

# Georgia Country Report - 2017

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## **Preface**

NCSEJ has taken an active role in the region since 1971, playing an important part in the rebirth of Jewish consciousness during the final decades of the Soviet era. Today, NCSEJ's central role in the growth of new, post-Communist Jewish institutions makes it a respected leader in all aspects of Jewish communal life, in Jewish relationships with the independent states of the region, and in relations between the countries of the region and the United States.

One of the missions of the NCSEJ is to facilitate international Jewish organizations' access to Jewish communities. This includes providing information about the human rights situation of the Jewish communities residing in a particular country. NCESJ provides country reports that research and analyze recent developments that could potentially affect local Jewish communal life.

The report provides comprehensive information to its readers about recent events that occurred throughout the reporting year and have direct or indirect influence on the local Jewish communities. The Report also analyses the political, economic and social aspects of the Georgian state.

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## Executive Summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Statistics:

**Population:** 3 718.2 million (2017)

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

**Capital:** Tbilisi

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

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### Head of State:

President Giorgi Margvelashvili

**Head of Government:** Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili

**Foreign Minister:** Mikheil Janelidze

**Ambassador to United States:**

David Bakradze

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

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### Jewish population:

Approximately 13,000

**2009 Aliyah** (emigration to Israel): 333

**1989-2006 Aliyah:** 22,849

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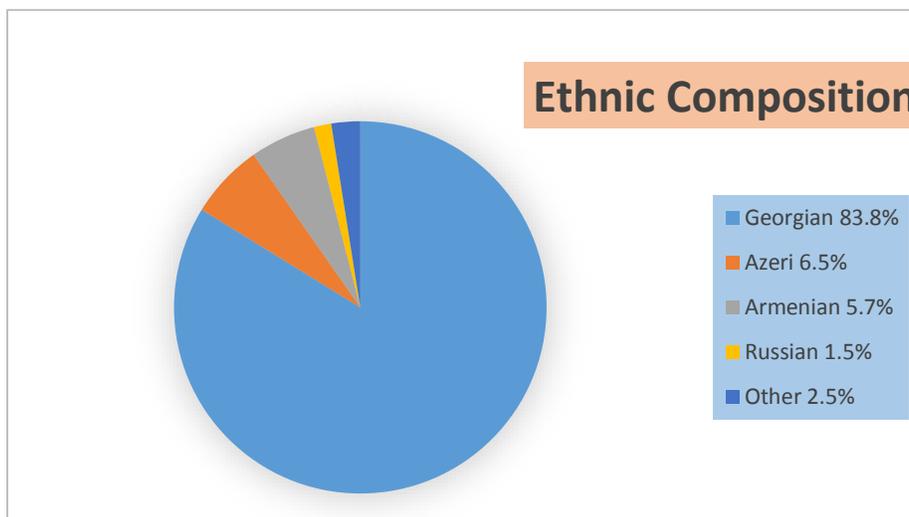
### Freedom House Rating:

Partly Free

Sources: [www.geostate.ge](http://www.geostate.ge)

## History

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



Thanks to its strong ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity, Georgia was one of the first Soviet Republics to push for outright independence in the late 1980s, following the April 9, 1989 brutal suppression of a peaceful demonstration in Georgia's capital by Soviet troops. Georgia officially declared its independence in April 1991, shortly before the Soviet Union's fall. Prominent

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Political Situation

Georgia is a semi-presidential republic with executive, legislative, and judicial branches. According to recent developments, the leading Georgian political party, Georgian Dream, is trying to amend the constitution of Georgia and significantly reduce the power of the President. Initiatives also include abolishing majoritarian seats at the national parliament, indirect election of the presidency and definition of marriage as a union between man and woman. This process is ongoing with significant resistance from the general public, NGOs and political parties.

- ***Legislative branch***

The Georgian constitution establishes the Parliament, which is a 150 seat unicameral legislature in which members serve four-year terms, and an independent judiciary. According to recent amendments to the constitution, power is distributed almost evenly between the President, Prime Minister, and the Parliament.

- ***Executive branch***

Since November 17, 2013 Giorgi Margvelashvili is the President of Georgia. As the head of state, the President is elected every five years by popular vote to a maximum of two terms.

Since December 30, 2015 Giorgi Kvirikashvili is the Prime Minister. He runs and appoints the Cabinet of Ministers.

At the local level, the system is decentralized into five self-governing cities. Mayors are elected directly by public votes and he or she runs the city. Governors are appointed by the Prime Minister in order to govern nine municipal entities throughout the country.

- ***Judiciary branch***

The highest courts are the Supreme Court (organized into several specialized judicial chambers with the number of judges determined by the president of Georgia) and the Constitutional Court, consisting of 9 judges. *Note:* the Abkhazian and Ajarian Autonomous Republics each have a supreme court and a hierarchy of lower courts.

