

2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

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For Georgia

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LOCAL PARTNER

UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION OF GEORGIA (UNAG)

Otar Kantaria

PROJECT MANAGERS

FHI 360

Michael Kott
Eka Imerlishvili
Alex Nejadian

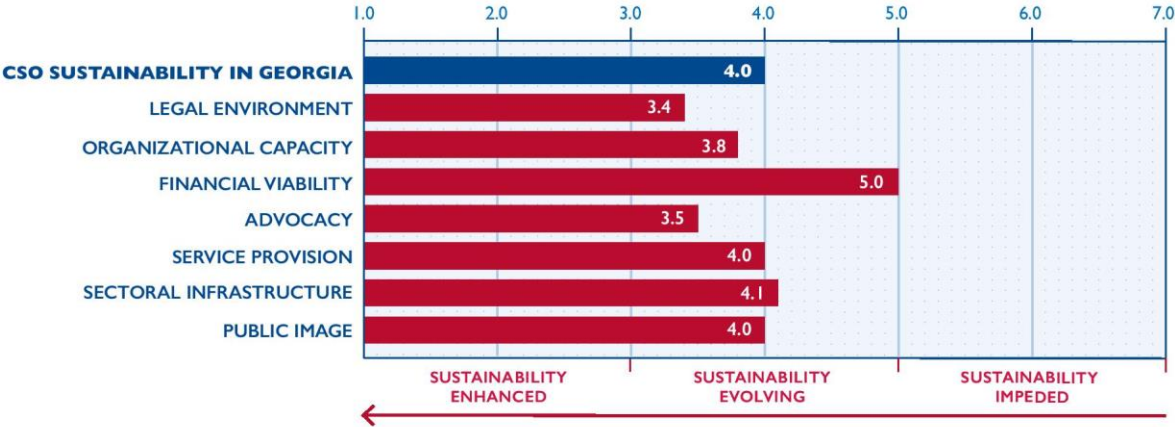
INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW (ICNL)

Catherine Shea
Jennifer Stuart

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Erin McCarthy, Michael Kott, Jennifer Stuart, and Natalia Shapovalova

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.0



Georgia entered 2021 already deep in political crisis following allegations of election fraud and an opposition boycott of parliamentary elections in late 2020. Political turmoil peaked in February, when police stormed the headquarters and detained the chairman of the United National Movement (UNM), Georgia’s main opposition party. In April, the European Council (EC) brokered an agreement to end the political stalemate. Among other requirements, the agreement committed the ruling Georgian Dream party to holding snap parliamentary elections in 2022 if it received less than 43 percent of the vote in 2021 local elections and to halt judicial appointments until concerns about “transparency, accountability, and impartiality” in the appointment process were addressed. UNM did not sign the agreement until September 2021.

Georgian CSOs criticized Georgian Dream for violating the EC-mediated agreement, including its failure to halt judicial appointments and to undertake meaningful electoral reforms ahead of local elections. In July 2021, fifty Georgian CSOs and media outlets urged the EC President to continue his “close engagement with Georgia’s leadership and speak publicly against democratic setbacks, and work with Georgia’s civil society to ensure the country’s progress on the path to the Euro-Atlantic integration.”

Amid widespread local and international criticism for failing to honor its commitments under the deal, Georgian Dream quit the EC-brokered agreement in late July 2021 and openly criticized the European Union (EU) and OS diplomatic missions in Georgia, further straining the country’s relationships with its main foreign allies. The government also refused an EU loan that was conditioned on implementation of the judicial reform commitments. In a statement issued on July 28, 2021, eighteen local CSOs stated that Georgian Dream’s withdrawal from the EC-brokered deal “constitutes a straightforward rejection of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic course.”

Local elections were held in October, against the backdrop of former president Mikheil Saakashvili’s surprise return to Georgia and his subsequent arrest for long-standing charges, including abuse of power and misappropriation of state funds. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) Election Observation Mission, the local elections were “generally well-administered but held against the backdrop of a protracted political crisis and characterized by hardened polarization. Contestants were able to campaign freely in a competitive environment that was, however, marred by wide-spread and consistent allegations of intimidation, vote-buying, pressure on candidates and voters, and an unlevel playing field.” Despite general expectations that Georgian Dream would struggle to reach the threshold introduced by the EC-brokered deal, it ended up receiving 46.74 percent of the popular vote, with UNM receiving 30.68 percent.

