Democratic Civil Society in Autocracy - Survival, Adaptation, and Resilience

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Introduction - Global Pressure on Civil Society and the Existential Threat to Georgia's Public Sphere

The global civil society experienced considerable upheaval in the first quarter of 2025, largely due to the closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and substantial reductions in funding for democracy promotion initiatives.[2] This emerging landscape posed an existential threat, not merely to the survival of local beneficiaries of these resources but also to the operational capacity of well-established, authoritative organizations with global reach, such as Freedom House.[3]

Notably, the re-evaluation of democracy promotion priorities did not originate solely with state donors. As early as 2023, the Open Society Foundations, the world's largest private donor in the field, founded by George Soros, announced its own comprehensive reorganization and a redefinition of its priorities, resulting in significant alterations to its operations in numerous regions.[4]

The rising waves of autocratization and democratic backsliding have been characterized by systemic attacks on civil society organizations.[5] A prominent example of this trend is the widespread adoption of Russian-style "foreign agents" legislation[6] across Eurasia and, to some extent, in parts of East-Central Europe, including Georgia.[7]

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[2] Mbah, Ruth Endam, Caden Maddox Hardgrave, Drusilla Engonwei Mbah, Alyssa Nutt, and Jordan G. Russell. "The Impact of USAID Budget Cuts on Global Development Initiatives: A Review of Challenges, Responses, and Implications." Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal 12, no. 04 (2025).
[3] The Effects of the US Foreign Aid Freeze on Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/effects-us-foreign-aid-freeze-freedom-house
[4] George Soros foundation's retreat from Europe could 'turn off the lights' for human rights, The Guardian, 19 Aug 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/aug/19/george-soross-retreat-from-europe-could-turn-off-the-lights-for-human-rights
[5] Chaudhry, Suparna. "The assault on civil society: Explaining state crackdown on NGOs." International Organization 76, no. 3 (2022): 549-590
[6] Waller, Julian G. "Mimicking the mad printer: Legislating illiberalism in post-soviet Eurasia." Problems of post-communism 70, no. 3 (2023): 225-240.
[7] Gegenava, Dimitry, Tsisia Okropiridze, Ketevan Bakhtadze, and Sandro-Giorgi Sarukhanishvili. "The "Russian Law" in Georgia: Human Rights, Legal Certainty, and the Passions of the Georgian Lawmakers." Review of European and Comparative Law (2025).

These “foreign agents” laws are deliberately designed to dismantle the model of civil society that emerged in the post–Cold War era within the framework of global democracy promotion programs.[8] These civil society organizations (CSOs) typically operate as legal entities, possess formal governing bodies and structures, and adhere to standard financial accountability procedures, including compliance with tax, anti-corruption, anti–money laundering, and other legal frameworks.

Such formal institutionalization was acceptable to both the organizations themselves and to states and international donors, whether governmental or private. Institutionalization and bureaucratization enhanced CSOs' internal autonomy and operational efficiency, while simultaneously ensuring financial transparency and accountability (these terms must be understood in a rational, rule-of-law-based sense, rather than in the distorted, authoritarian, or malicious ways that are often employed in autocratic contexts) to both states and donors.[9]

However, this model rested on several contextual assumptions that began to shift significantly in the 2010s. These assumptions included: a socio-political environment undergoing democratization; at least partially institutionalized electoral democracy; a state's recognition of the value of institutionalized civil society; provision of minimum legal conditions for its operation; and, in the best-case scenarios, constructive cooperation with it.

Beginning in the 2010s, the waves of autocratization and democratic backsliding intensified to such an extent that these foundational assumptions started to collapse. Under conditions of autocratization or democratic recession, the presence of an institutionalized civil society becomes intolerable to new powerful leaders, as its very existence increases the risks of democratization.

Therefore, for illiberal regimes undergoing autocratization, dismantling the institutionalized infrastructure of civil society becomes a central objective. These regimes believe that weakening organized civil society will reduce the effectiveness and internal autonomy of civic groups and networks.

Ironically, these regimes often justify dissolving organized civil society through “foreign agent” laws by citing financial transparency and accountability—goals previously best achieved through institutionalization and bureaucratization.

