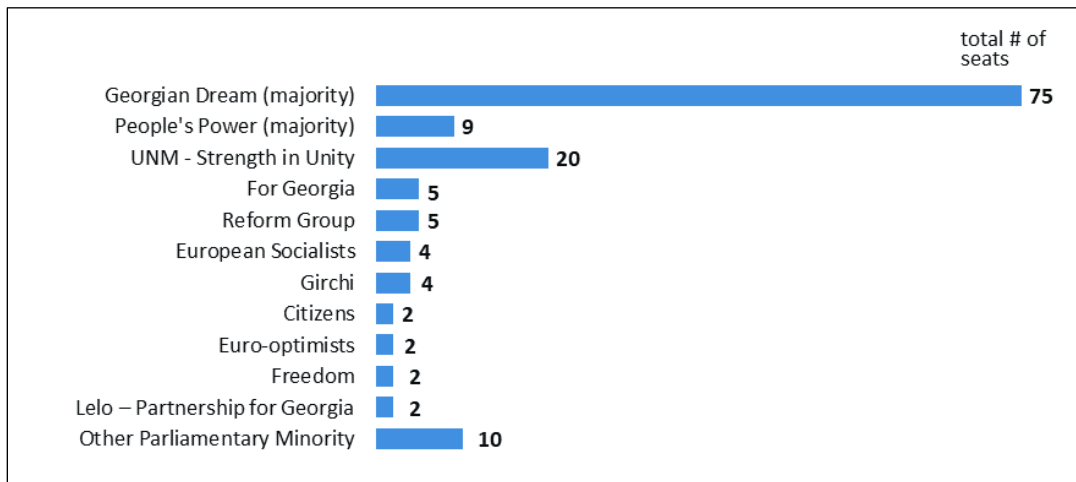
**Source:** Election Administration of Georgia, “The Central Election Commission Summarized Results of the 31 October Parliamentary Elections of Georgia,” December 3, 2020.

**Note:** UNM = United National Movement.

The parliament’s composition has changed since the 2020 elections (see **Figure 3**). Several MPs have left their parties or blocs and created new factions or become independent MPs. Fifteen MPs have left GD. Although their defection in principle threatened to unravel GD’s parliamentary majority, nine former GD MPs that established the People’s Power parliamentary group continue to support the ruling party.

**Figure 3. Parliamentary Factions or Groups**

(as of June 29, 2023)



**Source:** Parliament of Georgia.

**Notes:** UNM = United National Movement. Ten of 150 seats were vacant as of June 29, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “19 Detained as Police Used Water Cannons Against Election Rally in Tbilisi,” November 9, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “Statement by the United States Embassy and the Delegation of the European Union to Georgia,” December 11, 2020.

In Georgia's October 2021 local elections, GD candidates won mayoral elections in 63 out of 64 races and majorities in 57 of 64 local councils. International observers said elections were "marred by widespread and consistent allegations of intimidation, vote-buying, pressure on candidates and votes, and an unlevel playing field."<sup>14</sup> The UNM and some other opposition parties rejected the results.<sup>15</sup>

## Political Tensions Since 2021

Georgian politics are characterized by a high degree of political polarization. Since 2021, developments that have contributed to both domestic tensions and U.S. and EU expressions of concern include the collapse of an April 2021 EU-brokered agreement between the ruling party and opposition parties on political and judicial reform; the imprisonment of former President Saakashvili and other opposition figures; and some senior government officials' newly strident criticism of U.S. and EU policy.

## Reform Challenges

In 2021, Georgian authorities agreed to launch a political dialogue with opposition parties after facing international criticism for arresting Nika Melia—the then-leader of the UNM, Georgia's largest opposition party—for violating court orders related to charges from 2019 (see below, "Imprisonments"). The dialogue was mediated by the EU and supported by the United States. It led to a negotiated agreement in April 2021 that resulted in the end of a boycott of parliament by most opposition parties and Melia's release from prison. The agreement also provided for political and judicial reforms.<sup>16</sup>

The agreement was short-lived. The parliament implemented some of the agreement's provisions, including the amnesty of Melia and others and changes to the process of selecting members of election commissions. In July 2021, however, GD leaders stated that the party no longer considered the agreement binding, citing the UNM's refusal to officially sign the agreement.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, EU officials said the Georgian government reversed course on several of its commitments, including by dropping its advance pledge to hold snap parliamentary elections in the event that the party received less than 43% of the popular vote in October 2021 local elections (GD officially received 47%).<sup>18</sup> Although the UNM agreed to return to parliament and eventually signed the agreement, its members continued to boycott the parliament periodically and limit themselves to a restricted set of legislative activities until February 2022.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> GD officially received 47% of the proportional vote. The United National Movement (UNM) placed second, with 31% of the proportional vote, followed by For Georgia, with 8%. GD candidates won about 88% of majoritarian races (about one-third of total seats). OSCE/ODIHR, *Georgia, Local Elections, 2 and 30 October 2021*, April 8, 2022, pp. 1, 38-40.

<sup>15</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Ruling Party Dominates Georgian Local Elections, Sparking Protest," *Eurasianet*, November 1, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS), "President of the European Council Charles Michel Publishes New Proposal Made Today to Georgian Political Parties," April 18, 2021; and *JAM News*, "Georgia Gov't, Opposition Standoff at an End? What's in the Newly Signed Agreement," April 20, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgian Ruling Party Walks Out on Critical Political Agreement," *Eurasianet*, July 28, 2021; and *Agenda.ge*, "Int'l Community Criticizes Ruling Party's Withdrawal from EU-Mediated Agreement," July 29, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgian Ruling Party Walks Out on Critical Political Agreement," *Eurasianet*, July 28, 2021; and Delegation of the EU to Georgia, "Remarks by EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell Following Today's Parliamentary Vote in First Reading on the Post-19 April Agreement Constitutional Amendments," September 7, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> *Civil Georgia*, "UNM to Enter Parliament, Refuses to Sign EU-Brokered Deal," May 30, 2021; *Agenda.ge*, "UNM to (continued...)"



According to the April 2021 agreement, long-awaited judicial appointments were to be paused and the application process reopened pending passage of several judicial reforms. In subsequent months, the parliament moved forward with dozens of appointments, including 11 to the Supreme Court (which has 28 sitting judges). Opposition parties, some NGOs, and some U.S. and EU officials said the appointments and other adopted measures contradicted the agreement and undermined transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.<sup>20</sup>

In May 2022, then-EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell praised Georgia for past reform progress but expressed concerns about newer developments. Referring to Georgia’s application for EU membership (see “European Union,” below), Hartzell stated that

Georgia could have been better prepared for this historic moment, as it comes at a time when the EU is increasingly concerned about the country’s current trajectory. Following an effective slow-down of the reform pace over recent years—partly due to consecutive political crises for which all sides bear their part of responsibility—over these past months, questions have been raised about where Georgia is heading.<sup>21</sup>

Since June 2022, Georgia’s reform efforts have been structured around a set of 12 governance “priorities” that the EU established as conditions for Georgia to receive EU candidate status (see “European Union,” below).<sup>22</sup> Georgian officials state that the government has addressed these priorities. In January 2023, parliamentary majority leader Irakli Kobakhidze said the government had “meticulously followed each [of the EU’s recommendations] and the relevant requirements were satisfied.”<sup>23</sup> In February 2023, GD officials noted that a recent EU analysis concluded that Georgia and Ukraine had a similar overall capacity to adhere to EU legislation and policy.<sup>24</sup>

According to the EU, however, several of the 12 governance priorities remain partially achieved or not achieved. As of June 2023, EU officials assessed that Georgia had “completed” three priorities, achieved “some progress” on seven, achieved “limited progress” on one, and achieved “no progress” on one (see **Table 1**).<sup>25</sup>

Some reforms that remain pending, according to observers, include the following:

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Sign EU-Mediated Agreement After Months of Refusal to Do So, Ruling Party Calls Step ‘Funny,’” September 2, 2021; and *Civil Georgia*, “UNM Calls off Parliamentary Boycott,” January 31, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, OSCE, *Final Report on the Nomination and Appointment of Supreme Court Judges in Georgia*, August 23, 2021; EEAS, “Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Appointment of Supreme Court Judges,” December 2, 2021; and U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “U.S. Embassy Statement on the Ruling Party’s Rushed, End-of-Year Legislation,” January 3, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Delegation of the EU to Georgia, “Key Note Speech by Ambassador Hartzell at the Conference ‘New Security Architecture in Europe and Its Impact on Georgia,’” May 30, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> European Commission, *Opinion on Georgia’s Application for Membership of the European Union*, June 17, 2022, pp 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “GD Chair Kobakhidze Talks ‘Second Front,’ ‘Radical Opposition,’ Lavrov’s Remarks,” January 19, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “EC Publishes Analytical Reports on Alignment with the Acquis,” February 6, 2023; and Georgian Dream Chronicle, “EU Report Positive, Georgia Also Progresses in All Polls and Rankings,” February 6, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, “Press Remarks by Neighbourhood and Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, Following the Informal General Affairs Council,” June 22, 2023. Also see Open Society Georgia Foundation, *EU Candidacy Check: State of Implementation of 12 Priorities, 16 January-31 March, 2023*, April 20, 2023; and Sasha Stone et al., *Reform and Resistance: Georgia’s Path to EU Candidacy*, Center for European Policy Analysis, April 6, 2023.