Despite its early successes in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia was one of the world’s hardest hit countries in 2021, ranking seventh in deaths per capita according to data from the World Health Organization. Although the country’s COVID-19 death toll continued to climb, vaccination rates lagged. However, the

government's serial failures in handling the pandemic were overshadowed in 2021 by the economic slowdown, political crises, and local elections.

The Public Defender's Office and State Inspector's Service, supported by local civil society groups, were propelled into the spotlight in 2021 for their principled stance over alleged abuse at the Ninotsminda orphanage, which emerged after Georgia's Ombudsperson raised concerns after being denied access to a church-run boarding school. The controversy attracted public scrutiny to the issue of child abuse, including the launching of several investigations, and the Georgian Orthodox Church's immense informal power.

In November 2021, the State Inspector's Service, which is tasked with monitoring personal data protection and probing the abuse of power, announced the launch of an investigation into "the possible inhumane treatment" of former President Saakashvili. Less than three weeks later, the State Inspector's Service announced that it found the Ministry of Justice and its Special Penitentiary Service guilty of violating Georgia's personal data protection law by releasing several controversial video clips of the former president. The Inspector's Service also instructed the Ministry of Justice and the Penitentiary Service to delete the footage from Facebook and their official websites. In late December 2021, the Georgian Dream-led parliament fast-tracked hearings and voted to abolish the State Inspector's Service in the face of harsh local and international criticism.

The government's retaliatory criticism against critical media and civil society groups continued to shrink civic space and stigmatize the role played by these actors in Georgia's democratic transition. When far-right radical groups assaulted media workers during counter-demonstrations against a Pride march in Tbilisi in July 2021—marking a "calamitous turning point" for media freedom, according to Reporters Without Borders—the government failed to act fast and prosecute the perpetrators. At the same time, media reports throughout 2021 revealed questionable surveillance practices, including Georgian authorities' massive eavesdropping on western diplomats, media, and civil society.

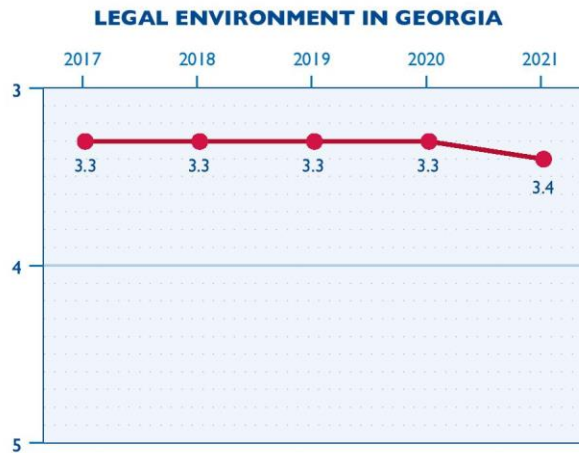
Although the operational context for CSOs worsened in 2021, overall CSO sustainability remained largely unchanged, with civil society continuing to play a key role in providing advocacy, services, and commentary on social and political developments—from the public health crisis response to the widely-contested elections—throughout the year. Organizational capacities improved despite the financial challenges that local CSOs faced, while the public image and legal environment declined.

Legally, CSOs operate as non-entrepreneurial (non-commercial) legal entities (NNLE). According to the National Agency of Public Registry, there are over 30,000 NNLEs on record. However, this number is not reflective of the actual number of operational CSOs in the country, as liquidating a CSO is still an overly complicated procedure, which the majority of founders choose to forego. The EU-funded *Civil Society Organizations in Georgia: Mapping Study* estimated that in 2021 only between 1,200 and 2,300 entities could be classified as CSOs.

In addition, CSOs share NNLE status with a range of public institutions that are owned and operated by municipal or central governments. According to the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI)'s 2021 study *Employees and Remuneration Expenses of Municipal N(N)LEs and LLCs*, there were a total of 524 NNLEs established by 48 of the 69 municipalities in Georgia. These government-owned NNLEs, which perform a variety of sports, educational, tourism, cultural, and other functions, have become the subject of scrutiny by watchdog CSOs due to their limited transparency and accountability. For example, IDFI's report describes the case of Tsageri Municipality, where a municipality of 8,800 residents employs almost 1,000 people in municipal NNLEs.

