

## The flags of contemporary Georgia

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### Abstract

*Self-governing bodies – communities and cities - are empowered by law to have a coat of arms and a flag. The law indicates that such symbols shall be ratified solely by the council, following preliminary consultations with the Council of Heraldry. The coat of arms is created first and then the flag. In choosing a design, priority is given to the historical flag (if such exists). Otherwise the flag should reflect the main colour and the principal charge of the coat of arms. The only exception is made for cities which have pre-existing historical flags.*

The Georgian state flag was adopted by Parliament on 14 January 2004. President Mikeil Saakashvili formally endorsed it via Presidential Decree No. 31, signed on 25 January, following his election as president. Georgia celebrates 14 January each year as its Flag Day. The flag is shown as the flag of Tbilisi on a fourteenth-century map by Domenico and Francesco Pizzigano.



*Tbilisi and its flag portrayed in a detail of the 1367 Pizzigano chart*

Georgia is divided into nine regions, one city, and two autonomous republics. The regions are subdivided into 67 communities and 12 self-governing cities. By law, self-governing bodies – the communities and cities – are entitled to a coat of arms and a flag. The law stipulates that the symbols of each municipal unit will be ratified solely by its board, following preliminary consultations with the Council of Heraldry at the Parliament of Georgia and with the board's consent.

The main procedures prescribed for creating the state symbols are:

1. the board meets with the special Commission at the State Council of Heraldry;
2. the municipality calls for a legal tender and cooperates with the selected party;
3. in case of failure to obtain the desired outcome, the board can appeal to the Council of Heraldry to initiating a joint long-term cooperation for creating symbols which will be ratified by the municipal body.



The seven regions contain no functioning municipalities, only a governor, appointed by the national government, empowered with minimal authority. Consequently, regions do not have symbols.

When the legislative act permitted the granting of symbols to municipal units, the Council of Heraldry made the decision to systematise the territorial symbols to express additional information by employing locally meaningful symbols.

When creating municipal symbols, we are guided by several principles:

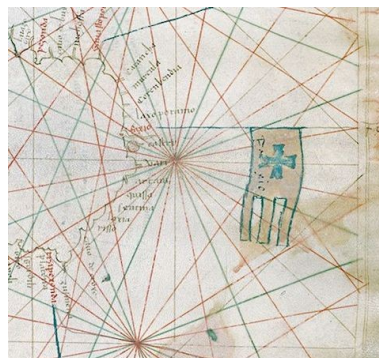
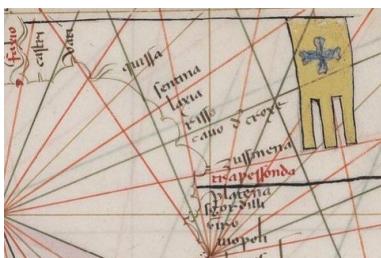
- the coat of arms is created first and then the flag; priority is given to any historical flag, if one exists, otherwise the flag should reflect the main colour and charge of the coat of arms; the only exception applies to cities which have historical flags;
- the proportions of flags in Georgia are 2:3; all other coats of arms and flags are composed according to historical, ethnographic, cultural, economic and social characteristics and other aspects;
- only one shade from each colour on the shield is chosen; for example, azure means dark blue only, neither light- nor mid-blue are used; the random use of such colours is restricted.

### Flags with a vexillological or heraldic heritage

#### *The self-governing City of Poti*

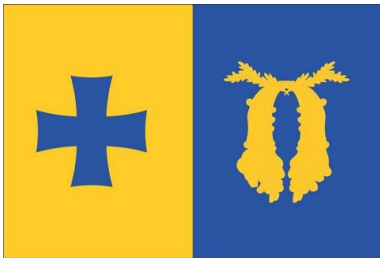
The port of Poti is located in western Georgia, on the eastern Black Sea coast. Built near the site of the ancient Greek colony of Phasis, and deriving its name from the same, the city has become a major port and industrial centre since the start of the twentieth century. Poti is home to a naval base and is the headquarters of the Georgian Navy.

Poti's flag is an old one, shown for the first time on nautical charts, undated and unsigned but confidently attributed to Genoese cartographer and geographer Pietro Vesconte (fl. 1310–30). These charts are among the earliest to map the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions accurately.



*The flag of Poti in medieval portolans: left, 1321. Bibliotheca Apostolica, Vatican City; right, 1325. British Library, London*

The Flag of Poti is divided per pale into two. Hoist – blue cross on a yellow field. Fly – the Golden Fleece on a blue field.



City of Poti, 2005

*Municipality of Dmanisi*

The field of the flag is divided per chief into two sections. The lower section, two-thirds of the height of the flag, is red with a gold leopard holding a lance. The chief is argent (white) with a red cross.

