



Scylla and Charybdis: Georgian Civil Society between Authoritarianism and Geopolitical Shifts

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Traditionally, Georgian civil society has been central to democratization processes and has been distinguished by exceptional efficiency, strength, and expertise. In recent years, Georgia's civil society organizations (CSOs) and critical media have been subjected to unprecedented pressure from the ruling Georgian Dream party, which has moved rapidly towards authoritarianism. Georgian Dream launched a long-term and multifaceted attack against CSOs to remove a significant obstacle to single-party rule. Compounding this domestic challenge, Georgian civil society suffered a serious blow from Washington's shuttering of USAID programs, a decision that sent shockwaves globally. In this context, Georgian democracy and statehood are currently engaged in a struggle for the survival of civil society and are walking a particularly dangerous path in the country's history. This puts Georgian civil society between Scylla and Charybdis - on the one hand, it must successfully continue to fulfill its function in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, and on the other hand, it must protect itself from authoritarian pressure.

An independent and critical civil society – comprised of CSOs, independent media, and activist groups – is a fundamental element of any democracy. Thus, targeted propaganda and legislative and strategic attacks on the civil sector are tantamount to the destruction of Georgia's democratic prospects. The sector provides various benefits to citizens and forms a

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crucial part of the basis for the functioning of domestic democratic processes. At the same time, it bolsters the state's credibility with Western partners, for whom the functioning of democracy is fundamentally important for successful cooperation and for admission into the Western community of democracies. Consequently, against the backdrop of a weakened civil society, the country's prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration face unprecedented danger.

Having in mind the existential importance of an independent civil society for the Georgian state, this paper analyzes the various threats facing the civil society sector, assesses their potential magnitude, and provides an argumentative discussion of the sector's future prospects.

Civil Society Landscape in Georgia

Georgia's CSOs form one of the country's most diverse, influential, and effective segments, which has worked actively for the development of the state in various directions for more than 30 years. Historically, the civil sector has been at the forefront of Georgia's democratization and Europeanization processes. As of September 2024, Georgia was home to more than 31,000 registered non-profit (non-commercial) legal organizations (CSO Georgia 2024; CSO Meter 2024). Of that number, however, only 3,900 were currently active (CSO Meter 2024). In terms of the region-by-region breakdown of active organizations, Tbilisi is in the lead with 450, with Imereti (155) and Kakheti (130) following suit (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of SCOs by region

Region	Number of CSOs
Adjara	62
Guria	32
Imereti	155
Kakheti	130
Kvemo Kartli	79

Mtskheta-Mtianeti	19
Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti	28
Samegrelo	51
Samtskhe-Javakheti	71
Shida Kartli	57
Tbilisi	450

source: <https://csogeorgia.org/ge/region/imereti/organizations>

Based on expert interviews with CSO representatives, Georgian civil society can be divided into three main categories: a) non-profit legal organizations; b) commercial legal organizations, and c) informal groups. These groups, in turn, can encompass three main thematic subtypes of organizational activity: (1) NGOs; (2) Multimedia Broadcasters; and (3) Activists. These thematic areas include a variety of activities - analytical research (think tanks), educational academies, watchdogs, fact-checking organizations, service-providing organizations, initiative groups, commercial and non-commercial organizations, sectoral professional associations such as trade unions, and others.

Each of these categories, beyond the legal status and institutional type of activity, extends into a variety of sectoral or functional directions. Given that official state statistics do not accurately reflect these directions, we can only speak about those public organizations that are registered by “CSO Georgia” (Diagram 1), according to which human rights, youth issues, education, and social issues are the areas in which the largest number of organizations operate (CSO Georgia 2024).