Civil society continues to struggle in the Russia-occupied territories of Georgia—Abkhazia and South Ossetia. According to Freedom House's *Freedom in the World Report* for 2021, "the freedom of assembly is largely respected, and civil society organizations, particularly groups representing Abkhazia's war veterans, exert influence on government policies." However, fewer funding opportunities are available for CSOs in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, undermining their institutional capabilities, compliance management, organizational development, and equipment, among other aspects of their operations. Collaboration between CSOs across the dividing lines took a significant hit in 2021. On December 6, 2021, the "foreign ministry" of Abkhazia announced that the de facto government will be requiring prior approval for any projects implemented by "foreign non-governmental and international organizations" going forward. In line with this announcement, in early January 2022, the de facto government of Abkhazia banned the Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism (COBERM), a project that is funded by the EU and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and has worked with conflict-affected communities and civil society groups in Georgia proper and Georgia's occupied territories since 2010.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 3.4



The legal environment governing CSOs deteriorated in 2021. While procedures and regulations for registering and operating CSOs remain mostly favorable, administrative harassment against civil society activists, including detentions and unreasonably hefty fines, became more commonplace during the year.

CSOs are able to register freely. Registration templates for organizational statutes are publicly available on government websites and at Public Service Halls operated by the Ministry of Justice. Registration requires a single founder and is typically completed within two days at a cost of GEL 200 (about USD 70). Same-day registration is available for double the price. Liquidation procedures remain lengthy and complicated, which may inflate the number of CSOs that are registered but no

longer operate.

In August 2021, Georgia's legislature passed the new Law on Entrepreneurs. Originally adopted in 1994 and substantially overhauled in 2021 as part of Georgia's obligations under the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU, the law sets additional legal requirements for locally registered legal entities, including civil society groups. The new compliance standards affect registration, branding, business correspondence, and employment. The majority of CSOs are still unaware of the new requirements, which take effect in 2024. CSO leaders strongly criticized the government's failure to inform civil society about the new law or to inclusively consult with CSOs about its content.

The operational context for civil society deteriorated significantly in 2021 due to the government's failure to enforce protections for fundamental freedoms. As noted above, in July 2021, the government tacitly allowed attacks on media workers by far-right groups, which left dozens severely injured. Lekso Lashkarava, a camera operator for the government-critical TV Pirveli, was found dead days after he was brutally assaulted by the far-right mob. Nineteen Georgian CSOs called for the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri in response to this incident.

At the same time, the government exerted increasing pressure on activists and informal CSOs through steep fines and detentions for "disorderly conduct" (according to Article 166 of the Administrative Code) and "non-compliance with a lawful order" (Article 173). In 2021, the parliament passed changes to the Administrative Code that significantly increased the penalties under Articles 166 and 173. For instance, the range of applicable penalties under "disorderly conduct" increased from between GEL 500 and 1,500 (approximately USD 160 to 480) or jail time up to fifteen calendar days to between GEL 1,500 and 2,000 (approximately USD 480 to 640) or jail time of between five and fifteen days.

Georgian law allows CSOs to mobilize financial resources through fundraising. CSOs may conduct economic activities, such as selling goods and services, and their income is taxed at the same rate as that of commercial entities and other organizations. Although various government grants are available, many CSOs do not utilize them due to concerns about the politicization of grantmaking mechanisms.

Tax legislation allows CSOs to request refunds on value-added tax (VAT) on their grant expenditures. Most donors allow CSOs to retain the recovered funds. Additionally, agreements between Georgia and several foreign governments, such as the US and EU, waive VAT payments altogether. Corporate donors are technically eligible for deductions on a minor portion of their net profits, but the provision has been rendered moot since Georgia reformed its taxation model in 2017.

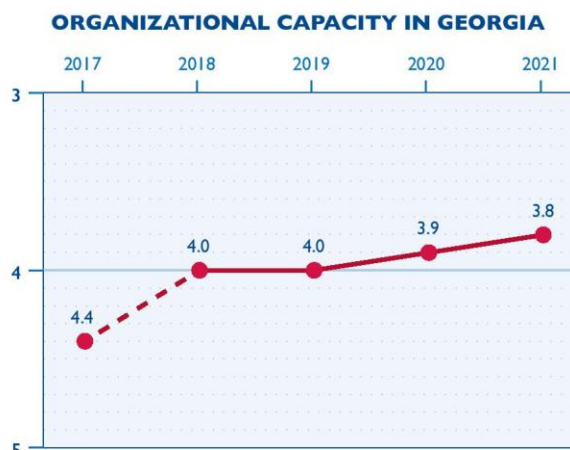
CSOs that register as charities may waive VAT on charitable donations. However, many CSOs do not seek this status to avoid the potentially burdensome requirement to submit annual financial reports to the tax authority, given their broad distrust of the government. The EU-funded 2021 CSO mapping study found that only one-tenth of Georgian CSOs had charity status.

