

Shooting the Messenger: Governments vs. Georgia's NGO Sector

For the second year running, Georgia's ruling party, the Georgian Dream, is plunging the country into a deep political crisis over the same piece of legislation that aims to regulate – and, in effect, curb – foreign-funded civil society groups and media. The wave of pressure, accompanied by strident anti-US and anti-Western rhetoric, cozying up to Moscow, defamation campaign, and, lately, violence, has been described by several commentators as “unprecedented.”

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Yet, a similar campaign was launched against NGOs in Georgia in 2001-2002 by none other than Eduard Shevardnadze and his Citizens Union of

Georgia. The similarity of that campaign with the current one is sometimes uncanny. Discerning the motivation and drivers behind these two attempts at curbing foreign-funded civil society groups may help determine their true objectives.

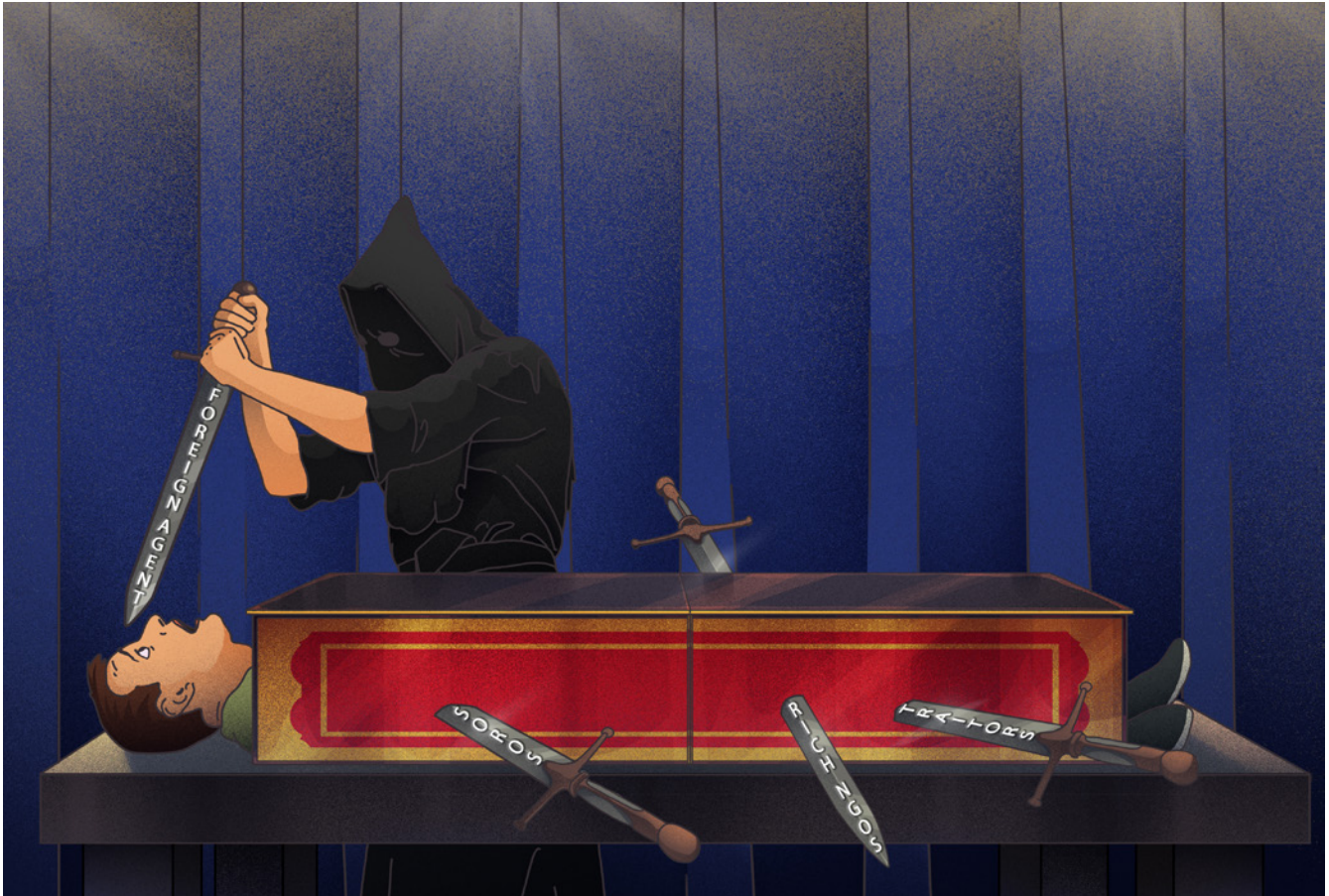
Too Much to Bear

It is 2001. Many international journalists and commentators refer to Georgia as a failed state. Yet, for many Georgians, there has been clear progress. Veteran Soviet politician Eduard Shevardnadze has managed to navigate the political field of warlords and criminals and stabilize the country's politics after the mayhem that followed the violent overthrow of the newly independent Georgia's first government in 1991. Still, the war in Abkhazia has the country truncated; over 200 thousand displaced persons have led to a precarious existence in overcrowded state properties and hotels since 1996.