- More effective efforts to combat high-level corruption, including potentially by providing investigative powers to the Anti-Corruption Bureau, which was legislatively established in December 2022<sup>26</sup>
- Judicial reform legislation that would provide “holistic reform,” would not be “limited in scope,” and would incorporate long-standing international recommendations<sup>27</sup>
- A more systemic approach to “eliminating or at least significantly reducing the influence of ‘oligarchs’ in political, economic, and public life” than would be provided for via draft legislation on “de-oligarchization” introduced in November 2022 and amended in April 2023<sup>28</sup>
- Continued electoral reforms, including potentially lowering the electoral threshold and ensuring inclusive means of selecting members of the Central Election Commission<sup>29</sup>
- Reversing a deterioration in media freedom<sup>30</sup>

## Imprisonments

In 2018, former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was convicted twice in absentia and sentenced to a total of six years in prison for alleged crimes related to abuse of power during his term in office. His supporters consider the charges to be politically motivated. Saakashvili returned to Georgia on the eve of October 2021 local elections, seemingly to support the opposition. He was detained on the basis of his existing convictions and charged with crossing the border illegally; in addition, two outstanding investigations against him were revived.<sup>31</sup>

Some U.S. and European officials, together with Saakashvili supporters and human rights organizations, have called on Georgian officials to ensure Saakashvili’s appropriate medical care.<sup>32</sup> In May 2022, he was transferred to a civilian medical clinic. In February 2023, the

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<sup>26</sup> Transparency International (TI) Georgia, “Analysis of the Law on the Fight Against Corruption,” April 21, 2023; and TI Georgia, “Alleged Cases of the High-Level Corruption—A Periodically Updated List,” April 24, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Council of Europe European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), *Georgia: Follow-Up Opinion to Four Previous Opinions Concerning the Organic Law on Common Courts*, March 14, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Nini Gabritchidze, “Georgia Advances Anti-oligarchy Laws While It Debates Who, Exactly, Is an Oligarch,” *Eurasianet*, November 8, 2022; and Venice Commission, *Georgia: Final Opinion on the Draft Law “On De-Oligarchization,”* June 12, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association, and TI Georgia, *Joint Opinion on the December 2022 Amendments to the Election Legislation*, January 2023; and *Civil Georgia*, “Parliament Passes Amendments to Electoral Code Altering CEC Election Process,” June 13, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “U.S. Embassy Statement on the Continued Imprisonment of Nika Gvaramia,” November 2, 2022; Delegation of the EU to Georgia, “Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Verdict by the Tbilisi Court of Appeal, in the Case of Mr. Gvaramia,” November 2, 2022; Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), “CPJ, Rights Groups Call on Georgia President to Release Journalist Nika Gvaramia,” April 20, 2023; and TI Georgia, “Media Environment from May 3 to May 3: Chronology of Backsliding,” May 4, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> After leaving office in 2013, former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili departed Georgia, adopted Ukrainian citizenship, and served as a Ukrainian official. In 2015, Saakashvili was stripped of his Georgian citizenship (Georgia prohibits dual citizenship, although the law provides for exceptions). *Civil Georgia*, “Complicated: Guide to Saakashvili’s Jail Controversy,” October 25, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, U.S. Department of State, “Treatment of Former President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili,” November 18, 2021; U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing,” December 20, 2022; EEAS, “EP Plenary: The Situation of Former President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili,” February 2, 2023; and Amnesty International, “Georgia: Authorities Should Reconsider Mikheil Saakashvili’s Release on Medical Grounds,” March 2, 2023.

European Parliament passed a resolution calling on Georgian officials to release and pardon Saakashvili.<sup>33</sup>

**Table 1. Status of EU Candidacy Priorities**  
(European Commission update to the European Council, June 2023)

<b>Implemented Fully</b>	<p>(9) Consolidate efforts to enhance gender equality and fight violence against women</p> <p>(11) Adopt legislation so that Georgian courts proactively take into account European Court of Human Rights judgments in their deliberations</p> <p>(12) Ensure that an independent person is given preference in the process of nominating a new Public Defender (Ombudsperson) and that this process is conducted in a transparent manner; ensure the Office's effective institutional independence</p>
<b>Implemented Partially</b>	<p>(1) Address the issue of political polarization, through ensuring cooperation across political parties in the spirit of the April 19, 2021, agreement</p> <p>(2) Guarantee the full functioning of all state institutions, strengthening their independence and effective accountability as well as their democratic oversight functions, and further improve the electoral framework</p> <p>(3) Implement a transparent and effective judicial reform strategy and action plan based on a broad, inclusive, and cross-party consultation process, ensuring a judiciary that is fully independent, accountable, and impartial and safeguarding the separation of powers</p> <p>(4) Strengthen the independence of the Anti-Corruption Agency, in particular to address high-level corruption cases; equip the new Special Investigative Service and Personal Data Protection Service with resources commensurate to their mandates and ensure their independence</p> <p>(6) Strengthen the fight against organized crime, notably by ensuring rigorous investigations, prosecutions, and a credible track record of prosecutions and convictions; guarantee accountability and oversight of law enforcement agencies</p> <p>(8) Move swiftly to strengthen the protection of human rights of vulnerable groups, including by bringing perpetrators and instigators of violence to justice more effectively</p> <p>(10) Ensure the involvement of civil society in decisionmaking processes at all levels</p>
<b>Implementation Limited</b>	<p>(5) Implement the commitment to “de-oligarchization” by eliminating the excessive influence of vested interests in economic, political, and public life</p>
<b>Yet to be Implemented</b>	<p>(7) Undertake stronger efforts to guarantee a free, professional, pluralistic and independent media environment, notably by ensuring that criminal procedures brought against media owners fulfill the highest legal standards and by launching impartial, effective, and timely investigations in cases of threats against the safety of journalists.</p>

**Source:** Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, “The Twelve Priorities,” September 20, 2022; and European Commission, “Press Remarks by Neighbourhood and Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, Following the Informal General Affairs Council,” June 22, 2023.

Past imprisonments also have raised concerns. In May 2022, Nika Gvaramia, the director of an independent television station, was sentenced to 3½ years in prison on charges of abuse of power that some observers and Western officials suggested were potentially without legal foundation.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> European Parliament Resolution of 15 February 2023 on the Situation of the Former President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili, at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0046\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0046_EN.html).

<sup>34</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “Critical TV Boss Sentencing Unlawful, Watchdog Says,” May 17, 2022; Reporters Without Borders, (continued...)

In June 2023, Georgia’s Supreme Court upheld Gvaramia’s conviction; three days later, President Zourabichvili pardoned Gvaramia.<sup>35</sup>

In February 2021, authorities also arrested then-UNM party chairman Nika Melia. The arrest was the culmination of a lengthy judicial confrontation with Melia stemming from his role in a 2019 clash between protesters and police, when Melia was charged for allegedly inciting violence and leading an attempt to storm the Georgian parliament (see “June 2019 Protest” box, below). Then-Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned, stating he opposed Melia’s detention given its political overtones, risk of violence, and potentially destabilizing effects. Gakharia subsequently entered the opposition as head of a new political party, For Georgia.<sup>36</sup>

### June 2019 Protest

In June 2019, the Georgian government faced a political crisis after police used tear gas and rubber bullets against demonstrators, some of whom had confronted riot police in an attempt to forcibly enter the Georgian parliament. Demonstrators were protesting the decision to allow a Member of Parliament (MP) from Russia to deliver a speech from the parliamentary speaker’s chair in his capacity as chairman of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, which the Georgian parliament was hosting. Many protesters called the decision a national affront, given Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia and occupation of parts of its territory.