CSOs can seek legal assistance from other specialized CSOs, including Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), the Georgian Democracy Initiative, and Rights Georgia, both in Tbilisi and regional cities.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 3.8¹

CSOs' overall organizational capacity improved slightly in 2021. CSOs capably adapted to the emergency situation caused by COVID-19 and continued their operations despite the shrinking civic space in the country. In particular, CSOs collaborated effectively with various stakeholders, both public and private, in the pandemic response, aided by an influx of funding focused on the COVID-19 crisis.

Overall, the civil society sector is well-established and able to influence the narratives and political agendas around the issues on which they focus. Individual organizational capacities vary, however, and there is a stark contrast between Tbilisi-based and regional organizations. These capacity gaps are driven by disparate access to donors and funding opportunities. The operational focus of most CSOs remains donor driven.



Constituency building continues to evolve, including in the context of the growing number of active informal social movements. According to the EU-funded mapping study, 89 percent of surveyed organizations reported that they had met and consulted with their constituents on project planning and design or organizational strategy and priorities. Constituency-driven organizations, such as youth and student CSOs, environmental groups, professional associations, minority organizations, and disabled peoples' organizations, continued to successfully engage with their beneficiaries in 2021, typically planning and implementing their activities in consultation with their beneficiaries. In contrast, CSOs' human rights, advocacy, and watchdog campaigns are often driven by donor funding decisions, though some donors consult with beneficiaries. USAID Georgia, for example, consulted extensively with local stakeholders in 2021 before publishing the draft solicitation for a wider co-creation process for an upcoming media program. However, CSOs feel that some large donors allocate resources based on their own funding priorities that do not always align with the local context and needs.

Many CSOs struggle to implement strategic planning processes. Some CSOs report that the need to respond to shifting donor priorities makes it impractical to plan beyond their immediate projects.

Most CSOs have internal systems and guidelines in place, including written procedures governing executive functions, cost practices, staffing, and other internal processes and operations. Donors typically require project closeout audits, which help to ensure compliance with donor regulations. It is common for CSOs to have boards of directors and there are clear divisions of responsibilities between boards and executive staff, at least on paper. In reality, however, most boards exist only formally and do not actively engage in the governance of CSOs. Further, a large proportion of CSOs, both large and small, remain "one person" organizations that depend on particular individuals, usually the founders, thereby hindering long-term sustainability.

According to the EU-funded mapping study, Georgian CSOs tend to be small, with eight full-time employees on average, while about one-fifth of CSOs have one or no permanent employee. CSOs struggle to retain skilled staff, due to their financial instability. High-performing local CSOs are rarely able to compete with the salaries of US- and EU-based nonprofits operating in Georgia. Further, few local CSOs can invest meaningfully in staff development, depending instead on donor-funded training opportunities. As more Georgians access online and

¹ The Organizational Capacity score was recalibrated in 2018 to better reflect the situation in the country and to better align it with other scores in the region. The score did not reflect an improvement in Organizational Capacity, which remained largely the same in 2018 as in 2017.

remote work opportunities, the local nonprofit sector is further challenged as a competitive employer. Most CSOs that implement foreign donor-funded projects have personnel policies that govern labor relations. CSOs are often unable to afford external IT, legal, and other professional services, and depend on internal staff for these functions.

Many CSOs recruit and work with volunteers, although this is often done on an ad hoc and unstructured basis. According to the Charities Aid Foundation's World Giving Index 2022, which reports on developments in 2021, 22 percent of Georgian respondents reported engaging in volunteering. There are continued attempts, including the EU-funded www.volunteer.ge, to promote more structured approaches to volunteerism in Georgia.

The cost of office space, utilities, equipment, and other overhead expenses is a recurring concern among CSOs. Internet connectivity, for example, while widely available, is a substantial expense. Although most CSOs are unable to afford communication staff, Georgian CSOs are increasingly present on social media and networking platforms. Cybersecurity is a growing concern for CSOs due to the government's intrusive surveillance practices.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.0



Financial viability did not change in 2021 and continues to be a core challenge for Georgian CSOs. Few CSOs are able to meaningfully diversify their funding sources, and many remain dependent on a single donor. While CSOs had access in 2021 to short-term project-based funding, especially for initiatives related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of consistent long-term funding was limited.