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The Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG) is Shevardnadze's political base. A "big tent" party mostly merges with the state administrative apparatus. It unites all sorts – from hardliner traditionalists with pro-Russian sentiments who are in charge of the police, security, and army to progressive youngsters, many with US education. This body is unwieldy but essentially held together by Shevardnadze's charisma and wily maneuvers. There is no serious opposition that can contest CUG leadership. The Revival Union, a party of the regional strongman Aslan Abashidze, is in an uneasy coexistence with the CUG but does not challenge its leadership. Most of the political contestation goes on within the CUG between the conservative security service leadership and the so-called "young reformers" – Speaker Zurab Zhvania and Justice Minister Mikheil Saakashvili being their most notable representatives. Shevardnadze is already 73, and the question of succession weighs on the country. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2003, and the feeling is that the infighting may cost the CUG its grip on power.

Despite political and petty corruption and overall state dysfunction (kidnappings for ransom are common, there is almost no electricity in winter), Shevardnadze has kept Georgia in a pro-Western camp. Political contests within the CUG leave room for some independent media – the Rustavi 2 TV channel is the most notable example. Since 1996, the country has had a very liberal law on the registration of civil associations, which has since mushroomed. There were over [3,500 registered by 2001](#), even though only three to five hundred are considered "active" and mostly in the capital. Many of those are funded by Western, mostly US grants and act as crucial human rights watchdogs – the *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)* is a major election observer, the *Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA)* defends citizens against state malpractice and the *Liberty Institute* is notable in defense of religious and ethnic minorities. Liberal-minded media and newspapers help these groups publicize their findings. The "young reformers" in the Parliament are their allies and a vehicle to organize commit-

tee hearings where their reports are reviewed on a formal basis, much to the irritation of, for example, the corrupt police boss, Kakha Targamadze, who likes to call himself a “Man of Steel.”

Conservative CUG activists, aided undoubtedly by the police and security quarters, alongside ultra-nationalist firebrand MP Guram Sharadze, launched repeated attacks on NGOs, calling them “grant-eaters,” “raised on Western money,” and acting contrary to the traditions and interests of Georgia. NGO advocacy for ethnic and religious minorities has been causing particular ire.

In 2001, the international context was shifting rapidly. Following the 9/11 attacks on the US, the anti-terrorist agenda became central, and Vladimir Putin’s Russia, for once, is portraying itself as the US ally in this fight. Putin succeeds in subsuming his bloody persecution of Chechens under the worldwide anti-terrorism struggle. Georgia’s Pankisi gorge, where many Chechens from across the Caucasus range are fleeing, became for Russia a new lever of pressure on Georgia, which it accuses of harboring terrorists. President Shevardnadze’s traditional weekly regularly [refers](#) to Pankisi, trying to assuage the Russian pressure. That is not working well: influential voices in Russia call for bombing Pankisi, and [there are widespread fears](#) that the US, sidetracked by anti-terrorist cooperation with Russia, would let it “take care” of Georgia. Moscow is using every pretext to get out of the 1999 Istanbul Agreement, where it pledged to withdraw two of its military bases from Georgia.

In this context of perceived Russian ascendancy, Georgia’s pro-Russian security services feel emboldened, and the situation starts to deteriorate rapidly. When a well-known investigative journalist and news anchor from Rustavi2 channel was [found murdered](#) in his flat in July 2001, it sent a shockwave of fear in a wider civil society and Georgia’s pro-Western circles. The [press review](#) from those days shows that the opposition points

the finger at the Georgian special services working at the behest of their Russian colleagues. Some in CUG’s young reformer wing also agreed.

In this context, non-governmental organizations are becoming targets more and more often. State-run television channels broadcast talk shows that portray the NGOs as “grant-eaters” acting at the behest of the US. Similar publications multiply in the press, which is widely considered to publish attack pieces solicited from security services.