After the crackdown, the government made some concessions but maintained the police response was largely appropriate. Then-parliamentary chairman Irakli Kobakhidze resigned, although he subsequently became leader of the parliamentary majority. The government did not meet the protesters’ main demand that then-Minister of Internal Affairs Giorgi Gakharia resign; instead, Gakharia was appointed prime minister. About 20 protesters were charged with participating in mass violence and resisting police.

**Sources:** RFE/RL, “Furious Anti-Russia Protesters in Tbilisi Demand Speaker’s Resignation, Clash with Police,” June 21, 2019; Giorgi Lomsadze, “Violent Crackdown Throws Georgian Ruling Party’s Survival into Question,” *Eurasianet*, June 21, 2019; and *Civil Georgia*, “Two More Arrested for ‘Group Violence,’” July 27, 2019.

### Anti-Western Criticism

Since 2022, some senior GD party and government officials have exhibited increasingly national-conservative leanings. This has included branding domestic opponents as “liberal fascists” or “pseudo-liberalists” and asserting that Georgian national and sovereign interests do not necessarily align with EU and U.S. preferences.<sup>37</sup> They also claim that Western criticisms of democracy and governance reforms in Georgia are unfounded; some have alleged the EU and the United States have improperly interfered in Georgia’s domestic politics and have exhibited bias against the ruling party.<sup>38</sup> Some also have criticized leading NGOs, many of which have received support from Western governments and foundations for years, alleging that they seek to “delegitimize the government” and undermine Georgia’s prospects for European integration.<sup>39</sup>

“Georgia: RSF Seeks Review of Opposition TV Chief’s Conviction, Jail Sentence,” May 24, 2022; and U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “U.S. Embassy Statement on Nika Gvaramia’s Imprisonment,” June 20, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Gabriel Gavin, “Georgian President Pardons Jailed Journalist After EU, US Outcry,” *Politico*, June 23, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> *JAM News*, “Georgian Opposition Leader Faces Arrest After Parliament Revokes MP Status,” February 16, 2021; and *OC Media*, “Gakharia Resigns as Georgian PM over Melia Arrest,” February 18, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Nini Gabritchidze, “Georgian Leaders Come After ‘Liberal Fascists’ Following Foreign Agent Bill’s Defeat,” *Eurasianet*, March 17, 2023; and Shota Kincha, “Georgian Dream Renounces Affiliation with Centre-Left EU Parliament Group,” *OC Media*, May 11, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “Judges Accuse EU, U.S. Embassies of Meddling in Georgia’s Internal Affairs,” November 4, 2021; Ana Dumbadze, “GD Chairman on U.S. Embassy Statement: Shakes Public Confidence in Western Partners,” *Georgia Today*, January 4, 2022; and *Civil Georgia*, “Criticism Towards U.S. Not in Georgia’s Interests Says PM,” September 2, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “Ruling Party Contests Civic Space,” September 19, 2022.

In 2023, criticism of Western policies culminated in the parliamentary majority's effort to enact *foreign agent* legislation that international and domestic stakeholders said was antidemocratic and inspired by similar Russian legislation. GD withdrew the legislation in early March after domestic protests and objections from President Zourabichvili and U.S. and European officials.<sup>40</sup>

These developments—together with the government's willingness to improve relations with Moscow amid Russia's war against Ukraine (see "Relations with Russia and Secessionist Regions," below)—have led some observers to question whether Georgia's political environment and increased economic ties with Russia may jeopardize the country's European trajectory.<sup>41</sup> President Zourabichvili, several opposition parties, and some NGOs have urged the government to adopt more consistently pro-European policies and rhetoric.<sup>42</sup>

## Economy

For three decades, Georgia has been recovering from the severe economic decline it experienced after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>43</sup> In 2022, Georgia's gross domestic product (GDP) was about \$24.6 billion (approximately 10 times less than that of Oklahoma, which has a slightly larger population size). Georgia's per capita GDP (\$6,672 in 2022) is midsized in comparison with the per capita GDP of Russia and other post-Soviet states.

Georgia's economy entered a period of growth starting in 2017. From 2017 to 2019, GDP grew by about 5% a year. In 2020, the first year of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Georgia's GDP declined by almost 7%. In 2021, GDP rebounded by 10.5%; in 2022, it grew by another 10%, at least in part due to an influx of Russian nationals who fled Russia after the latter invaded Ukraine (see "Economic Relations with Russia," below).<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, Georgia continues to contend with unemployment, underemployment, and inflation. According to official data, 16% of the population lived in poverty in 2022 (down from 30% a decade before). The official unemployment rate in 2022 was 17% (down from 27% in 2012). About 18% of Georgian laborers work in agriculture, a sector of the economy that accounts for about 7% of GDP. Inflation has grown in recent years: from 5% a year in 2019-2020 to 10% in 2021 and 12% in 2022.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Nini Gabritchidze, "International Pressure Grows on Georgia to Reject Foreign Agents Bill," *Eurasianet*, February 28, 2023; Sophiko Megreldidze and Dasha Litvinova, "Georgia to Drop Foreign Agents Law After Massive Protests," Associated Press, March 9, 2023; and Lela Kunchulia and Andy Heil, "Why the Georgian Government Climbed Down on the 'Foreign Agents' Law," *RFE/RL*, March 9, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Sergi Kapanadze, "Anatomy of Georgia's U-Turn Towards Russia," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, March 28, 2023; Francis Fukuyama and Nino Evgenidze, "Russia Is Winning in Georgia: America Needs to Get Tough on Tbilisi," *Foreign Affairs*, April 6, 2023; Joshua Kucera, "Georgia's Diplomatic Balancing Act Is Getting Harder to Pull Off," *RFE/RL*, May 22, 2023; and Jamie Dettmer, "Georgia Hedges Its Bets on the EU—and Russia," *Politico*, May 31, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, President of Georgia, "2023 Address to Parliament," March 31, 2023; and President of Georgia, "Independence Day Speech," May 26, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> According to World Bank estimates, Georgia's gross domestic product (GDP) declined by 45% in 1992, 29% in 1993, and 10% in 1994.

<sup>44</sup> Rezo Bitsadze, "Strong Economic Performance in Caucasus amid Geopolitical Turmoil," European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, September 28, 2022; International Monetary Fund (IMF), "IMF Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on First Review for Georgia's Stand-By Arrangement," press release, November 7, 2022; and Nini Gabritchidze, "Russian Influx Boosts Georgian Economy, But Not Everyone Is Feeling the Boom," *Eurasianet*, November 17, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat), at <https://www.geostat.ge/en>.



Georgia's economy relies in part on migrant remittances. From 2017 to 2021, remittances on average were equivalent to about 10% of Georgia's GDP. Russia is the largest source of remittances to Georgia, followed by Italy, the United States, Greece, and Israel. In 2022, money transfers from Russia quintupled, as Russian nationals visiting or currently residing in Georgia relocated funds there (see "Economic Relations with Russia," below).<sup>46</sup>

Tourism, a steadily growing sector in Georgia prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, began to recover in 2021 after coming to a "virtual standstill" in 2020.<sup>47</sup> From 2011 to 2019, annual travel-related income more than tripled; in 2019, international travel to Georgia was responsible for about 8% of Georgia's GDP. Most international travelers to Georgia come from Russia, Turkey, Armenia, Israel, and Ukraine.<sup>48</sup>

Georgia's energy supply includes natural gas, oil, hydropower, biofuels, and coal. Most of Georgia's natural gas supplies come from neighboring Azerbaijan. In 2019, Georgia's natural gas imports from Russia began to rise; in 2022, they amounted to 24% of Georgia's total gas imports. Georgia purchases oil and petroleum products mainly from Russia, Romania, Turkmenistan, Bulgaria, and Azerbaijan. In 2022, Georgia's oil imports from Russia rose substantially, amounting to 47% of its total oil imports (up from 16% in 2021).<sup>49</sup> Georgia has rehabilitated hydropower plants and constructed new ones, although some key hydropower development plans have engendered local community and NGO opposition.<sup>50</sup>

In 2022, Georgia's largest merchandise trading partner was the EU, which accounted for about 21% of total trade (\$3.8 billion). Georgia's largest bilateral trading partners were Turkey (\$2.8 billion, or 15% of Georgia's trade), Russia (\$2.5 billion, 13%), China (\$1.9 billion, 10%), Azerbaijan (\$1.3 billion, 7%), Armenia (\$1.2 billion, 6%), and the United States (\$930 million, 5%). Almost half of Georgia's merchandise exports went to four countries: China, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia. Georgia's main exports were copper ores, motor vehicles, beverages (wine, water, and spirits), and ferroalloys.<sup>51</sup> Georgia has free-trade agreements with the EU and China.