According to USAID's Country Development Cooperation Strategy for Georgia, the civil society "sector is largely dependent on donor funding." According to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), official development assistance (ODA) disbursements to Georgia increased from \$405 million in 2019 to over

\$680 million in 2020. According to 2021 EU data, out of the EUR 820 million invested in Georgia's development between 2014 and 2020, an estimated EUR 42.75 million (5 percent) was awarded to CSOs for their work on justice sector reform, strengthening oversight, business support services, civil society sustainability, vocational education, training, and employment. USAID/Georgia awards approximately 10 percent of its total portfolio directly to local partners.

However, foreign nonprofit organizations tend to win the majority of funding from Georgia's main development partners, leaving most local CSOs with only smaller, short-term pass-through funding opportunities. Local CSOs report that these short-term funding opportunities, while important to their work, make limited contributions to their organizational development and financial viability.

A few foreign organizations, however, provide sustained support to their local partners. The German aid group Bread for the World, for example, has provided substantial funding to support the development and financial sustainability of several Georgian CSOs for more than a decade. Similarly, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency has built lasting partnerships with a small group of local CSOs.

Domestic funding for COVID-19 responses subsided in 2021, as the sense of urgency regarding the pandemic waned. Government agencies became less reliable as funding sources for local CSOs in 2021 in terms of both the amount of funding provided and the reputational risks to CSOs if they accept government funds. The EU-funded mapping study revealed that only 31 percent of Georgian CSOs reported receiving state funding between 2018 and 2020, with a total of about GEL 4.3 million (approximately USD 1.4 million) distributed to these CSOs. Corporate social responsibility, a potential funding source for CSOs, also subsided during the pandemic as businesses struggled financially.

Philanthropy is undeveloped in Georgia. According to the World Giving Index 2022, only 3 percent of Georgians reported donating money to a charity in 2021, making it the lowest ranked country on this metric. A promising

model for local fundraising is Orbeliani, a quickly growing crowdfunding organization that supports community-led projects.

Few membership-based organizations collect dues and, for those that do, yearly membership revenues can barely cover one month's rent. In contrast, industry groups such as the Business Association of Georgia (BAG) collect substantial revenue through membership fees.

Service-oriented CSOs continue to earn revenue from consulting, training, coaching, and other services marketed to government and business clients. Revenue, however, has seemingly declined since the pandemic started in 2020. Many donors, particularly the EU, continue to prioritize social entrepreneurship and invest in social startups but few examples of sustainable social enterprises exist.

Larger and more established organizations typically have advanced financial management systems, including procedures to ensure transparency in managing donor funds. Many local CSOs are unable to retain qualified financial management staff as they are unable to meet salary requirements. Annual audits are common among the more established CSOs, but few make their financial statements public. Most CSOs publicly disclose their sources of funding and projects.

ADVOCACY: 3.5

Civil society advocacy did not change significantly in 2021. Although the quality of interactions deteriorated, CSOs continued to actively engage with all levels of government. Government officials are open to productive and fruitful collaborations on non-controversial issues, but less accepting of CSO input on governance, judiciary, anti-corruption, media, and other sensitive areas. The government's refusal to halt judicial appointments, for instance, illustrated the authorities' disregard for input from both domestic civil society and international partners, such as the EU and US.

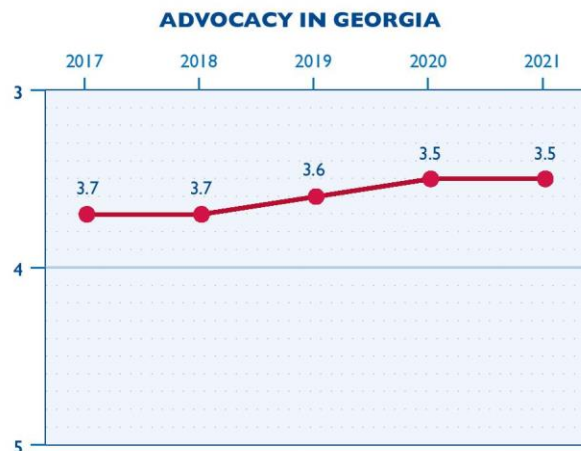
Although Georgian law requires public consultations on public policy, meaningful public consultations on both policies and legislation remain rare. In 2021, for example, the government amended the Law on Entrepreneurs, which affects CSOs, without consulting or notifying civil society.

While the government involves CSOs in working groups and commissions, it often disregards their contributions. As a result, CSOs sometimes boycott these mechanisms. In July 2021, for example, the Coalition for Independent and Transparent Judiciary, which unites forty local CSOs, refused to participate in the parliament's working group for the selection of Supreme Court judges.