According to geographer, historian, cartographer and Georgian royal prince Vakhushti Bagrationi (1696-1757), the leopard holding the lance was the symbol of Somkhiti. Below you can see it portrayed in his *Description of the Kingdom of Georgia and the Geographical Atlas*. The atlas was added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2013. Somkhiti was an ambiguous geographic term used in medieval and early modern Georgian historical sources to describe the Armeno-Georgian marches along the valleys of the rivers Debed and Khrami.

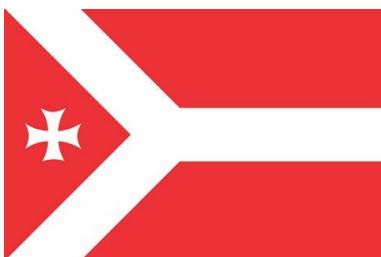


Left, Municipality of Dmanisi, 2007; right, the symbol of Somkhiti portrayed in Bagrationi's Geographical Atlas

**Flags that reflect geographical location**

*Municipality of Khashuri*

A white pall on the red field, divides the flag into three sections. In the hoist there is a white cross paty. The pall represents the location of the municipality, at the crossroads connecting the highways and railroads of east, west and south Georgia.



Municipality of Khashuri, 2010



*Municipality of Dusheti*

The flag shows a white zigzag between five crosses paty, three above and two below, in the centre of a red field. The Municipality of Dusheti combines five sub-ethnic historical regions: Pshavi, Khevsureti, Gudamakari, Mtiuleti and Kartli. Each mountain region had its own place of worship: a 'Jvari', meaning 'cross'. The main device is taken from a Khevsurian man's tunic and symbolises the five ethnic regions – crosses in the mountains.



*Left, Municipality of Dusheti, 2012; below, Khevsurian man's tunic, showing the cross and zigzag motif*



**Flags that depict local cultural heritage symbols**

*Municipality of Bolnisi*

A white cross within a circle placed on a red field. Bolnisi Sioni Cathedral is known for its Georgian Bolnisi inscriptions.



*Left, Municipality of Bolnisi, 2009; right, stone dated AD 494 depicting the oldest Georgian inscriptions within the territory of Georgia, Bolnisi Cathedral*

These form one of the oldest historical documents of the Georgian alphabet, dating from AD 494. Due to the historical and cultural importance of the bas-relief in Georgia, this cross is called the 'Bolnisi Cross'.

*Municipality of Kaspi*

The flag depicts a yellow griffin on a red field, with a yellow cross of St Nino in the canton.



Samtavisi is considered one of the masterpieces of Georgian architecture. The masterly decorated eastern façade is the surviving original structure from the eleventh century.



Left, Municipality of Kaspi, 2009;  
below left, griffin from the flag  
portrayed on the walls of the Georgian  
Orthodox Cathedral, Samtavisi;  
below right, Samtavisi Cathedral, built  
in the eleventh century and located  
c.11km from Kaspi



**Flags that reflect local sagas, legends and sayings**

*Municipality of Martvili*

The flag is red, edged on top and bottom with white, and with a blue stripe on the top and bottom edges. Each white and each blue stripe occupies one-tenth of the width of the flag. On the central red field is a yellow oak.

The site upon the hill where the monastery of Chkondidi stands today was always a sacred site, and was used in ancient times as a pagan cultural centre. An enormous ancient oak tree once stood at this location. The tree was worshipped as an idol of fertility and prosperity (in Mingrelian, *chkoni* means 'oak' and *didi* 'enormous'), and in the Eleusinian mysteries infants were once sacrificed there. After the conversion of the native population to Christianity, the ancient tree was cut down to prevent further worship. A church was originally constructed in the late seventh century upon the roots of the old oak tree, and was named in honour of St Andrew who preached Christianity and converted the pagans throughout the Samegrelo region.



*Municipality of Martvili, 2009*



*Chkondidi monastery, Martvili*



*Municipality of Lentekhi*

The flag is divided per pale in two. Hoist – three four-rayed yellow stars on an azure field. Fly – plain green.

The three stars symbolise Maximus the Confessor. This great Christian saint was eventually persecuted for his beliefs; following a trial, his tongue and right hand were mutilated. He was then exiled and died on 13 August 662 in Tsageri, Georgia. According to local legends, after the burial of the saint three stars rose shining in the sky over his burial site. The *Life of the Virgin*, the only extant copy of which is in a Georgian translation, is commonly attributed to him, and is the earliest complete biography of Mary, mother of Jesus.