From 2015 to 2019, foreign direct investment (FDI) in Georgia averaged \$1.6 billion a year. FDI declined to \$590 million in 2020, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, but recovered to \$1.2 billion in 2021 and, according to preliminary data, \$2 billion in 2022. Top sources of FDI in 2022 were the United Kingdom, Spain, the United States, and the Netherlands.<sup>52</sup>

## Relations with the European Union and NATO

Successive Georgian administrations have made closer integration with the EU and NATO a priority. A constitutional amendment that came into effect in 2018 states that Georgia's "constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the

<sup>46</sup> National Bank of Georgia, at <https://nbg.gov.ge>. Also see TI Georgia, "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War," August 3, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> IMF, "IMF Staff Concludes Virtual Review Mission to Georgia," press release, November 10, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA), at <https://gnta.ge/statistics>.

<sup>49</sup> Geostat, as reported by Trade Data Monitor.

<sup>50</sup> Christian Mamo, "In Georgia, A Grassroots Protest Movement Campaigns to Halt a Hydroelectric Power Plant," *Emerging Europe*, May 26, 2021; Josef Gassman, "Untapped Potential: What's Behind Georgia's Hydropower Slowdown?," *Investor.ge*, December 12, 2021; and Nini Gabritchidze, "Georgia Seeks \$3 Billion to Expand Power Generation," *EurasiaNet*, January 6, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Geostat, as reported in Trade Data Monitor.

<sup>52</sup> Geostat, at <https://www.geostat.ge/en>.



full integration of Georgia into [the EU and NATO].”<sup>53</sup> In polls conducted since 2020, about 75% to 90% of respondents have supported EU membership and 70% to 80% have supported NATO membership.<sup>54</sup>

## European Union

One week after Russia renewed its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Georgia joined Ukraine and Moldova in applying for EU membership. On March 15, 2022, the Georgian Parliament unanimously adopted a resolution calling on the government “to strengthen its efforts towards Georgia’s European integration” and on the EU “to take all necessary steps to accelerate Georgia’s accession.”<sup>55</sup> EU accession is a long, complex process that can take years or decades to complete and requires prospective members to adopt and implement a large body of EU laws. Aspiring EU members also must meet core political and economic criteria, including stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for minority protection; a functioning market economy; and administrative capacity to take on the obligations of membership.<sup>56</sup>

Alongside Georgia’s application for membership, EU-Georgia relations have been marked by some tensions. EU officials and some European politicians have expressed concerns about the state of democracy and governance reforms in Georgia.<sup>57</sup> EU concerns were reflected in a European Council decision of June 2022 to defer granting Georgia EU candidate status.<sup>58</sup> In the decision, the Council “recognized the European perspective” of Georgia, together with that of Ukraine and Moldova, but did not name Georgia a candidate country as it did the other two. The Council said the EU would grant candidate status to Georgia after the country addresses a set of 12 governance *priorities*, including remedying political polarization; promoting democratic oversight; and implementing electoral, judicial, and anti-corruption reforms (see “Reform Challenges,” above).

Georgia’s pursuit of EU membership follows years of increased economic and social integration with the EU. In 2014, Georgia concluded an association agreement with the EU that included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area and encouraged harmonization with EU laws and regulations.<sup>59</sup> In 2017, the EU granted Georgian citizens visa-free entry to the EU’s Schengen

<sup>53</sup> Constitution of Georgia, Article 78, available at <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36>.

<sup>54</sup> Center for Insights in Survey Research (International Republican Institute), “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia,” September 2022; and National Democratic Institute (conducted by CRRC Georgia), “Taking Georgians’ Pulse: Findings from December 2022 Face to Face Survey,” February 2023.

<sup>55</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “Parliament Unanimously Backs Resolution on Georgia’s EU Integration,” March 16, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> For more on the EU accession process, see CRS Report RS21344, *European Union Enlargement*, by Kristin Archick and Sarah E. Garding.

<sup>57</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “PM Complains to EC President over European Parliament ‘Falsehoods,’” July 18, 2022; *Civil Georgia*, “GD Chair Doubles Down on Criticizing EU, U.S. Ambassadors,” July 22, 2022; Delegation of the EU to Georgia, “Joint Press Statement Following the 7<sup>th</sup> Association Council Meeting Between the EU and Georgia,” September 7, 2022; and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, “PACE Rapporteurs: Georgia Is at a Crossroads on Its Path to European Integration,” April 3, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> The European Council is an institution composed of the heads of state or government of the 27 EU member states, the European Council President, and the President of the European Commission. European Council, *European Council Meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions*, June 24, 2022; and European Commission, *Opinion on Georgia’s Application for Membership of the European Union*, June 17, 2022, pp. 17-18.

<sup>59</sup> The free-trade agreement was applied provisionally in 2014 and entered into force in 2016. The text of the association agreement and the corresponding agenda for 2017-2020 are available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/9740/eugeorgia-association-agreement\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/9740/eugeorgia-association-agreement_en). More information on the free-trade agreement is available from the Georgian government at <https://dcfta.gov.ge/en/home>.

area of free movement, which allows individuals to travel without passport checks between most European countries. In 2022, Georgia’s largest merchandise trading partner was the EU. The EU also is a major source of foreign assistance to Georgia, providing about €100 million (\$109 million) a year in aid.<sup>60</sup>

## NATO

In 2008, NATO members agreed Georgia would become a member of NATO, together with Ukraine.<sup>61</sup> Neither state, however, has been granted a clear path to or timeline for membership, in part reflecting concern that membership could lead to a heightened risk of war between NATO and Russia.

Nonetheless, NATO considers Georgia to be “one of NATO’s closest partners.”<sup>62</sup> A NATO-Georgia Commission was first established in 2008, after Russia invaded Georgia (see “2008 Russia-Georgia War,” below). At the NATO 2014 Wales Summit, NATO leaders established a Substantial NATO-Georgia Package to help Georgia bolster its defense capabilities. Since 2014, Georgia has been a NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partner, a cooperative status currently granted to six countries (including Ukraine).<sup>63</sup> In 2015, Georgia joined the NATO Response Force, a multinational rapid reaction force.

Also in 2015, NATO opened a Joint Training and Evaluation Center in Georgia to enhance interoperability and operational readiness. The center has hosted three joint NATO-Georgia exercises. Some NATO member states also participate in two sets of regular military exercises led by the United States and Georgia: Agile Spirit and Noble Partner (see “U.S.-Georgia Relations,” below).

Georgia was one of the top troop contributors (and the top non-NATO contributor) to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, which ended in 2021. At its height, Georgia’s deployment to NATO’s previous International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan exceeded 1,500 troops, who served with no operational caveats.<sup>64</sup>

## Relations with Russia and Secessionist Regions

Georgia’s relations with Russia have been tense since the last years of the Soviet Union, when Georgia’s independence movement flourished. Observers generally assess that since then, Russia has sustained the secession of Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to

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<sup>60</sup> From 2014 to 2020, the EU provided more than \$1 billion (€938 million) in aid to Georgia. Delegation of the EU to Georgia, “EU-Georgia Relations – Factsheet,” updated November 11, 2022; and European Commission, *Evaluation of the EU’s Cooperation with Georgia, 2014-2020*, September 19, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> In the Bucharest Summit Declaration of April 2008, heads of state and government of NATO member countries declared that “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.” NATO, “Bucharest Summit Declaration,” April 3, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> NATO, “Relations with Georgia,” updated April 12, 2023.