Legal mechanisms that enable CSOs to perform a watchdog function over government policies are increasingly difficult to use, as public institutions respond less frequently to freedom of information requests. According to a 2021 Institute for Development of Freedom of Information report, the response rate to Freedom of Information Act requests dropped from 90 percent in 2013 to 80 percent in 2020.

CSO advocacy coalitions are common but are mostly project-based and often short-lived. A promising example of a more sustained advocacy effort is the Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia, which was established by twenty-two local CSOs in 2016 to campaign for Georgia's continued progress towards EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership. This coalition actively commented on Georgia's strained foreign policies in 2021. While Georgian CSOs have a strong history of conducting joint advocacy campaigns, such collaborations have been rare in the past few years.

CSOs frequently comment in the media and influence public debate on pressing social and political issues. In 2021, informal social movements became increasingly active in organizing public protests and campaigns. Public protests against the Namakhvani hydropower plant succeeded in forcing the government to cancel the nearly USD 1 billion

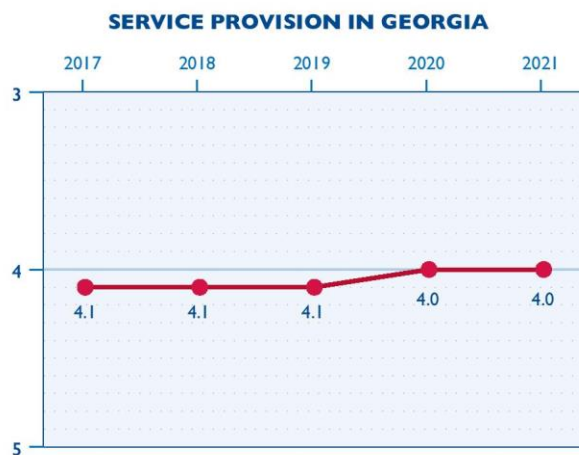


energy project. Workers and unions conducted successful strikes in 2021 at Rustavi Azoti, the Chiatura Mines, Borjomi mineral water factories, and the port of Batumi.

Illiberal groups continued to proliferate in 2021. On July 5, far-right groups rallied on Tbilisi’s main avenue to prevent the Tbilisi Pride March from taking place. According to a report by the US Mission to the OSCE, “The mobs went largely unchecked by authorities as they attacked citizens and also broke into and vandalized the offices of the Shame Movement, the Human Rights Center, and Tbilisi Pride.” Twenty-seven embassies issued a joint statement condemning the “violent attacks on the civic activists, community members and journalists, as well as the failure of the government leaders and religious officials to condemn this violence”. These targeted assaults on activists and media workers—to some extent endorsed by the government—marked a significant setback for civic space and fundamental freedoms in Georgia. The government also failed to remove a metallic cross that was illegally installed by these groups in front of Georgia’s parliament. The radical group Altinfo subsequently registered a political party, the Conservative Movement, and propagates anti-Western, anti-democratic, and anti-CSO sentiments.

CSOs have been lobbying for some legislative and policy results for years, including improvements to the legal and operational environment for CSOs, but with limited results. While many CSOs actively collaborate with the parliament, the parliament has limited influence, as Georgia’s political landscape—including the work and decisions of the parliament—is excessively dominated by the executive branch.

SERVICE PROVISION: 4.0



Service provision remained unchanged in 2021. CSOs continued to provide a wide range of health, education, relief, employment, environment, governance, and other services to communities, government, and businesses, while also playing an active role in Georgia’s COVID-19 response. According to the 2021 EU-funded mapping study, nearly half of the surveyed CSOs conducted emergency response and public health programming in response to the pandemic.

Although the CSO sector overall provides a diverse range of services, many individual CSOs lack the financial resources to diversify their product lines. CSO services typically respond to local needs, which they identify by actively collecting data and feedback through surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews.

However, CSOs’ ability to develop projects and programming to meet these needs depends on the priorities and schedule of international donors. Many donors allowed grant recipients to modify project activities and budgets as needed in the context of the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Georgian CSOs are mostly value-driven organizations, commonly upholding high standards of integrity in partnerships, as well as of equality in producing, marketing, and delivering their projects and services. CSOs generally provide services to various clients without discrimination.

The number of industry and membership associations that offer a diverse range of services to their members has been growing steadily. The Small and Medium Enterprise Development Association (SMEDA), for example, is a membership-based, independent nonprofit organization that was established in 2021 and whose membership and range of services quickly expanded. SMEDA provides tax, audit, training, legal, and other services for its members, while at the same time providing educational programs and opportunities for the wider public. According to a 2021 Georgian Institute of Politics study, at least thirty-one Georgian CSOs actively worked with small and medium enterprises to strengthen value chains, increase sales, and promote exports through EU and USAID projects.