[8] Beichelt, Timm, and Wolfgang Merkel. "Democracy promotion and civil society: Regime types, transitions modes and effects." In Civil Society and Democracy Promotion, pp. 42-64. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014.
[9] Nasibov, Murad. "Civil Society within Authoritarian Regimes: A Case for Positive Theorising." PhD diss., Justus-Liebig University of Giessen, 2024.

In addition to cutting off financial resources, imposing arbitrary and unreasonable reporting requirements, and stigmatizing organizations as “foreign agents” (often accompanied by draconian criminal penalties),[10] these regimes also create formal and informal barriers to registering new organizations. The ultimate aim is to control the very formation of new civic organizations at a level of inception.

After 2024, in just a one-year period, the Ivanishvili regime in Georgia has enacted legislation that effectively makes the existence of an autonomous, institutional civil society network impossible. Moreover, the “Foreign Agents Registration Act” enables surveillance and repression not only of civil society organizations but also of private individuals pursuing civic goals without formal organizational structure and having financial resources abroad.

While the “Foreign Agents Registration Act” serves as a tool to control and repress civil society actors, the “Law on Grants” directly targets foreign donors, empowering the Georgian government to approve or block them. This law requires foreign donor governments and organizations to obtain explicit authorization from the Georgian government before issuing fundings.[11] The first practical application of this law, involving the British Embassy, has clearly revealed[12] the true intent: to drive out the few remaining foreign state donors.

Notably, the British government's response to this restrictive legislation sharply diverges from typical global donor behavior in similar situations. Research indicates that in response to repressive legal frameworks, donors usually reduce or terminate funding altogether, a pattern that, in turn, emboldens authoritarian regimes to enact such legislation.[13]

The repressive policy of the Georgian Dream regime now poses an existential threat not only to institutional, autonomous civil society but also to civic groups and individuals operating outside formal organizational structures and maintaining independence from regime control.

[10] Tertytchnaya, Katerina, and Madeleine Tiratsoo. "Legal Repression in Russia." In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. 2024.
[11] Law of Georgia on Amending the Law of Georgia on Grants, 496-IIმს-XIმპ, 16/04/2025.
[12] British Embassy: Due to the misunderstanding, we are compelled to cancel the planned grant proposals, Jam-news, 11.06.2025, https://jam-news.net/ge/britanetis-saelcho-grantebze/
[13] Right, Lucy, Jeremy Springman, and Erik Wibbels. Pushing Back or Backing down? Examining Donor Response to Restrictive NGO Legislation. Working paper. https://jrspringman. GitHub. io/files/The_Effect_of_NGO_Laws_on_Bilateral_ Aid_Flows. pdf, 2024.

In the next section, we will explore strategies for civil society's survival and resilience under authoritarian regimes, followed by a concluding section evaluating the relevance and potential effectiveness of these strategies in the current Georgian context.

For the purpose of this article, our analysis will focus on the strategies utilized by civil society actors operating within the country. We will, therefore, not examine civil society in exile or emigration as a distinct strategy for either individual or organizational survival and resilience.[14] The mobilization efforts of diasporas, as well as exiled activists and organizations, directed against the political regimes of their countries of origin inherently involve an examination of the contextual factors present in their host states. Given the multifaceted nature of this subject, it necessarily extends beyond the scope of the current discussion.

Strategies for Civil Society's Survival and Resilience under Authoritarian Regimes

Modern authoritarian regimes do not always rely on legalistic repression, as seen in the Georgian case, to suppress civil society. Legal repression is rarely the sole means of control, however, and is often complemented by other authoritarian tactics, such as co-optation and ideological dominance.

The establishment of a state grant agency by the Ivanishvili regime exemplifies its broader policy of strengthening co-optation and ideological control tools.[15]

In this manner, the regime rapidly creates conditions that push organized civil society toward the most degrading path to individual survival: subordination to regime control and full co-optation. Research demonstrates that authoritarian regimes derive significant benefits from co-opted civil society organizations[16] and these groups not only fail to threaten regime stability but often reinforce it.[17]

[14] Myers, Nathaniel. "The Strategic Potential of Democratic Exiles." (2025).
[15] Tamar Zodelava has been appointed as the Chairperson of the Grant Management Agency, Netgazeti, 23.04.2025, https://netgazeti.ge/news/771904/
[16] Pellerin, Camille Louise. "Unpacking 'public silence': Civil society activism under authoritarian rule in Ethiopia." Public Administration and Development 43, no. 5 (2023): 331-342.
[17] Toepler, Stefan, Annette Zimmer, Christian Fröhlich, and Katharina Obuch. "The changing space for NGOs: Civil society in authoritarian and hybrid regimes." VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations 31 (2020): 649-662.