<sup>63</sup> NATO’s Enhanced Opportunity Partners are Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, Sweden, and Ukraine. NATO, “Partnership Interoperability Initiative,” updated November 3, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Georgia also contributed more than 2,250 troops to the NATO-led Kosovo Force, or KFOR, between 1999 and 2008. NATO, *Deepening Relations with Georgia*, August 2013; U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Georgia,” June 16, 2020; and NATO, “Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures,” updated February 2021.

maintain influence over Georgia and prevent it from joining NATO.<sup>65</sup> Georgia's relations with Russia worsened after Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution, which brought to power ex-President Saakashvili, who sought to deepen Georgia's integration with the West and restore Georgian sovereignty over the breakaway regions.<sup>66</sup>

After first coming to power in 2012, the GD government made efforts to stabilize the Georgia-Russia relationship. In 2013, Moscow lifted an embargo on popular Georgian exports (including wine and mineral water) that had been in place since 2006. As a result, Russia again became one of Georgia's top trading partners. Russian tourism to Georgia grew under the GD government; between 2012 and 2019, the number of Russians visiting Georgia more than tripled.<sup>67</sup> Russia suspended direct passenger flights to Georgia in 2019, however, alleging that protests against a visiting Russian MP posed a threat to the security of Russian nationals (see "June 2019 Protest" box, above).<sup>68</sup> Subsequently, the COVID-19 pandemic diminished Russian and other international travel to Georgia for two years.<sup>69</sup>

Georgia's response to Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022-2023 has been the subject of some debate. Polls indicate widespread support among Georgians for Ukraine, and the Georgian government officially condemns Russia's invasion. At the same time, the Georgian government has maintained a measured approach in criticizing Russia, stating that it seeks to avoid possible reprisals or economic losses.<sup>70</sup> The government has promoted increased trade and travel with Russia and permitted an influx of Russian nationals in the wake of Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine starting in 2022.<sup>71</sup> In May 2023, the Georgian government accepted a Russian offer to resume direct air travel. Russian authorities also announced the introduction of a visa-free regime for Georgians, reciprocating a visa-free regime for Russians that Georgia instituted in 2012 under ex-President Saakashvili.<sup>72</sup>

The government of Georgia does not support the imposition of direct sanctions on Russia, although officials assert that Georgia strictly complies with U.S., EU, and other international

<sup>65</sup> An official 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement stated that "resolution of [ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes] would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance." NATO, *Study on NATO Enlargement*, September 3, 1995. Also see Christian Lowe, "Russia Warns Against Georgia NATO Membership," Reuters, March 11, 2008; and Michael Kofman, "The August War, Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War," *War on the Rocks*, August 17, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Lincoln A. Mitchell, *Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia's Rose Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); and Cory Welt, "Georgia's Rose Revolution: From Regime Weakness to Regime Collapse," in Valerie Bunce, Michael A. McFaul, and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, eds., *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Post-Communist World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 155-188.

<sup>67</sup> GNTA, at <https://gnta.ge/statistics>.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Roth, "Putin Bans Russian Airlines from Flying to Georgia," *Guardian*, June 21, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Margarita Antidze, "Coronavirus Hits Georgia's Booming Tourism Industry," Reuters, March 20, 2020; and Manana Vardiashvili, "Georgian Tourism Struggles to Recover," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, September 14, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> *OC Media*, "Georgians Want Their Government to Support Ukraine," March 15, 2022; *Economist*, "Georgians Back Ukraine, But Their Government Is More Hesitant," April 23, 2022; and Nadia Beard, "How the War in Ukraine Has Exposed Georgia's Fault Lines," *RFE/RL*, December 27, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Ivan Nechepurenko, "Flood of Russians Alters Life for Countries That Took Them In," *New York Times*, March 14, 2023; Maradia Tsaava, "One Year After Emigration: Russians in Georgia," *JAM News*, March 29, 2023; and Alexander Atasuntsev, "How Far Will the Thaw in Russia-Georgia Relations Extend?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 19, 2023.

<sup>72</sup> *RFE/RL*, "Russian Lifting of Visas, Flight Ban Highlight Georgia's Precarious Relations with Moscow," May 11, 2023; and Nini Gabritchidze, "Georgia: Uncertainty Looms as First Carriers Authorized for Russia Flights," *Eurasianet*, May 16, 2023.

sanctions.<sup>73</sup> Some senior officials have accused members of the political opposition, Western-funded NGOs, and U.S. and European officials of pressuring Georgia to impose direct sanctions on Russia or to take other actions that could lead Georgia into war. U.S. and European officials reject these claims.<sup>74</sup>

## Economic Relations with Russia

The Georgian government seeks to improve economic relations with Russia, including since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Between 2012 and 2022, the share of Georgia's merchandise exports to Russia as a percentage of its total exports increased from 2% to 12%, making Russia Georgia's fourth top export market after the EU, China, and Azerbaijan. In 2022, the value of Georgian exports to Russia rose by about 7% (but made up a smaller share of Georgia's total exports than in the previous five years). The increase in exports to Russia was due mainly to growth in intermediate trade (re-exports) of third-country goods via Georgia, including for trade that previously transited Ukraine; domestic exports to Russia declined by 3%.<sup>75</sup>

The share of Georgia's imports from Russia also has grown over the last decade: from 6% in 2012 to 14% in 2022, behind imports from the EU and Turkey. In 2022, the value of imports from Russia rose by about 78%. In particular, Georgia tripled its imports (by volume) of Russian oil and oil products; the value of Russian imports as a share of Georgia's total oil imports increased from 16% to 47%, in part replacing imports from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.<sup>76</sup>

After Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Georgia retained its decade-long visa-free regime for Russian nationals. The post-pandemic recovery of tourism and Russia's invasion of Ukraine contributed to the official arrival of almost 1.1 million Russians to Georgia in 2022 (about 25% less than in 2019).<sup>77</sup> Among these, more than 110,000 are estimated to have remained in Georgia.<sup>78</sup>

Along with an influx of Russian nationals, official data indicates a relatively high level of Russian-origin financial activity since the start of the Ukraine war. In 2022, Georgia recorded more than \$2 billion in money transfers from Russia, about five times the average amount of annual remittances from Russia over the previous seven years (and almost half of all remittances to Georgia in 2022). At the end of 2022, Georgian banks recorded about \$1 billion of deposits belonging to Russian residents (37% of all non-resident deposits). In 2022, almost 15,000 new

<sup>73</sup> Nino Narimanishvili, "Lack of Political Will – Why Georgia Does Not Join Anti-Russian Sanctions?," *JAM News*, June 3, 2022; Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), *Georgia's Implementation of the International Sanctions Imposed Against Russia*, November 7, 2022; *Civil Georgia*, "Finance Minister Says Georgia Leading in Enforcing Sanctions against Russia," January 23, 2023; and *Civil Georgia*, "Ministry of Finance 'Categorically' Denies Sanctions Evasion," May 1, 2023.

<sup>74</sup> *Civil Georgia*, "Georgian PM Upholds 'War Blackmail' Narrative, Backs Dissident MPs, Slams Opposition," July 29, 2022; and Interpressnews, "Kelly Degan: The Georgian Government Knows Very Well That We Have Never Pressured Georgia to Be Involved in This War," February 9, 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Geostat, as reported in Trade Data Monitor; and TI Georgia, *Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War*, February 22, 2023. Also see Nini Gabritchidze, "Ukraine War Leads to Traffic Jams in Georgia," *Eurasianet*, October 6, 2022; and Ivan Nechepurenko, "How Western Goods Reach Russia: A Long Line of Trucks Through Georgia," *New York Times*, January 13, 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Geostat, as reported in Trade Data Monitor; and TI Georgia, *Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War*, February 22, 2023.

<sup>77</sup> GNTA, at <https://gnta.ge/statistics/>; and TI Georgia, *Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War*, February 22, 2023.

<sup>78</sup> Evan Gershkovich, "Russians Who Fled Putin Seek Shelter and Redemption in Georgia," *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2022; Jake Cordell, "From Russia with Cash: Georgia Booms as Russians Flee Putin's War," Reuters, November 8, 2022; and *Civil.ge*, "Report: Russian Capital in Georgian Business," June 15, 2023.

Russian-owned companies were registered in Georgia (about two-thirds the total number of Russian-owned companies in Georgia).<sup>79</sup>

## Russian Occupation in Georgia: Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Ethnic Abkhazians and South Ossetians—both related to minority populations in Russia’s North Caucasus region—sought to separate Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia and remain with Russia in the early 1990s, during and after Georgia’s pursuit of independence from the Soviet Union. At the time, some observers asserted that Soviet authorities had instigated the conflicts to halt Georgia’s efforts to secede from the Soviet Union, whereas others viewed the secessionist movements as homegrown but facilitated by Moscow.<sup>80</sup> After the conflicts ended, Russian forces remained in both regions, officially as peacekeepers.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are small but strategically located regions of Georgia that make up almost 20% of Georgia’s territory (see **Figure 1**). Abkhazia accounts for more than half of Georgia’s Black Sea coastline. South Ossetia is located along a major transportation route to Russia and close to Georgia’s main east-west highway.