Figure 1: CSOs by operating directions

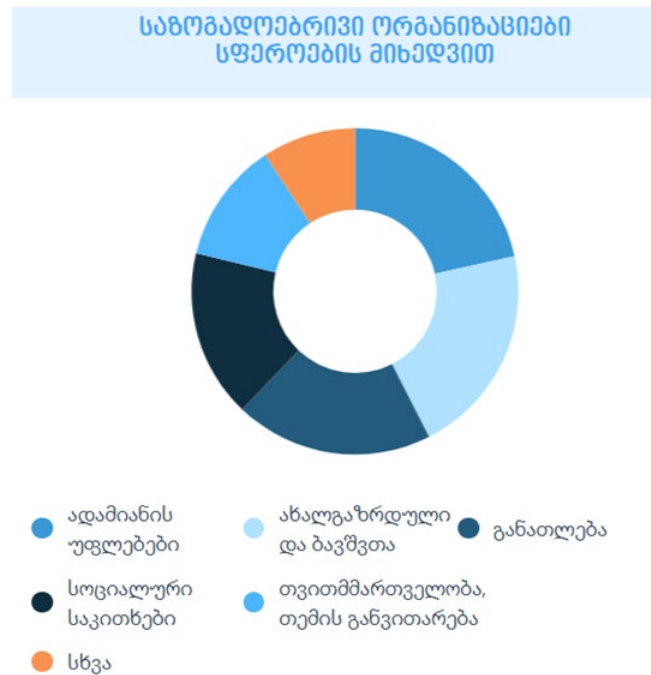


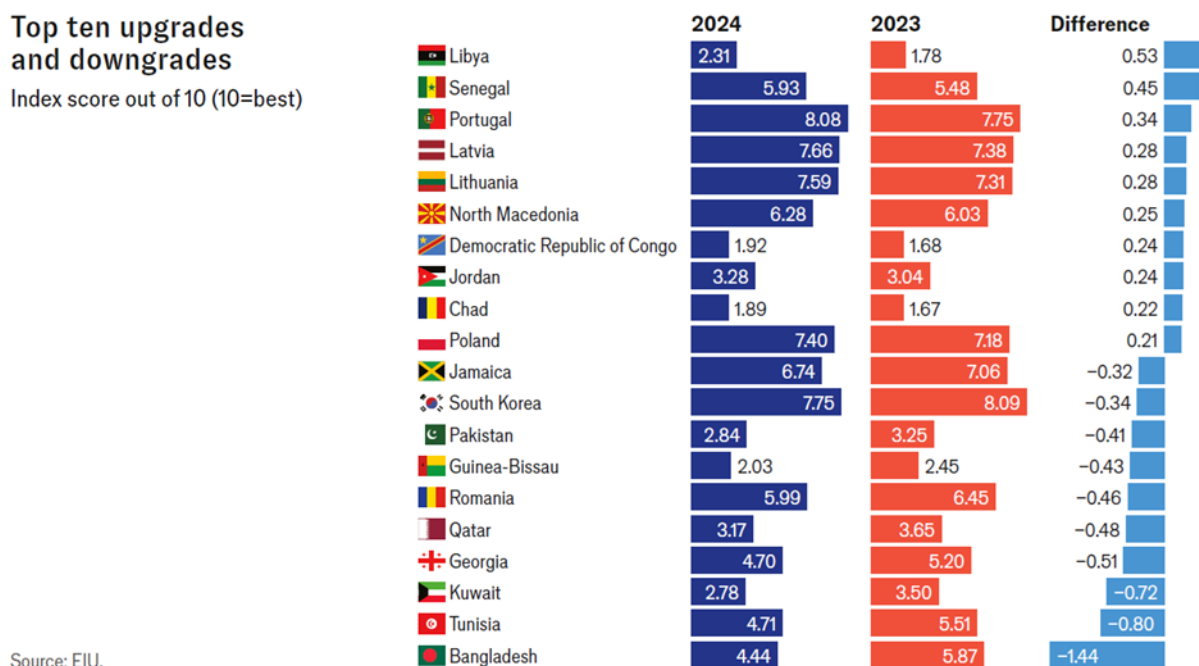
Chart available only in Georgian: Human rights, Social Issues, Youth and Children, Self-government/community development, Education, Other.