*Left, Municipality of Lentekhi, 2011; below left, fresco in the 11th-century Georgian Monastery, Jerusalem; below right, St Maximus the Confessor*



**Flags that reflect economic activity**

*Municipality of Borjomi*

Borjomi is a resort town in south-central Georgia. It is situated in the picturesque Borjomi Gorge on the eastern edge of the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park. The town is famous for its mineral water industry (which is Georgia's leading export). Borjomi water is exported to over 40 countries.



*The Borjomi Gorge*



*Borjomi mineral water*

Its flag is divided into four quarters. The first and fourth are white with a green fir tree; the second and third are green with a white tree. A central shield



depicts a white deer on a sanguine field. The proportions of the flag are 2:3.

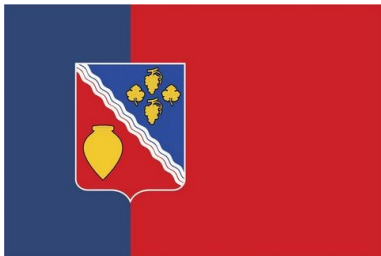


*Municipality of Borjomi, 2011*

#### *Municipality of Telavi*

The flag is divided vertically, one third blue and the remaining two thirds red. On the line of partition is the coat of arms of Telavi city (per bend azure charged with two vine leaves in fess and two bunches of grapes slipped in pale all or, and gules charged with a kvevri wine vessel also or, overall a bend wavy argent charged with two bendlets azure).

Kakheti is one of Georgia's main wine-producing regions, celebrated for a range of different wines. The kvevri is an egg-shaped earthenware vessel used for making, ageing and storing the wine. Archaeological excavations in the southern Georgian region of Kvemo Kartli (notably at Dangreuli Gora, Gadachrili Gora and in the village of Imiri) uncovered evidence of grape pips and kvevris dating back to the sixth millennium BC. In 2013, UNESCO added the traditional Georgian method of winemaking in kvevri to its list of intangible cultural heritage.

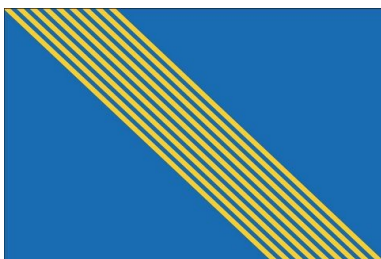


*Left, Municipality of Telavi, 2011; right, earthenware kvevri jar used in the manufacture and storage of the famous local wine*

#### **Flags that reflect local toponyms**

##### *Municipality of Chkhorotsqu*

On the blue field are nine very narrow yellow diagonal lines. Chkhorotsqu (in Mingrelian, 'nine springs') is a town in western Georgia, located in the region of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti.



*Municipality of Chkhorotsku, 2011*



*Municipality of Ninotsminda*

Ninotsminda is a town and the centre of the eponymous municipality located in the southern Georgian district of Samtskhe-Javakheti. It is mainly populated with ethnic Armenians. Its current official name means 'St Nino' in English and it was granted in 1991 in honour of St Nino, the enlightener of the Georgians. The flag is divided horizontally into two. The upper section occupies four-fifths of the width of the flag, and depicts a yellow cross of St Nino on a garnet red field. The lower fifth is plain yellow. The grapevine cross (Georgian, *Jvari Vazisa*), also known as the Georgian cross or St Nino's cross, is a major symbol of the Georgian Orthodox Church and dates from the fourth century AD, when Christianity became the official religion in the kingdom of Iberia (Kartli).



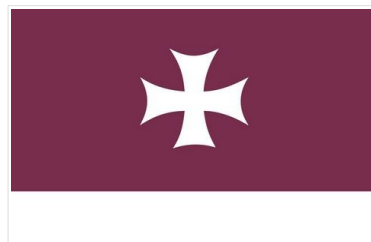
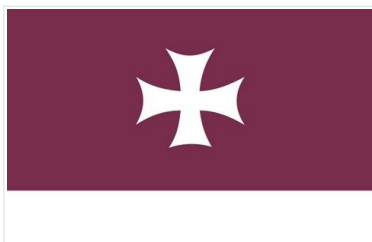
*Left, Municipality of Ninotsminda, 2011; right, St Nino's 'grapevine' cross, a symbol of Georgian Christianity*

St Nino's cross displays a slight drooping of its horizontal arms. St Nino was a Cappadocian woman who preached Christianity in Iberia early in the fourth century, which led to Christianity becoming the official religion of Iberia. Legend states that she received the grapevine cross from the Virgin Mary (or created it on the way to Mtskheta) and secured it by entwining it with her own hair. St Nino passed through Ninotsminda with this cross on her mission to Georgia. According to traditional accounts, the cross of St Nino was kept at Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta until 541. During the Persian invasions, it was taken to Armenia and remained there until David IV of Georgia recovered the Armenian city of Ani from the Muslims in 1124 and returned the cross to Mtskheta.