Given this, it is clear why Ivanishvili's regime prioritizes the full co-optation of civil society as a means to consolidate authoritarian rule. In contrast, repressive legislation offers no room for compromise; it aims at organizational liquidation and legal repression.

The current repressive legal framework in Georgia leaves virtually no space for adaptation. Adaptive behavior differs from full co-optation, though it may include elements of partial co-optation.[18]

These adaptation strategies typically involve self-censorship, forms of self-limitation, and, most notably, avoidance of direct confrontation with the regime. Instead of adopting adversarial tactics and public advocacy, adaptively operating organizations may agree, implicitly or explicitly, to play by the regime's rules, hoping to advance parts of their agenda, even if only indirectly.

In such contexts, CSOs engage in constant negotiation and maneuvering, seeking "loopholes" in repressive legislation and the regime's tacit or explicit approval to exploit those gaps for survival.

These techniques of adaptation are especially visible in contexts of rapid autocratization when organizations are suddenly faced with existential threats. A commonly cited example is Hong Kong, where CSOs were forced to quickly adapt to a swiftly tightening authoritarian environment. Their experience demonstrated important survival, resilience, and resistance strategies.

However, the Hong Kong case also highlights the contextual specificity of Chinese Communist Party's brand of authoritarianism. Namely, its choice not to pursue full legal repression of civil society, but instead to tolerate limited co-optation and adaptation, and to allow cooperation in non-sensitive policy areas such as service provision.[19]

[18] Lee, Francis LF. "Civil society organizations under rapid democratic backsliding: The case of Hong Kong." Journal of Civil Society (2025): 1-18.

[19] Noakes, Stephen, and Jessica C. Teets. "Learning under authoritarianism: Strategic adaptations within international foundations and NGOs in China." VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations 31, no. 5 (2020): 1093-1113.

This stands in contrast to the Russian model[20] of complete subjugation through legalistic repression and ideological control, a model also observed in Hungary[21] and now replicated by Ivanishvili's regime in Georgia. The rigidity of this approach leaves no room for adaptation or partial co-optation.

In situations where the regime does not permit even limited space for adaptive strategies, attempting adaptation becomes risky. It increases the likelihood of organizations slipping into full co-optation and becoming instruments of regime control. Nevertheless, some organizations are determined to preserve their formal institutional structure at any cost, operating under the belief that in the medium or long term, it may be possible to gradually reclaim autonomy from within a co-opted position.

Driven by this hope, some organizations choose to remain formally registered, agree to be labeled as "foreign agents," or even accept state funding. In such cases, content-based censorship tends to follow naturally. Organizations shift their priorities: partially or fully co-opted groups often abandon advocacy on politically sensitive topics or public policies that challenge the regime.

In these circumstances, authoritarian regimes tend to prefer CSOs that deliver services.[22] However, even some services, such as providing legal aid to dissidents or protest participants, fall within the regime's "red lines" and are subject to restrictions.

Alongside shifts in thematic priorities, viewpoint-based self-censorship, and the choice of non-confrontational communication methods, a key element of adaptation strategies includes resolving the issue of institutional form. Under a repressive legal framework like Georgia's, maintaining legal entity status, as well as bureaucratization and professionalization, almost inevitably implies falling under the regime's effective control.

Within conditions of full co-optation, a limited path remains for exerting indirect influence on the regime. Specifically, co-opted bureaucratic organizations may leverage their expert and professional knowledge, attempting to position themselves as providers of such knowledge to the regime. Authoritarian regimes

[20] Henderson, Sarah L., Scott N. Romaniuk, and Aliaksandr Novikau. "Repressive security and the unmaking of civil society in contemporary Russia." In Counter-terrorism and civil society, pp. 143-159. Manchester University Press, 2021.
[21] Gerő, Márton, Dorottya Szikra, Anna Fejős, and Szabina Kerényi. "From exclusion to co-optation: Political opportunity structures and civil society responses in de-democratizing Hungary." Politics and Governance 11, no. 1 (2023): 16-27.
[22] Teets, Jessica C. Civil society under authoritarianism: The China model. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

require this expertise and often become their consumers. In such cases, a narrow window for exerting limited indirect influence remains open.