Source: <https://csogeorgia.org/ge/organizations/ngo>

Each these sectors are essential components of democracy and are involved in critical assessments of political events and ongoing reforms in the country, as well as issues related to freedom of information, transparency, anti-corruption, free and fair elections, human rights, and many other processes necessary for the functioning of the state. When assessing the damage suffered by civil society, what is most important is not figures (Brachveli 2025; Simonishvili 2025), but rather the sectoral and organizational threatening effects of restrictions on democratization-related activities. Until repressive laws are fully enacted, it will be difficult to statistically measure the damage to civil society as a fundamental element of Georgian democracy. The intensity, scale, and comprehensiveness of the mechanisms applied by the Georgian Dream to stifle dissent are not yet clear, especially considering that Georgian CSOs are traditionally represented in great diversity and work in many dimensions.

Georgia's civil society environment is currently assessed through a number of established indices. The Georgian Governance Index, for example, measures two main dimensions: "Independence and Resilience of Civil Society," which has been rated as "increasing" by Georgian experts over the past year; and the "Ability to Influence Policy," which was rated as decreasing in 2024 (GGI 2025). Freedom House showed a reduction in Georgia's freedom score in the direction of civil society in 2024 (Freedom House 2025). According to Varieties of Democracy, in competitive autocracies, the favorite tool of governments for repression is attacks on the media and civil society. One of the main reasons for Georgia being downgraded and characterized as an electoral autocracy is precisely the decline in the direction of civil society (V-Dem 2025). According to the Economist Democracy Index, Georgia was among the ten countries globally that experienced the greatest democratic setbacks in 2024 (Diagram 2), and attacks on civil society were one of the determining factors in that decline (The EIU 2025).

Figure 2: Countries that experienced the greatest democratic declines in 2024, according to the Economist Democracy Index



Source: The Economist Democracy Index, available at <https://www.eiu.com/n/global-themes/democracy-index/>

The multidimensional attacks directed by Georgian Dream against civil society, especially in the legislative context, affect all types of organizations equally. However, given that the party's goal in recent years has been to undermine democracy and consolidate oligarchic one-party rule, the primary targets of repression should be sought based on sectoral criteria and the scale of influence (Brachveli 2025). Although the threats analyzed in this paper equally threaten critical media, civil society, and formal and informal activism, the main focus of this analysis and findings is on the dimension of civil society that is oriented towards strengthening democracy and is considered a sufficiently authoritative and resourceful sector to effectively hinder the process of state capture by Georgian Dream.

Scylla: Authoritarian party vs civil society

New, diverse, and creative attacks on independent and critical CSOs in Georgia have emerged since around 2022 and are still being refined. Under the rule of Georgian Dream, Georgia has experienced the most striking dynamics of democratic backsliding since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. That is when the party began to pursue both a policy of external isolation and active attacks on democratic institutions in order to preserve oligarchic rule. Georgian Dream saw critical civil society as the most important barrier on this path, so it scaled up its neutralization strategy in three main dimensions: propaganda; legislation; and strategy.

a) Propaganda dimension - "Cards from Imedi TV"

Before the Georgian Dream parliament legally attacked civil society activities with a barrage of repressive laws, the party and its associated propaganda stakeholders (media, social media agents, spin-off parties, GD-supportive cultural elites, etc.) were conducting an active preliminary campaign to publicly demonize the CSO sector. Stigmatization and demonization are threats conducted at the propaganda stage can limit the space for civil society activities (Imnadze 2025, Simonishvili 2025, Natroshvili 2025).

The Imedi TV company, which is at the forefront of government propaganda, began conducting so-called "vox pops" about the heads of authoritative NGOs back in May 2022. The main thrust of this activity was to find out how famous these people were. Gradually, the degree of marginalization and demonization increased - as a common metaphor for this phenomenon, civil society representatives often mention the term "Imedi cards", which refers to the process by which pro-government media outlets, led by Imedi TV, publish

social media cards and infographics to rapidly disseminate out-of-context information and demonizing labels.