According to local authorities in Abkhazia, the region’s population in 2011 was about 240,000 (50% Abkhazian, 19% Georgian, 17% Armenian, and 9% Russian). Most Georgians—who were previously the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia—were forced to flee Abkhazia during the 1992-1993 war and became internally displaced persons (IDPs). Abkhazia’s population in the 1989 Soviet census was about 525,000, of which 46% were ethnic Georgians and 17% were ethnic Abkhazians. The Georgian government has estimated that about 40,000 ethnic Georgians still live in Abkhazia, primarily in the southeastern district of Gali, and face challenges regarding freedom of movement, political rights, and native-language education.<sup>81</sup>

Authorities in South Ossetia stated that the region’s population in 2015 was about 54,000 (90% Ossetian, 7% Georgian). In the 1989 Soviet census, the region’s population was about 98,000 (66% Ossetian, 29% Georgian); most of South Ossetia’s Georgian population was forced to flee in the 1990s conflict and again in the 2008 war. The few thousand ethnic Georgians who remained in South Ossetia after the 2008 war are mainly residents of the easternmost Akhalkgori region, which was under Georgia’s direct control until the war (see “2008 Russia-Georgia War,” below).

As in occupied regions of Ukraine, Russia has provided citizenship to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Observers note that Russia justified its 2008 invasion of Georgia in part by alleging the need to defend Russian citizens in South Ossetia.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> TI Georgia, *Georgia’s Economic Dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War*, February 22, 2023; Giorgi Menabde, “Russians Keep Nearly \$1 Billion in Georgian Banks,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, May 15, 2023; and IDFI, “Russian Capital and Russian Connections in Georgian Business,” June 6, 2023.

<sup>80</sup> The South Ossetia conflict occurred in 1991-1992; the Abkhazia conflict occurred in 1992-1993. See, for example, Svetlana Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia, and the Russian Shadow* (Glastonbury, UK: Gothic Image Publications, 1994); Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia’s Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2004); and Bruno Coppieters, ed., *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: VUB Press, 1996).

<sup>81</sup> Olesya Vartanyan, “Easing Travel Between Georgia and Breakaway Abkhazia,” International Crisis Group, September 5, 2019; U.S. Mission to the OSCE, “Joint Statement of the Group of Friends of Georgia,” September 2, 2022; and Lana Kokaia, “Abkhazia: Erasing the Georgian Language,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, November 24, 2022.

<sup>82</sup> Yuri Zoria, “Is Russia’s Passport Scheme in Donbas a Harbinger of Full-Scale Invasion Like in 2008 Georgia?” (continued...)



## 2008 Russia-Georgia War

Under then-President Saakashvili, the Georgian government sought to accelerate Georgia's integration with the West and restore Georgia's sovereignty over the breakaway regions. Georgian authorities established greater control over Georgian-populated villages in South Ossetia and the remote and thinly populated Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia. In 2004, new clashes occurred in South Ossetia between Georgian and local forces.<sup>83</sup> In 2006, Russian authorities imposed an embargo on popular Georgian exports (including wine and mineral water) and forcibly deported more than 2,000 Georgian migrant workers from Russia, seemingly in response to Georgia's arrest of four Russian military officers on espionage-related charges.<sup>84</sup>

After another round of escalation in 2008, Russia invaded Georgia to prevent the Georgian government from reestablishing control over South Ossetia. A five-day war in August 2008 led to the deaths of more than 800 civilians and military personnel, the expulsion of some 20,000 Georgian residents from South Ossetia, the destruction of villages, and Georgian loss of control over the Akhalkalaki region.<sup>85</sup> In Abkhazia, local forces took control of the Kodori Gorge. Russian forces temporarily occupied Georgian territory outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia and recognized the latter as independent states.

In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Russia had violated several articles of the European Convention on Human Rights during the 2008 war, including "through its responsibility for the arbitrary detention of civilians, the ... treatment, torture, and other ill-treatment of prisoners of war, and the denial of Georgian citizens' right to return to their homes."<sup>86</sup>

## After the 2008 War

The 2008 war ended with a six-point cease-fire plan and a follow-on implementation plan brokered by then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The six-point plan included a nonuse of force pledge and the return of Russia's armed forces to the positions they held prior to the start of hostilities.<sup>87</sup> Regular Russian forces withdrew from areas they had occupied outside South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but within the two regions Russia deployed military forces in greater numbers and

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Euromaidan Press, May 14, 2019; and Toru Nagashima, "Russia's Passportization Policy Toward Unrecognized Republics: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 66, no. 3 (2019), pp. 186-199.

<sup>83</sup> Cory Welt, "The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 62, no. 1 (2010), pp. 63-97.

<sup>84</sup> In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled the deportations violated the European Convention on Human Rights but did not make a ruling regarding compensation. In 2019, the ECHR ruled that Russia should pay €10 million (almost \$12 million) in compensation; Russia has not complied with the ruling. *Civil Georgia*, "CoE Concerned with Russia's Failure to Pay to Deportation Victims," September 5, 2020; and *Agenda.ge*, "Council of Europe 'Deeply Deplores' Russia for not Paying €10 Mln Compensation to Georgia After Ruling," September 23, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Council of the EU, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia* (3 vols.), September 2009; Ruslan Pukhov, ed., *The Tanks of August* (Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2010); and Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>86</sup> U.S. Mission to the OSCE, "On the ECHR Judgment in the Case Concerning the Armed Conflict Between Georgia and the Russian Federation," January 28, 2021. Also see Helen Duffy, "Georgia v. Russia: Jurisdiction, Chaos and Conflict at the European Court of Human Rights," *Just Security*, February 2, 2021; and Natia Seskuria, "Georgia's Historic Victory: Implications of the ECHR Ruling," February 11, 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Council of the EU, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, vol. 3, pp. 587-594.



outside prior peacekeeping formats. As a result, U.S. officials and others consider Russia to be in noncompliance with the six-point plan.<sup>88</sup>

Since the 2008 war, Moscow has tightened control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In these regions, Russia established military bases and border guard outposts that reportedly each house around 3,500-5,000 personnel.<sup>89</sup> Russian and local authorities have constructed boundary fences, imposed transit restrictions, and frequently detained Georgian citizens for “illegal” crossings.<sup>90</sup>

Since 2008, the U.N. General Assembly annually has passed a resolution recognizing “the right of return of all internally displaced persons and refugees and their descendants ... to their homes throughout Georgia, including in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.”<sup>91</sup> The most recent such resolution passed by a vote of 100-9 (with 59 abstentions) in June 2023.

Georgia, Russia, and representatives from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, together with the United States, the EU, the United Nations, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), participate in the Geneva International Discussions, convened to address issues related to the conflict (the discussions were suspended temporarily after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine).

Georgia, Russia, and representatives from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, together with the United Nations and the OSCE, also participate in joint Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) to address local security issues and build confidence; the IPRM for Abkhazia has not convened since 2018 due to a lack of engagement by Abkhaz representatives (it also did not convene from 2012 to 2016).<sup>92</sup>

The EU leads an unarmed civilian monitoring mission in Georgia that monitors compliance with the 2008 cease-fire. Russian authorities do not permit the mission to operate in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>93</sup>

## U.S.-Georgia Relations

Georgia is one of the United States’ closest partners among the post-Soviet states. Building on a history of strong development aid and security cooperation, the United States deepened its strategic partnership with Georgia after Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 and initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014. A U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, signed in 2009, provides the framework for much of the two countries’ bilateral engagement. A Strategic Partnership

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, U.S. Mission to the OSCE, “Joint Statement of the Group of Friends of Georgia,” September 2, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> Military Base in Abkhazia is in Gudauta; the 4<sup>th</sup> Military Base in South Ossetia is in Tskhinvali. The estimated number of armed forces does not include local military formations. Abkhazia maintains local forces under the command of the Russian military; some local South Ossetian forces have been absorbed into the Russian military. International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance 2022*, p. 188.

<sup>90</sup> Mariusz Rzeszutko, *The Borderization of Georgia’s Breakaways as a Tool of Russia’s Long-term Struggle with the EU and NATO*, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, May 2022; and Arsen Araquelov, “Border” Checkpoints in the Occupied Region of Abkhazia: Anatomy of the Movement on the Occupation Line, Rondeli Foundation, November 24, 2022.