**Flags that reflect the subdivision of Municipalities**

*Municipality of Ambrolauri*

The flag is in the proportions 2:3. The field is divided horizontally – the top three-quarters is murrey with a white cross; the remainder, white.



*Municipality of Ambrolauri: left, old flag; right, current flag*





*City of Ambrolauri*

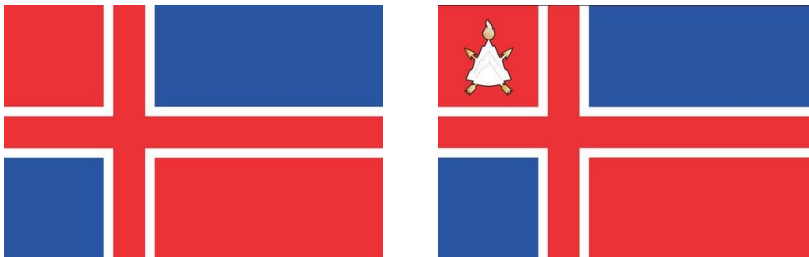
A plain murrey field with the shield in the centre. The shield is divided per pale; the dexter is white with a bunch of grapes, the sinister murrey with a white tower, across the bottom are three wavy lines counterchanged.



*City of Ambrolauri, 2011*

*Municipality of Gori*

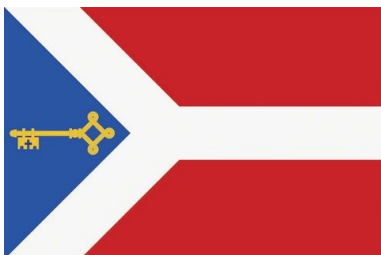
The field of the flag is divided by a white-bordered sanguine 'Scandinavian' cross (with the vertical placed at one-third of the length). The white border is one-fifth of the height of the flag, and the width of arms of the cross is one-eighth of the height of the flag. The first and fourth cantons are sanguine, and the second and third are blue. In 2016, a mountain in flames in front of two crossed yellow arrows was added to the first canton.



*Municipality of Gori: left, old flag; right, current flag, 2016*

*City of Gori*

The red field contains a white horizontal pall; the hoist triangle thus formed is blue charged with a yellow key.



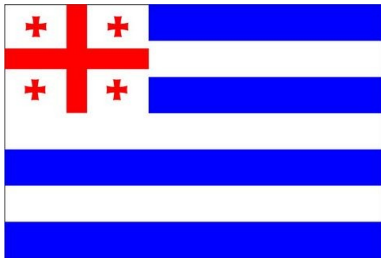
*City of Gori, 2015*

**Autonomous Republics**

As mentioned above, Georgia also includes the Adjara and Abkhazia Autonomous Republics. In accordance with the Constitution, they have their own elected body, local parliament and government. Consequently, they have their own constitutions and symbols.

*Current symbols of the Adjara AR, created 2004– 8*

The coat of arms depicts the fortress of Gonio in yellow on green, the sea and three byzantine coins below; overall is a shield with the small coat of arms of Georgia. The flag is in the proportions of 3:4, three white bars on a blue field. The blue represents the sea and seven bars represent the number of municipalities in the republic. The state flag of Georgia is in the canton.



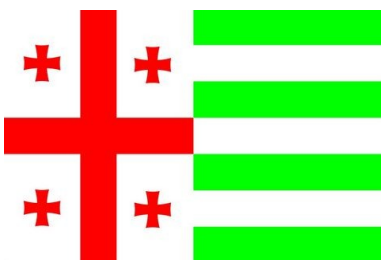
*Adjara Autonomous Republic*

Three of the Adjara AR's six administrative sub-divisions also have their own flag: the City of Batumi, the Municipality of Kobuleti, and the Municipality of Kelvachauri.



*Above left, City of Batumi (Adjara);  
above right, Municipality of Kobuleti  
(Adjara), 2013; left, Municipality of  
Kelvachauri (Adjara), 2012*

The territory of Abkhazia is currently occupied by the Russian Federation. Three hundred thousand local residents have been expelled from their homes, mostly ethnic Georgians, Abkhazians, Ukrainians and Estonians. The exiled Government of Abkhazia functions in Tbilisi and has its own constitution and symbols. We have developed draft symbols for the Abkhazia AR which are now under consideration.



*Abkhazia Autonomous Republic, flag*



*Flags of Abkhazia as portrayed in medieval portolans*