The most damaging lines of propaganda against CSOs include the following: the sector, instead of serving national interests, serves the interests of “foreign powers”; the sector represents “a foreign agency network”; CSOs undermine public order; CSOs are accused of advocating for war (combination of interviews). As the purpose of this paper is to analyze the damage done to the CSO sector, this space is not sufficient to in-depth analysis of anti-CSO propaganda. When assessing the harm caused by propaganda, however, we confidently assess that propaganda prepared fertile ground for attacks on CSOs through repressive legislation. On the one hand, propaganda, has significantly strengthened negative or nihilistic public sentiments towards CSOs. On the other hand, the use of derogatory labels, in many cases, successfully served to demoralize members of the public, civil sector employees, leaders of civil organizations involved in various activities, and in some cases, even donors.

b) Legislative dimension - the "troika" of laws

The main weapon that Georgian Dream has used against CSOs is the so-called “troika of laws” – new laws and legislative amendments that, once enacted against civil society, will effectively eliminate the sector’s means of activity (Table 2). This dimension of the struggle is universal - sooner or later, it will affect everyone (Imnadze 2025). The three main laws considered here include the “Foreign Influence Transparency Act” (the so-called “Russian law”), the “Foreign Agents Registration Act” (the so-called FARA), and the legislative amendment to the “Grants Act”, according to which donors must obtain government permission before issuing grants.

Table 2: A list of recent laws or amendments carrying the repressive measures against the CSOs

Law/Amendment	Type of repression ²
The Foreign Influence Transparency Law	Direct and universal
Foreign Agents Registration Act	
Amendments to the Grants Law	
Amendments to the Rules of Procedure of Parliament on the Mandatory Involvement of the Non-Governmental Sector	Somewhat direct and partially universal
Amendments to the Law on Political Unions of Citizens	
Law On Family Values and the Protection of Minors	
Amendments to the Law on Civil Service	
A package of legislative amendments to completely remove the word "gender"	Indirect and partially universal
Amendments to the Law on Assembly and Manifestation	
Amendments to the Criminal Code	
Amendments to the Law on Broadcasting	

Source: Combined results of interviews conducted by the author, desk research

² Direct: Directly affects CSOs and/or grants provided to them; More or less direct: may or may not affect CSOs and/or grants provided to them directly; Indirect: does not affect CSOs directly as a sector, but rather the content of their activities or the lifestyle of their members.

The so-called “Russian law” was adopted by the Georgian Dream parliament on April 17, 2024. However, CSOs found legal mechanisms to continue their activities outside of this law, and despite the narrowed scope for action, there were still opportunities for this sector to continue its activities. Among the most popular choices were registering organizations outside of Georgia, preparing to pay fines envisaged by the law, or changing organizations’ legal status. However, the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which went into effect from June 1, 2025, includes new and more draconian restrictions. Therefore, the previous workarounds are losing their effectiveness for the following reasons:

1. The list of grounds for being considered an “agent” is expanded: an “agent of a foreign principal” is someone who: a) acts under the direction or control of, or is supervised, controlled, or subsidized by a foreign principal; (b) engages in political activities for or in the interests of such foreign principal; acts as a public agent, political advisor; collects or distributes money or other funds; represents the interests of the principal before state bodies (Civil.ge 2025).
2. The obligations imposed on “agents” are broad and vague: CSOs, based on the Georgia FARA wording, or conclusions drawn from meetings with Georgian Dream representatives, have difficulty determining what types of cases, what types of “violations” they will have to answer for. For example, according to the interpretation of Razhden Kuprashvili, the head of the Anti-Corruption Bureau which oversees enforcement of the FARA, - one may be held liable for a critical post on social media (Brachveli 2025a).
3. The new law provides for criminal liability mechanisms. In the event of failure to register an organization, the heads of the organization (directors and board members) will be subject to individual criminal liability and may face imprisonment of up to 5 years, a fine, or a combination thereof (Civil.ge 2025).

The main repressive blow that Georgian Dream has inflicted on the future activities of CSOs is the amendment that requires governmental permission for donors to issue grants, a common practice in authoritarian states. This amendment eliminates the legal and factual spaces that CSOs were able to find under the so-called “Russian law” and the so-called FARA. In these conditions, the process of legally avoiding the status of “agent” will no longer alleviate the situation, as the government will decide which organizations can receive grants and which donor-funded projects can be implemented. This change poses a significant threat to the financial stability and sustainability of organizations. Given that,

unlike in mature democracies, Georgia does not have a significant tradition of donations or cooperation with business, there is a danger that the state will easily subject the activities of the non-governmental sector to its control (Imnadze 2025).