Supreme Court judges are nominated by the president and appointed by the Parliament. Judges serve a minimum of 10-year terms. Constitutional Court judges are appointed by the president following candidate selection by the Justice Council of Georgia, a twelve-member consultative body of high-level judges, and presidential and parliamentary appointees. These judges are appointed for ten-year terms. Subordinate courts are the Courts of Appeal and regional (town) or district courts.

## Occupied territories

Twenty percent % of Georgian territory is occupied by Russian military services in South Ossetia (Tskhinvali region) and Abkhazia. The annexation process is ongoing, Russian militants cross borders on a regular basis.



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

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

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

Georgia has continued to press for the withdrawal of Russian troops from South Ossetia, who are widely viewed as supporting the separatist authorities and preventing the reestablishment of Tbilisi's jurisdiction. International efforts to facilitate discussions on security and stability between representatives of South Ossetia, Georgia, and Russia have failed to bring the parties to an agreement on non-use of force.

Abkhazia, a region in Georgia's northwest, saw the country's bloodiest post-independence fighting, in 1992-1993. After Georgia's independence in 1991, separatists announced their intention to break away and establish closer ties with Russia.

Tbilisi attempted to re-impose central authority over Abkhazia in 1992. A thirteen-month war between Georgian government forces and Abkhaz separatists followed, which ultimately involved Russian troops and volunteers from other parts of the Caucasus. The war resulted in widespread ethnic cleansing in which an estimated 10,000 Georgians were killed and up to 300,000 refugees fled to other regions of Georgia and beyond. Abkhazia's independence has never been recognized widely. It remains diplomatically and economically isolated with the exception of Russia, its main economic partner. In August 2008, Abkhazian forces took control of the Kodori Gorge.

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

## Economic Situation

**Currency:** 2.41 Lari = \$1  
**GDP:** \$14.02 billion (2016 est.)  
**GDP per capita:** \$3,833 (2016 est.)  
**GDP Growth:** 3.1 % (2016 est.)

*Source: World Bank*

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

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

oil and gas pipelines that run from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey.

According to the World Bank, Georgia's economy grew by 2.7% in 2016, driven by construction and other non-tradables. Net exports declined, mainly because of the slow adjustment of imports and continued decline in exports. Growth was supported primarily by investment that exceeded 30% of GDP in 2016. Meanwhile, tourism-related services performed well, as tourist arrivals from abroad increased significantly.

The decline in exports, along with the slow adjustment of imports, widened the current account deficit from 12% of GDP in 2015 to 12.4% in 2016. Foreign direct investment (FDI), however, financed nearly 90% of the deficit. External debt increased from 107% of GDP in 2015 to 111% in 2016 because of the higher external deficit and a 10% nominal depreciation of Georgia's national currency, the lari.

The NBG (National Bank of Georgia) responded adequately to the external shock by maintaining a floating exchange rate. As a result, the lari depreciated by 10.5% in 2016, helping the economy adjust. Despite the large depreciation and high rate of dollarization, the financial sector remains stable. Prudent banking supervision reinforced the stability of the banking sector, yielding a return on assets of 2.8% and return on equity of 19.2%. Nonperforming loans represented only 7.3% of all loans in December 2016, similar to the 2015 level.

Georgia's key macroeconomic vulnerabilities include risks to external and fiscal sustainability. The pace of poverty reduction may continue to slow and eventually stall if the recent rate of private sector employment growth were to decline – According to the analysis of the World Bank.

## Human Rights Situation

According to a 2016-2017 report from Amnesty International<sup>1</sup>, concerns persisted about a lack of judicial independence and political interference following a series of favorable rulings for the government in

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International – 2016/2017 Georgia, annual report. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/georgia/report-georgia/>

high-profile cases. There were cases demonstrating ill-treatment and torture by law enforcement agencies.

In February, Parliament adopted a new bill that transformed “insulting religious feelings” as an administrative offense. The bill was adopted in order to penalize criticism of religious leaders. Thirty-five attacks have been reported on LGBTQ individuals throughout the year. A local human rights organization with the Public Defender Office of Georgia raised concerns in regards to ineffective investigation and lack of accountability over crimes targeting sexual minorities.

Ill-treatment and abuses from Georgian law enforcement agencies are the major issues of concern domestically. Local NGOs with the Public Defender Office of Georgia unsuccessfully tried to influence authorities to create an independent investigation mechanism, but the government failed to adopt relevant legislation.

The legislation that allows state security services to have direct, unrestricted access to telecom operators’ networks for surveillance purposes were ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in April. In March, the leading political party introduced a new package of legislation that should have been in accordance with the decision made by the Constitutional Court. The new legislation was adopted in spite of the mass protests from NGOs and Public Defender Office of Georgia. Local human rights organizations plan to bring new legislation to the Constitutional Court once more as it does not guarantee effective oversight over state security services.