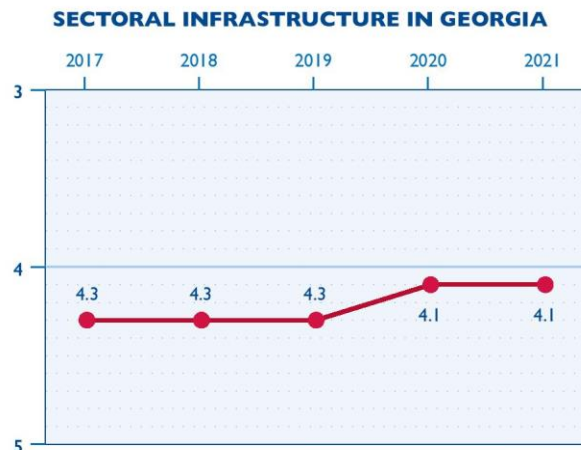
While many CSOs generate income from the services they provide, these revenues are insufficient to sustain them. As a result, even high-performing service CSOs are dependent on grant revenues. For example, Partners

Georgia and the Center for Training and Consultancy provide training services to the government, donors, CSOs, and businesses. Despite their success in this area, both organizations increasingly depend on international donor funds to enable them to offer competitive services.

The government recognizes the value of CSOs in providing social services. The government and CSO sectors collaborate actively in non-controversial fields such as the provision of basic social services. For example, the Ministry of Health outsources a variety of social services to CSOs. However, as noted above, relationships remain strained on more sensitive issues, as the government and the ruling party continue to publicly undermine the credibility of CSOs, their work, and their staff.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.1

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector did not change significantly in 2021. Overall, the infrastructure is insufficient to support the number and diversity of organizations in Georgia. Few support organizations and resource centers exist. The USAID-supported network of Centers for Civic Engagement (CCE) offers free space and other services to regional CSOs while charging fees to organizations from Tbilisi. CCEs are registered as local nonprofits and are currently working to increase their sustainability. The EU funds a similar network of organizations providing mentorship, physical space, and other support services for local CSOs and community organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic undermined access to and use of this infrastructure, but demand for these services is expected to rise as pandemic restrictions subside.



There are few local grantmaking organizations, such as the Open Society Georgia Foundation, Europe Foundation, the United Nations Association of Georgia (UNA-Georgia), and Women Fund in Georgia, as well as several government institutions. UNA-Georgia, for example, provided annual funding for at least twenty local CSOs from 2011 to 2021 under USAID and other donor projects. International NGOs actively re-grant EU and USAID funds to local CSOs as well.

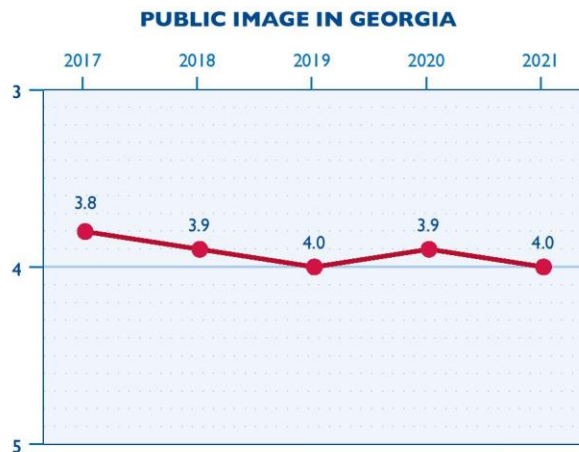
Orbeliani, as noted above, is at the forefront of innovating local crowdfunding for CSOs. The curated online platform allows any person or organization with online access to collect co-financing for projects, such as a village library, sports field, playground for special needs children, sewing and tailoring courses, or other local needs-based initiatives.

Training on planning, management, fundraising, and advocacy is available to CSOs, while training to build technical skills, such as accounting, financial management, board development, and constituency building, is less common. The USAID-funded Human and Institutional Capacity Development project works to address these gaps. While available trainings generally meet CSO needs, their scopes and level of effort rarely do. For example, training on fundraising tends to be either too general or irrelevant to the local context. CSOs also identify grant-writing for US and EU funding, as well as general literacy on donor procedures and regulations, as a significant gap in training opportunities.