In addition to these three main laws, interviewees cited a wave of restrictive laws or legislative amendments that, to varying degrees, have caused various types of harm to CSOs working in the vanguard of democratization. These include the Law on Family Values and Child Protection, amendments to the Law on Media, the decision to abolish consultation mechanisms with civil society while drafting legislation, the Law on Political Associations of Citizens (law on political parties), the Law on Public Servants, amendments to the Criminal Code that threaten the activities of activists with special punitive measures, and amendments to the Law on Assembly and Manifestation. All these legislative acts, reminiscent of an “artillery attack” (Simonishvili 2025), represent a direct or indirect war either directly against CSOs, against the substantive activities of CSOs, or against CSO members as active pro-democracy citizens.

c) Strategic dimension - "Party-spin-off civil society"

Along with propaganda and legislative mechanisms, Georgian Dream has also taken a number of strategic steps to combat vocal civil society. It has resorted to the tried-and-true mechanism of fostering an artificial opposition and, in the form of a “State Agency for Grant Management,” ensure the existence of a “safe”, sham civil society working for the benefit of an authoritarian regime. At first glance, there is no danger in the state strengthening the civil sector in healthy democratic countries, and this may even indicate a high level of democracy (Brachveli, Simonishvili, Natroshvili 2025). However, given Georgia’s current context, it is highly unlikely that the relevant state bodies will cooperate with the civil sector in accordance with the principles of justice and independence. Under such a state agency, it is more likely that a kind of demarcated territory has already been created for CSOs, and boundary established that they should not cross (Turmanidze 2025).

Civil society sees this move as a strategy to strengthen authoritarianism: when the cleansing of the civil sector of pro-democratic and pro-European CSOs reaches the level desired by the party, it will still need the presence of formally existing CSOs that are only critical to the party to a degree that is predetermined by the party itself, and they shall not criticize any anti-democratic steps at all. Thus, the creation of a facade in the form of a pseudo-democratic civil sector, characterized by so-called “Governmental Non-Governmental Organizations” (GONGOs), or organizations subordinate to the system, is a tried and tested

method that Georgian Dream has used before, such as in the creation of a pseudo-parliamentary opposition (Natroshvili 2025; Kakachia & Samkharadze, 2023). Ultimately, a significant portion of CSOs will be significantly affected; organizations which, for decades and under different governments, have real experience and credibility in the democratization and Europeanization processes.

"To be, or not to be": dangers and harms

At this stage, the paper examines the challenges facing those organizations that logically can be considered the primary targets of Georgian Dream. These are organizations that work on core aspects of Euro-Atlantic integration, geopolitics, human rights, good governance, free and fair elections, and other key areas of democratization. Taking all of this into account, the potential threats most frequently named by civil society representatives can be categorized as having immediate, medium-term, and long-term effects.

Immediate effects: Demonization (which is already partially established); suspension of activities; limitations on the independence of activities; direct prohibition of specific activities (for example, the right to observe elections); termination of services to citizens (such as support for survivors of violence and abuse); limitations on cooperation with donors; prohibitions on cooperation with beneficiaries (public officials, political parties, vulnerable citizens); persecution of individual employees; and psychological stress inflicted on CSO employees.

Medium-term effects: Gradual migration of CSO employees to other sectors; criminal prosecution of CSO leaders; ongoing control of activities related to democratization and Europeanization (in areas where these activities continue); and reduced visibility of CSOs.

Long-term effects: Total abolition of a critical and efficient part of the CSO sector.

CSOs are forced to deal with this diverse combination of threats and attacks at the expense of mobilization of additional resources. Although the Georgian Dream party has not yet implemented the troika of repressive laws in a conveyor-type manner and on a full scale, i.e., has not yet resorted to the "fire and sword", the CSO sector is actively preparing for a scenario in which such repressions against them are activated (Turmanidze 2025, Natroshvili 2025). In addition to the fact that direct repressive laws came into force on June 1, 2025, it is difficult for CSO leaders to project what effect the 2025 local elections will have

on GD's motivation to enforce the laws against CSOs (Natroshvili 2025). In turn, means of survival are currently being sought at the expense of downgrading, or in many cases, suspending existing activities. Therefore, while in the long term it is possible that some organizations deemed undesirable by the ruling party will be abolished, in the short and medium terms it is already evident that CSOs have to achieve certain goals within a significantly constrained environment.