Of course, this does not mean that co-opted “NGO experts” will subvert or reform the regime from within. However, they may be able to offer the regime better policies for achieving its goals, thereby helping society avoid the worst outcomes. The result of such limited positive influence is that the regime takes credit for any success and strengthens its own legitimacy.

As an alternative to full co-optation, there are the paths of deinstitutionalization[23] or masking organizational identity.[24] Deinstitutionalization entails transforming civil society groups into informal networks based on personal and group connections, lacking any legal form, and capable of partially or fully bypassing the legal framework of authoritarian control.[25]

Masking identity means transforming into an organization with other stated purposes (religious, cultural, educational) and conducting public political activities under that organizational cover.

Identity masking is less viable under conditions of strong legalistic repression. Putin’s Russia serves as a clear example, where, beyond the “foreign agents'” legal framework, repressive legislation on extremism and religious organizations also exists. Based on such laws, it becomes possible to liquidate all undesirable religious, cultural, or educational institutions and individually repress their members.

Another clear example of the fragility of the identity masking strategy is Erdogan’s Turkey’s, a less repressive regime than Putin’s Russia, treatment towards Fethullah Gülen’s network that pursued political goals under the guise of educational institutions.[26]

As a form of adaptive behavior, organizational identity masking can only function with the regime’s tacit consent, within the gray zones created by its choice not to enforce repression fully.

In turn, under mass legal repression, neither deinstitutionalization nor transformation into informal networks offers guaranteed protection against repression and control. As previously noted, the “foreign

[23] Kamilsoy, Najmin. "Unintended transformation? Organizational responses to regulative crackdown on civil society in Azerbaijan." Southeast European and Black Sea Studies 25, no. 2 (2025): 229-248.
[24] Honari A. From 'the effect of repression' toward 'the response to repression'. Curr Sociol. 2018 Oct;66(6):950-973.
[25] Cavatorta, Francesco, ed. Civil society activism under authoritarian rule. New York: Routledge, 2012.
[26] Pandya, Sophia, Brenda Oliden, and Ibrahim Aytac Anli. "Shunned and purged: Turkey’s crackdown on the Hizmet (Gülen) Movement." Human rights in Turkey: Assaults on human dignity (2021): 199-225.

agents" law applies broadly to individuals as well. Persecution and harassment of individuals without foreign funding can still be carried out under "extremism" laws or other legal pretexts.

Operating as an informal network increases operational costs, reduces efficiency and autonomy, and heightens individual risks for those involved. In such conditions, the human capital of civil society also changes - individuals accustomed to professionalized, bureaucratic environments ("'white-collar" personnel) are generally unable to perform effectively in informal and high-risk settings.

That is why, under rapid autocratization, where the regime does not allow even partial co-optation or adaptation, professionalized, institutionalized, and bureaucratic civil society organizations, such as the current civil society network in Georgia, have no access to either deinstitutionalization or identity masking as viable options.

As already mentioned above, under the current dynamics, Ivanishvili's regime has left an institutionalized civil society with two choices: full co-optation and control, or liquidation. Many existing "white-collar" professionals cannot choose deinstitutionalization, as they objectively lack the skills necessary for operating in informal settings.

However, transforming into informal networks does not necessarily mean returning to the classic underground operations of the past. Modern technologies, especially digital technologies, offer broad possibilities in this regard. At the same time, technology is a tool that can be used by everyone, including authoritarian regimes.

Autocracies are quick to adapt to technology and actively use it for repression and control.[27] Digital authoritarianism is not just useful for controlling the information space, it enables authoritarian regimes to carry out a wide range of tasks related to repression and control, including transnational repression that reaches beyond their borders.

Thus, the use of digital technologies by organizations that transform into informal networks presents both opportunities and challenges. Authoritarian regimes strive to control digital spaces to prevent any independent mobilization. On the other hand, the digital sphere also offers enhanced possibilities for

[27] Feldstein, Steven. The rise of digital repression: How technology is reshaping power, politics, and resistance. Oxford University Press, 2021.

evading authoritarian control and building the communication and financial infrastructure necessary for informal networks to operate.[28]

The situation is more complex in the digital information space. While social media platforms are accessible to informal civic networks, their public nature makes them visible targets for the regime. This contrasts sharply with tightly disciplined communication groups on platforms like Signal, or fragmented funding channels relying on anonymous crypto wallets, the structure of which is known only to a narrowly defined, highly disciplined group.