<sup>91</sup> A/RES/77/293. See United Nations, “Adopting Resolution Recognizing Right of Return for Georgia’s Displaced Persons, Refugees, General Assembly Underlines Implementation Timetable Needed,” June 7, 2023.

<sup>92</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “Sokhumi Hints at Resuming Gali IPRM,” October 18, 2022; U.S. Mission to the OSCE, “The 57<sup>th</sup> Geneva International Discussions on the Conflict in Georgia,” April 20, 2023; and EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia, “112<sup>th</sup> Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism Meeting Takes Place in Ergneti,” April 27, 2023.

<sup>93</sup> For more, see the EUMM website, at <https://eumm.eu>; and *Civil Georgia*, “Head of EUMM Georgia Talks Abkhazia, S. Ossetia,” May 16, 2022.

Commission convenes annual plenary sessions and working groups to develop political, economic, security, and people-to-people ties.<sup>94</sup>

On a bipartisan basis, Members of Congress and successive U.S. Administrations have condemned Russia's occupation of territory in Georgia. The Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-44, Title II, §253) states the United States "supports the policy known as the 'Stimson Doctrine' and thus does not recognize territorial changes effected by force, including the illegal invasions and occupations" of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the territories of other countries occupied by Russia.<sup>95</sup>

The United States calls on Russia to comply with the terms of the cease-fire agreement that ended its 2008 war against Georgia, including withdrawal of its forces to prewar positions, and to reverse its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. U.S. officials have criticized Russian efforts at hardening and extending the boundary lines of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>96</sup>

Since 2022, some U.S. officials have expressed concerns about the risks of Georgia's increased engagement with and dependence on Russia during Russia's war against Ukraine. In March 2023, the White House reported that National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan "underscored the need for Georgia to avoid becoming an avenue for [sanctions] evasion or backfill" in a meeting with Georgian President Zourabichvili.<sup>97</sup> In May 2023, in response to the resumption of direct flights between Russia and Georgia, U.S. officials noted the potential risk of engaging in activities involving sanctioned Russian aircraft.<sup>98</sup>

Successive U.S. administrations have strongly supported democracy and governance reforms in Georgia and the country's EU and NATO membership aspirations. With regard to Georgia's 2020 parliamentary elections, U.S. officials generally shared the assessment of the international observation mission that the elections "were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected." However, the U.S. Embassy in Georgia expressed concern about irregularities and allegations of abuse that "while not sufficient to invalidate the results, continue to mar Georgia's electoral process and are unacceptable."<sup>99</sup>

The State Department welcomed Georgia's April 2021 interparty political agreement and, in July 2021, cautioned that "failure to [implement the agreement] would further undermine the Georgian public's and international community's confidence in Georgia's judiciary and risk undermining Georgia's democratic development. [It] could also weaken investor confidence and diminish the resilience of Georgia's political and social institutions."<sup>100</sup> U.S. officials have called further

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<sup>94</sup> U.S. Department of State, "U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission," n.d.

<sup>95</sup> As noted in a proposed concurrent resolution introduced in September 2008 (H.Con.Res. 430), the Stimson Doctrine is named for Secretary of State Henry Stimson, who "declared in 1932 that the United States would not recognize territorial changes effected by force following the seizure of Manchuria by Japan."

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, U.S. Embassy of Georgia, "U.S. Embassy Statement on Shooting/Detention Along South Ossetia Administrative Boundary Line," July 12, 2020; U.S. Department of State, "Anniversary of the Russian Invasion of Georgia," August 7, 2022; and U.S. Mission to the OSCE, "The 57<sup>th</sup> Geneva International Discussions on the Conflict in Georgia," April 20, 2023.

<sup>97</sup> White House, "Readout of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Meeting with President Salome Zourabichvili of Georgia," March 10, 2023.

<sup>98</sup> U.S. Embassy in Georgia, "Ambassador Degnan's Remarks at CDC Graduation," May 11, 2023; and U.S. Department of State, "Department Press Briefing," May 11, 2023.

<sup>99</sup> U.S. Embassy in Georgia, "U.S. Embassy Statement on Georgia's Parliamentary Elections," November 1, 2020.

<sup>100</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Department Press Briefing," April 20, 2021; and U.S. Department of State, "Recent Judicial Appointments in Georgia," July 15, 2021.

attention to perceived shortcomings in Georgia’s judicial reforms. In addition, they have sought to counter domestic disinformation regarding U.S. and European policy toward Georgia.<sup>101</sup>

In 2021, the U.S. Department of State issued statements regarding the arrests of opposition UNM chairman Melia and former President Saakashvili. The State Department said the United States was “deeply troubled” by Melia’s arrest and called on the Georgian government to ensure “its judicial and prosecutorial system is free of political bias.” With respect to Saakashvili, the State Department “urged the Government of Georgia to treat Mr. Saakashvili fairly and with dignity, as well as to heed the Public Defender’s recommendations about appropriate treatment.”<sup>102</sup>

In March 2023, the State Department expressed concern “about the potential implications of [Georgia’s proposed foreign agent] law for freedom of speech and democracy in Georgia” and stated that it “encouraged Georgia’s political leaders to work together in earnest on the reforms urgently needed to obtain the EU candidate status that Georgia’s citizens overwhelmingly desire.”<sup>103</sup>

In April 2023, the U.S. Department of State imposed visa bans on four Georgian judges for corruption and underlined the significance to Georgia of continued judicial and rule of law reforms.<sup>104</sup> Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ilia Darchiashvili called the decision “completely incomprehensible and unacceptable.”<sup>105</sup>

## Congressional Action

Since FY2017, foreign operations appropriations have prohibited foreign assistance to governments that recognize the independence of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, and restricted funds from supporting Russia’s occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (most recently, in P.L. 117-328, §7047(c)).<sup>106</sup> The 2014 Ukraine Freedom Support Act (P.L. 113-272) provides for sanctions against Russian entities that transfer weapons illegally to the territory of Georgia and other states.

Some Members of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress and previous Congresses have expressed support for Georgia’s democracy and governance reforms and the deepening of its ties with Europe and the United States. The FY2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260, §7046) required the Secretary of State to submit a report on actions taken by the Georgian government since January 1, 2020, to “(1) strengthen democratic institutions, including through recent elections; (2) combat corruption; and (3) ensure that rule of law in the private-sector and the foreign investment climate meet international standards.”<sup>107</sup> The Explanatory Statement accompanying the Consolidated

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<sup>101</sup> See, for example, U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “Ambassador Degnan’s Remarks to Media at UN Women Meeting on Enhancing Access to Justice for Sexual Violence Victims,” December 2, 2021; U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “Ambassador Degnan’s Remarks to Media at USAID’s Digital Day in the Life,” July 8, 2022; and U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing,” July 20, 2022.

<sup>102</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Arrest of Opposition Members in Georgia,” February 23, 2021; U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “U.S. Embassy Statement,” February 23, 2021; and U.S. Department of State, “Treatment of Former President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili,” November 18, 2021.

<sup>103</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing,” March 2, 2023, and March 9, 2023.

<sup>104</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Public Designations of Mikheil Chinchaladze, Levan Murusidze, Irakli Shengelia, and Valerian Tsertsvadze, Due to Involvement in Significant Corruption,” April 5, 2023; and U.S. Embassy in Georgia, “Fact Sheet: 7031C Designations of Georgian Officials,” April 5, 2023.

<sup>105</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, “The Letter of Ilia Darchiashvili to the U.S. Secretary of State,” April 6, 2023. Also see Joshua Kucera, “Georgia-U.S. Relations Under Strain After Judicial Sanctions,” *Eurasianet*, April 14, 2023.

<sup>106</sup> In addition to Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Syria recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

<sup>107</sup> Explanatory Statement regarding H.R. 133 (P.L. 116-260), *Congressional Record*, December 21, 2020, p. H8794.