Charybdis: Threats of the geopolitical dimension facing Georgian civil society

Geopolitical shifts have presented an additional challenge for CSOs, forcing Georgian civil society to navigate between “Scylla and Charybdis”. Given that Georgia is among the countries that have historically been most dependent on US support, the decision by the Donald Trump administration to close the USAID Mission was a significant blow that was not met with enthusiasm by traditional friends of Georgian democracy (Thornton 2025).

Georgia is one of the largest recipients of US foreign assistance per capita and ranks third in Eastern Europe after Ukraine and Moldova (Foreignassistance.gov 2024; Figure 3).

Figures 3-4: Georgia among USAID aid recipients by region; main sectors of USAID programs



Source: Foreign Assistance gov. Available at: <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/georgia/2024/obligations/1>

USAID had operated in Georgia since 1992, and during that time Georgia became more than a technical recipient of assistance. Considering the country's foreign policy objectives, foreign assistance received from Western partners was an important geopolitical instrument which significantly contributed to the country's association with the club of mature, Western democracies. Therefore, the country suffered multifaceted damage with the closure of the USAID Mission (Natsvlishvili 2025). The withdrawal of USAID proved to be a particularly serious blow to the civil society sector. In 2025, 39 ongoing USAID programs were closed, with a total value of approximately USD 373 million and an annual budget of more than USD 70 million (Devdariani 2025). Although a significant part of the funds allocated by USAID were received by state institutions, American assistance was vital for the CSO sector. Since official statistics on USAID programs are not available on a global scale, additional threats facing the CSO sector can be discussed on several dimensions:

First, although the US is not the largest provider of official development assistance (ODA) to Georgia -- this position is occupied by the European Union (Devdariani 2025) -- USAID had a much stronger orientation toward cooperation with the civil sector, since the main objective of EU financial support has been primarily to approximate legislation and regulations to the EU legal framework. Therefore, European funding is mostly oriented towards the government and its various agencies.

Apart from this nuance, USAID programs have been an important source of employment for Georgia, a country characterized by high unemployment. In the absence of official statistics on USAID, it can be unofficially estimated that more than 2,000 Georgians in the civil sector have lost their jobs (taking into account the average number of programs, grants, and sub-grants and the number of people needed to implement them) (Devdariani 2025). Consequently, professional internal migration is currently underway in Georgia, with people with many years of experience in project management now seeking work in other, relatively stable areas.

Last but not least, one of the most significant blows to CSOs has been reputational damage. Georgian Dream's resentment toward USAID was evident in the run-up to and after the October 2024 parliamentary elections. Parliamentary Speaker Shalva Papuashvili accused USAID of "influencing Georgia's internal politics." Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze stated: "The US Embassy and USAID in Georgia, as well as NED and other institutions, have been acting against the Georgian state and people." The critical statements of some members of the US administration and President Trump against USAID seemed to coincide with the propaganda narratives of Georgian Dream (Natsvlishvili 2025), whose goal was not only to

damage USAID's reputation, but also to attack the CSOs that managed USAID grants and worked on Georgia's democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Civil society between Scylla and Charybdis

Georgian democracy faces a test, and passing this test depends on saving an independent and strong civil society and critical media. The ruling party, subordinate to oligarchic interests, is leading the country toward authoritarianism and, on this path, has declared war on civil society using the weapons of propaganda, legislative attacks, and strategic mechanisms. Ultimately, Georgian Dream is moving in the direction of not only limiting the space for independent civil society activities, but also, in the long term, fully eliminating the sector altogether, because the party perceives this sector to be a primary obstacle on its path to establishing one-party rule.

Amid the new challenges brought about by shifting geopolitical dynamics, the very functioning of civil society in Georgia is being questioned – along with the survival of the country's democratic and European future. The suppression of civil society and critical media will ultimately halt the process of building a democratic Georgia, undermining efforts to strengthen human rights, social development, equality and diversity, and state institutions accountable to the public. Finally, at a moment of critical importance, society will be left completely alone in the face of both internal and external threats that have faced Georgia for decades.

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