CSOs engage in multiple thematic coalitions, including strong and active coalitions that bring together CSOs focused on people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, and various health issues. Cooperation among CSOs is most common around high-profile events such as elections, and CSOs issue joint statements on major policy and political developments. However, CSO networking and coalitions have been adversely affected by the pandemic. Polarization and radicalization among CSOs also undermine the organization and cohesion of the sector. Georgian civil society lacks both sector-wide forums and willing facilitators to strengthen cooperation on mutual interests and common aims.

As noted above, CSO-government relationships continued to deteriorate in 2021 on high-profile, controversial issues while collaboration on non-political topics, such as education, employment, economy, and health, was more successful.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 4.0



According to a 2021 survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRRC), only 20 percent of Georgians trust or fully trust CSOs. While this was a decrease from the prior year's already low figure (24 percent), it is important to note that most Georgian institutions received even lower scores². These results indicate a high level of distrust for most institutions among the public. USAID's Country Development Strategy for Georgia notes that "many citizens question civil society's commitment to their mission of serving the Georgian people versus their commitment to securing donor funds and thus being donor-driven." To address the issue, USAID plans to help "build trust in Georgian civil society by helping them better connect and represent their communities." Despite this decline in public trust towards CSOs, local CSOs believe that the

sector's visibility improved in 2021 due to CSOs' contributions to the COVID-19 emergency response and engagement on Georgia's various political crises throughout the year.

Although many CSOs work on social and economic issues that are priorities for the public, such as employment, this work rarely gets coverage in the media. Instead, media tends to cover more political aspects of CSOs' work, including that related to governance, elections, and minority rights. Media and the public thus tend to incorrectly generalize that all of civil society is focused on these topics, fueling the sense that there is a disconnect between the public and CSOs. As Georgians continued to struggle with high unemployment, record inflation, and expensive health care, they were less focused on issues such as governance, elections, equality, and minority rights that are key CSO priorities. For example, a December 2021 National Democratic Institute poll found that a low percentage of Georgians identified the following issues as top concerns: the court system (2 percent), fair elections (1 percent), and freedom of speech (1 percent). No respondents mentioned media independence or minority rights as important issues of concern. Caucasus Barometer 2021, a respected annual opinion survey conducted by CRRRC, revealed that 52 percent of Georgians are hardly interested or not at all interested in Georgian politics.

According to a November 2021 study titled "Hate Crime, Hate Speech, and Discrimination in Georgia," funded by the Council of Europe, while 44 percent of Georgians know that they could address a CSO if they were discriminated against or the victim of hate crime or hate speech, only 12 percent would do so.

Media organizations and journalists showed continued interest in collaborating with CSOs in 2021 to advance public health communication during the pandemic. Independent media extensively covered CSO commentaries on the elections, as well as Georgia's strained relations with the EU and US. At the same time, the government-controlled media provided a platform for the ruling party's smear campaigns on CSOs. The media and political opposition continued to show a limited understanding of the role CSOs play in Georgia's democracy.

The government's continued broadsides against CSOs, as well as the Russian government's disinformation campaigns against the west and their "CSO allies," continue to damage the public image and credibility of CSOs. The government attacks CSOs both directly and indirectly through government-controlled media and other channels. The business sector's perception of CSOs is improving, as demonstrated by the growing incidence of CSO collaboration with businesses, especially on COVID-19 response, education, and other non-political issue areas.

² The levels of trust in other institutions were: the executive (19 percent), judiciary (18 percent), legislature (16 percent), media (14 percent), and political parties (9 percent).

CSOs' social media presence continues to increase every year as more Georgians turn from TV to social media and the internet as their primary source of information. According to the 2021 CRRC survey, 21 percent of Georgians turn to social media and 18 percent to other sources on the internet for news updates, while 53 percent still consider TV their main information source. GYLA has 62,000 followers on Facebook, while Georgia's leading election watchdog, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, has 38,000 followers. By comparison, UNICEF Georgia has a similar social media following as GYLA on Facebook, Georgia's preferred social media platform, though it has a larger communications budget. The majority of CSOs are unable to afford dedicated communication staff and struggle to update their official communication channels.

Most Georgian CSOs provide substantial public information about their projects and funding sources, though many do not disclose their annual audits. Some CSOs have adopted a voluntary code of ethics spearheaded by the Civil Society Institute, a local advocacy group. Donor guidelines also serve to regulate the sector's accountability and operational integrity.

Disclaimer: *The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.*

U.S. Agency for International Development

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20523

Tel: (202) 712-0000

Fax: (202) 216-3524

www.usaid.gov