Appropriations Act, 2023, directed the Secretary of State to submit an updated version of this report to the Committees on Appropriations.<sup>108</sup>

In 2023, some Members of Congress issued statements and letters calling on the Georgian government to reconsider its proposed foreign agent legislation and to avoid political prosecutions.<sup>109</sup> In April 2023, the co-chairs of the Congressional Georgia Caucus said that they supported the U.S. decision to issue visa bans on judicial officials and “continue to advocate for a strong U.S.-Georgia partnership and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations based on democratic institutions, the rule of law, accountability for those who engage in corruption, and an independent and impartial judiciary.”<sup>110</sup>

In the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Georgia Support Act (H.R. 923) passed the House on April 27, 2022, by a vote of 406-20. The House passed similar bills (H.R. 6219, H.R. 598) during the 115<sup>th</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> Congresses. The Georgia Support Act would have called for enhanced U.S. assistance to Georgia and required the President to impose sanctions on those responsible for serious human rights abuses in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In previous Congresses, the Senate and the House have passed resolutions in support of Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity: in 2016 (H.Res. 660, 114<sup>th</sup> Congress); in 2011-2012 (S.Res. 175 and H.Res. 526, 112<sup>th</sup> Congress); in September 2008 (S.Res. 690, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress); and, before the 2008 war, in May-June 2008 (H.Res. 1166 and S.Res. 550, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress) and December 2007 (S.Res. 391, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress).

## Foreign and Security Assistance

Georgia has been a leading recipient of U.S. foreign and security assistance in Europe and Eurasia: obligated assistance from FY1992 through FY2020 totaled more than \$4.44 billion (unadjusted for inflation).<sup>111</sup> Of this amount, about \$1 billion in assistance was committed in FY2008-FY2009 after Russia’s August 2008 invasion of Georgia.<sup>112</sup> U.S. assistance to Georgia has included two five-year Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compacts totaling \$535 million (2006-2011, 2014-2019).<sup>113</sup>

Since FY2018, Georgia is one of two countries in Europe and Eurasia for which Congress has specified that funds be made available for assistance (the other country is Ukraine).<sup>114</sup> For FY2021 and FY2022, planned State Department and USAID assistance for Georgia totaled, respectively, \$137 million and \$153 million in regular and supplemental funding (including \$35 million a year in Foreign Military Financing, or FMF). FY2023 appropriations include not less

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<sup>108</sup> Explanatory Statement regarding H.R. 2617 (P.L. 117-328), *Congressional Record*, December 20, 2022, p. S9300.

<sup>109</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “Menendez, Shaheen, Risch, Durbin & Ricketts Release Joint Statement on Georgian Parliament’s ‘Foreign Influence’ Legislation,” March 9, 2023; and U.S. Helsinki Commission, “Helsinki Commission Sends Appeal to Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili,” April 28, 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Congressman Gerry Connolly, “Georgia Caucus Co-Chairs Issue Statement on New Visa Restrictions on Georgian Officials,” April 6, 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Data available at [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://ForeignAssistance.gov).

<sup>112</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Remarks on U.S. Economic Support Package for Georgia,” September 3, 2008; and testimony of S. Ken Yamashita, in U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Georgia: One Year After the August War*, hearings, 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> sess., August 4, 2009.

<sup>113</sup> The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) provides assistance on a competitive basis to countries “committed to good governance, economic freedom and investing in their citizens.” See the MCC website, at <https://www.mcc.gov/>; and CRS Report RL32427, *Millennium Challenge Corporation: Overview and Issues*, by Nick M. Brown.

<sup>114</sup> See, most recently, P.L. 117-328, §7046(a)(1).

than \$132 million in assistance for Georgia. For FY2024, the State Department/USAID budget request includes \$121 million in assistance for Georgia (including \$25 million in FMF).<sup>115</sup>

Georgia receives security assistance through FMF and International Military Education and Training (IMET), as well as the Department of Defense's Section 333 (Building Partner Capacity) account. From FY2015 to FY2022, Georgia received about \$300 million in FMF assistance "to purchase U.S.-manufactured defense articles, training, and services in support of its national defense needs."<sup>116</sup> Since 2018, the Department of Defense (DOD) has provided assistance to the Georgian armed forces through a Georgia Defense Readiness Program and a follow-on Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative, as well as support for special operation forces, Black Sea maritime domain awareness, and other needs.<sup>117</sup> The United States has twice provided Javelin portable anti-tank missile systems to Georgia, in 2017 and in 2021.<sup>118</sup>

Georgia has received separate nonproliferation and threat reduction assistance administered by DOD.<sup>119</sup> Such assistance has supported the establishment of the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research. The Lugar Center is "a state of the art biosafety level 3 research facility constructed by [DOD's Defense Threat Reduction Agency] and handed over to the Georgian National Center for Disease Control for operation and ownership in 2013." The Lugar Center also houses the U.S. Army Medical Research Directorate-Georgia.<sup>120</sup>

The United States and Georgia have held regular joint military exercises in Georgia since 2011. Initial exercises, dubbed Agile Spirit, began as a counterinsurgency and peacekeeping operations training exercise and shifted to a "conventional warfare focus" in 2015, the year after Russia's first invasion of Ukraine.<sup>121</sup> That year, Agile Spirit began to include other NATO partners. A second bilateral exercise, Noble Partner, was launched in 2015 and designed "to enhance regional partnerships and increase U.S. force readiness and interoperability in a realistic, multinational training environment."<sup>122</sup> Georgia's armed forces are partnered with the Georgia National Guard through DOD's State Partnership Program, administered by the National Guard Bureau.

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<sup>115</sup> U.S. Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs (SFOPS), Congressional Budget Justifications for Fiscal Year 2023 and 2024.

<sup>116</sup> U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Georgia," June 16, 2020; and annual SFOPS budget justifications.

<sup>117</sup> U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Georgia," June 16, 2020; and U.S. Embassy in Georgia, "Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative," October 18, 2021.

<sup>118</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), "Georgia—Javelin Missiles and Command Launch Units," Transmittal No. 17-59, November 20, 2017; and DSCA, "Georgia—Javelin Missiles," Transmittal No. 21-48, August 3, 2021.

<sup>119</sup> Nonproliferation and threat reduction assistance refers to obligated funds from the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) account, as reported by [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://www.foreignassistance.gov).

<sup>120</sup> U.S. Army Medical Research Directorate-Georgia is part of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research laboratory network and "build[s] research collaborations and infectious disease surveillance partnerships within the Balkans, the Baltics and across the European area of responsibility to support U.S. Department of Defense priorities in infectious disease and vector surveillance." U.S. Embassy in Georgia, "Defense Threat Reduction Agency"; and USARMD-G, "Medical Research and Development Command."

<sup>121</sup> U.S. Marine Corps, "Exercise Agile Spirit Ends with Bang," July 27, 2015.

<sup>122</sup> U.S. Army Europe and Africa, "Exercise Announcement for Noble Partner," August 25, 2022.



The provision of U.S. security assistance to Georgia predates Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia. In the late 1990s, the United States began to provide Georgia with increased aid to improve border and maritime security and to combat transnational crime, including through the development of Georgia’s Coast Guard.<sup>123</sup> U.S. security assistance increased after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The George W. Bush Administration considered Georgia part of a “second stage” in the “war on terror,” together with Yemen and the Philippines, and supported Georgia with a two-year Train and Equip Program (the Administration said that Al Qaeda-linked fighters had entered Georgia via the neighboring Russian republic of Chechnya).<sup>124</sup> This program was followed by a Sustainment and Stability Operations Program through 2007 that supported a Georgian troop deployment to Iraq in Operation Iraqi Freedom. U.S. military assistance totaling more than \$200 million also supported Georgia’s deployments to Afghanistan in ISAF and the follow-on Resolute Support Mission.<sup>125</sup>

## Trade

In 2022, the United States was Georgia’s fourth-largest source of merchandise imports and seventh-largest destination for exports. The value of Georgia’s merchandise imports from the United States—mainly motor vehicles—was \$664 million in 2022. The value of merchandise exports to the United States—mainly iron and steel—was \$265 million in 2022.<sup>126</sup>

U.S. and Georgian officials periodically have discussed the possibility of a free-trade agreement. The United States and Georgia have signed a bilateral investment treaty and a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement. They also have established a High-Level Dialogue on Trade and Investment.

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<sup>123</sup> For more, see International Business and Technical Consultants, *Maritime Security Special Thematic Report*, Georgia Monitoring Project, submitted to U.S. Department of State, April 2012.

<sup>124</sup> In March 2002, President George W. Bush said: “Now that the Taliban are gone and al Qaeda has lost its home base for terrorism [in Afghanistan], we have entered the second stage of the war on terror—a sustained campaign to deny sanctuary to terrorists who would threaten our citizens from anywhere in the world.” White House, “President Bush Thanks the World Coalition for Anti-Terrorism Efforts,” March 11, 2002.

<sup>125</sup> U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Georgia,” June 16, 2020.

<sup>126</sup> Trade data from Geostat, as reported in Trade Data Monitor.



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