The more intense the repression, the more crucial it becomes to build covert, tightly disciplined informal structures. By their nature, such groups often evolve into semi-militarized, hierarchical organizations.[29] Otherwise, they risk remaining scattered, undisciplined, and poorly coordinated networks.

Notably, under conditions of mass repression, the existence of such networks often becomes the only viable form of direct resistance to the authoritarian regime, aiming for regime change or transformation.

The Future of Civil Society in Georgia

In the ongoing process of stabilization, Ivanishvili's authoritarian regime views the institutionalized, professional civil society, developed through Western democracy-promotion programs, as a serious threat to its stability and is actively repressing it. As noted, the regime leaves institutionalized civil society with only two choices: full co-optation or liquidation. As expected, the co-optation process has already begun among service-provider organizations, some of which registered as "foreign agents" as early as 2024.

Resistance to the regime primarily coming from general-profile organizations focused on policy development and advocacy. If the regime achieves stability, it is anticipated that many of these organizations will refuse co-optation and subsequently face liquidation.

[28] Ahmed, Zahid Shahab, Shahram Akbarzadeh, and Ihsan Yilmaz, eds. Digital Technologies and Activism in Authoritarian Contexts and Beyond. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025.
[29] Bartusevičius, Henrikas, Florian Van Leeuwen, and Michael Bang Petersen. "Political repression motivates anti-government violence." Royal Society open science 10, no. 6 (2023): 221227.

Ivanishvili’s regime will likely try to replace these organizations with GONGOs, funded by the new state grant agency. However, over time, the regime will likely face a shortage of expertise that existing GONGOs won't be able to supply. In that scenario, the regime will have two options: either co-opt remaining professionals from liquidated civil society organizations into GONGOs, or soften the repressive legislation, create operational gray zones, and enable an environment for adaptation. The latter path might also be chosen in response to **e**xternal and internal pressure.

If Ivanishvili's regime succeeds in stabilization, destroys the existing institutionalized civil society, and replaces it with fully co-opted structures, resistance will shift into informal networks. However, the logic and dynamics of these informal networks are highly unpredictable, making even speculative predictions impossible.

Given the current trajectory of Ivanishvili's regime, the internal prospects for the survival of institutionalized civil society (even with partial autonomy) are limited. However, if external pressure increases, it's possible the regime may open limited spaces for partial adaptation. For example, it might initially lift the restrictions imposed by the "foreign agents" and "grants" laws, at least for organizations funded by the European Union and its member states.

Even this kind of compromise is likely only under sufficiently strong external pressure, which the regime currently does not face. But in the coming weeks, the European Union must decide whether to provide a lifeline to Georgia’s institutionalized democratic civil society or observe from a distance as Ivanishvili carries out its liquidation and co-optation, following the same passive pattern most donors adopt in such situations, effectively handing another easy victory to an authoritarian regime. External actors who support democratization in Georgia must reflect and, together with the remaining Georgian organizations, determine how to compel the regime not to completely destroy institutionalized civil society, at the very least by creating conditions for adaptation.

The European Union must consider the harsh experience of Russian[30] and Belarusian[31] civil society organizations and activists in exile and should not assume that supporting Georgian civil society in exile is the only way to help in this catastrophic situation.

Of course, if Ivanishvili's regime stabilizes, the liquidation of civil society will inevitably trigger a wave of emigration. However, even in that case, priority should be given to preserving the remaining formal and informal networks inside the country. In such cases, it would be important to use diaspora organizations as intermediaries to bypass the regime's draconian restrictions and provide financial and other types of support to the surviving local formal and informal civil society networks.

[30] Bouchet, Nicolas. "Democratic Russian Civil Society Outside Russia." A Window of Opportunity for Support: Report. URL: https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/Bouchet (2024).
[31] Navumau, Vasil, Olga Matveieva, and Tetiana Gorokhova. "Resistance across borders: Belarusian civic activism in exile under (trans-) national repression." Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal 16, no. 2 (2024): 27-42.