## **Foreign Policy**

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

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

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

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

After March 2017, Georgian citizens can freely travel to the European Schengen zone without a visa. A long negotiation process resulted in a decision to drop visas for short-term visits between Georgia and EU. Abolishing the visa regime will further contribute to Georgia's Western aspirations.

Georgia has a unique partnership with NATO in the defense and security fields despite the fact that Georgia is not a candidate country for joining the Euro-Atlantic alliance. NATO provides technical assistance to improve Georgia's military and defense capabilities. In September 8, 2016 NATO's Secretary General visited Georgia for two days meetings with different officials of Georgian government.

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

### **Relations with the United States**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On May 8, 2017 Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili met President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence as part of his three-day official visit to the United States. President Trump expressed Washington's "full support of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity."<sup>2</sup>

On July 31, 2017 Vice-President, Mike Pence visited Georgia. During the visit, he reaffirmed Washington's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and denounced Russia's "aggression" and "occupation" of Georgian territory. Pence also met with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and addressed troops participating in NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia, saying, "We stand here today in the gap -- on a front line of freedom, a front line compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago." The Vice-President was accompanied by Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili during the troop review at the Vaziani military air base outside Tbilisi.

## **Relations with Israel**

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<sup>2</sup> Radio Liberty: Georgian PM: Trump Offers 'Full Support' In Standoff With Russia Over Breakaway Regions-May 08, 2017 <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-kvirikashvili-trump-abkhazia-south-ossetia/28475046.html>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

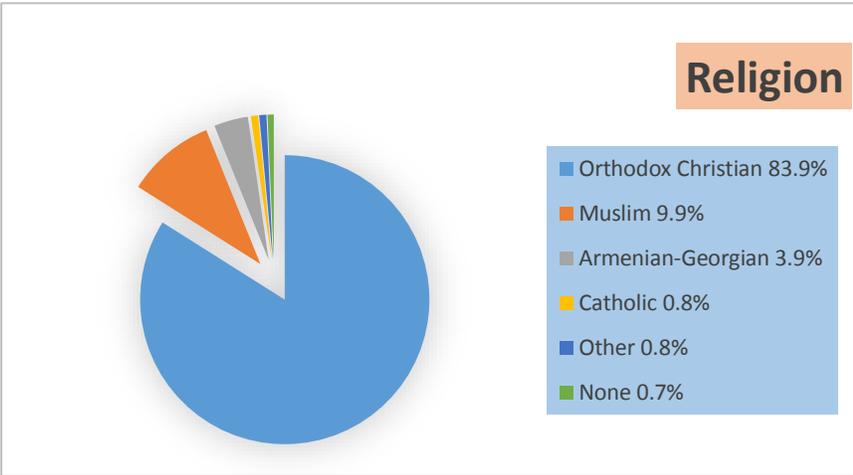
In October 2015, President Margvelashvili visited Israel, meeting with President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein.

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

In July, 2017 Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu and Prime Minister of Georgia, Giorgi Kvirikashvili met in Jerusalem. Giorgi Kvirikashvili underlined the special relations between Georgia and Israel and noted that the history of the friendship of the two nations is 2 600 years old. Netanyahu stressed that ongoing developments in Syria and terrorist threats from the Islamic State could create danger for any nation, for those as well who are not directly involved in the conflict. After the meeting Georgian Prime Minister honored the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, visiting the Yad Vashem. He laid a wreath at the Memorial of the Holocaust Victims and recorded his impressions in the guestbook. Georgian Prime Minister Kvirikashvili invited Prime Minister Netanyahu to visit Georgia; the latter accepted the invitation.

### Jewish Communal Life & Anti-Semitism

Jewish settlement in Georgia dates back 2,600 years. Once numbering as many as 100,000, the Jewish population has been declining for over fifty years, in large part as a response to Soviet-era restrictions and emigration spurred by the political and economic turmoil following independence.



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

Despite its rapid decrease in size and Soviet-era restrictions and persecutions, the Georgian Jewish community has maintained its identity and traditions. Inter-marriage rates are low and

levels of Jewish knowledge and community involvement are higher than in many other former Soviet republics.

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

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

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

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



Tbilisi synagogue, now home to a popular theater company

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

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

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

Christian organizations have been supportive of the Jewish community as well. In January 2001, the Georgian Orthodox Church and Jewish community signed an agreement of mutual respect and support,

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



The “Jewish House”

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

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

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

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

On December 5, 2015 during Hanukkah in Tbilisi, a charity event was initiated and organized by the Chairman of the Israeli Business Chamber and the Vice-speaker of Knesset (Parliament of Israel). Financial resource accumulated during the event was transfer to a fund that helps children affected by leukemia and cancer.

On December 25, 2016 Prime Minister of Georgia hosted an event dedicated to Hanukkah with the delegation from the Parliament of Israel, Deputy Head of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel and Chairman of Parliament of Georgia. According to the Prime Minister of Georgia and Israel have a prominent history of friendship and warm relations, which should continue in the future as well.