In September 2001, Shevardnadze [stepped down as CUG chair](#), apparently trying to stay above the party infighting. On 24 September, during his regular press briefing, [Shevardnadze attacked NGOs](#) and media, saying they get grant aid meant for the country’s social development but instead use it to finance an “information war” against Shevardnadze and his government; he demands “transparency” of all of this aid and promises to discuss these matters with the US administration during his upcoming visit to the country.

Naturally, NGOs [reacted with suspicion](#) when, in October 2001, the Ministry of Finance initiated the draft Law on Charity, Grants, and Humanitarian Assistance. Even though the Ministry said it was to apply only to state grants and foreign grants to the state, the draft law foresaw a significant additional burden for NGOs in terms of grant registration and reporting as well as heavy penalties if these requirements were not met. A promptly assembled working group of experts manages to convince the Ministry that to reach their stated objectives – more transparency of the grants received by the state for taxation purposes – a simple regulation will suffice. NGO lawyers even draft that regulation together with the Ministry.

Also in October 2001, security services raided Rustavi2, triggering protest demonstrations and a political crisis that ended with the departure of the leaders of the two opposing camps: Speaker

Zurab Zhvania resigned on the condition that Kakha Targamadze, the Minister of the Interior, followed suit. That crisis has dominated the political scene and has temporarily diverted attention from NGOs. Once the new political configuration was established, the issue came back on the agenda from the top level.

In January 2002, President Eduard Shevardnadze personally asked the Ministry of Finance to draft the new Law on Humanitarian Assistance, which [was accomplished](#) in two days. The law contained the notion of “state control over the utilization of grants,” which was considered by NGOs as an attempt to have control over their projects and activities. As the law was to be brought to the Parliament on 24 April, Shevardnadze [said](#) international terrorists might support NGOs. The Security Council started examining additional regulations aiming to replicate some of the restrictive laws adopted by the US post-9/11. The [violent attack](#) on the Liberty Institute in July 2002 was the demonstration of the highest level of hostility towards civil society organizations. Still, through building coalitions with Western donors and advocacy, as well as seeking political champions within the Parliament and the administration, the NGO coalition has managed to [thwart](#) most of the hostile initiatives.

The 2003 elections and the subsequent regime change have led to a substantial relaxation of pressure from the authorities - at least for a while. But that is another story.

Some Things Never Change ...

Georgia’s civil society organizations have emerged as a powerful and professional expert and watchdog community since the mid-1990s. Even though there is a certain truth in saying that many have had “elitist” origins and were de-linked from the grassroots, this does not paint a full picture. In-

deed, several have originated from grassroots greens movements while watchdog organizations, like the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA), were working closely with clients whose rights they were defending. It is also true that most of these institutional groups have worked with foreign funding, mainly from the West and mainly from the US. This is not for want of trying: Georgia’s successive governments have refused to grant tax exemptions for charity contributions to NGOs, and given the poor state of Georgia’s economy, funding uniquely through citizen support was, and remains, unrealistic.

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As entities that are able to retain professional staff and are financially and politically independent from the government and the successive dominant ruling parties, NGOs have been an obstacle whenever authoritarian tendencies emerge. The example of the 2001-2002 debacle provides some important insights into the crisis that is currently playing out in Georgia.

First, the ruling party, facing uncertain results in upcoming elections, tries to subdue civil society. The CUG was approaching the 2003 elections after its reputation was badly damaged following the flawed 1999 vote. Splits within the party were destabilizing. Similarly, even though leading the polls, the Georgian Dream felt it would not retain absolute control over the legislature in the 2024 elections, not under the new and fully proportional voting system. Accusations of [undue interference](#) of election watchdogs in the past elections were repeatedly [brought forward](#) as one of the reasons for keeping them at arm’s length from the elections, and so was their “political role.”

Second, Russia's perceived ascendancy is a tempting window of opportunity for conservative elements to get rid of the "agents of US influence." The second Chechen war and Russia's newly found partnership with the US in anti-terrorism formed the backdrop of the CUG attack on NGOs. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and particularly the failure of Kyiv's summer offensive, shaped the background of the second introduction of the "foreign agents' law" in Georgia.

Third, given the overwhelming support of Georgian citizens to the Euro-Atlantic integration and the perception of Russia as a threat, local conservative actors like to dress the anti-NGO legislation as a copy of the US laws. The 2002 legislation was partially portrayed to echo the US anti-terrorism package. The 2024 laws were said to mimic the US Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) even though glaring differences made that comparison [patently untrue](#).

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Fourth, NGOs are mostly discredited as "rich," "unpatriotic," and acting for "foreign interests." The key elements of the official propaganda channels in 2002 and 2024 were strikingly similar. The 2002 keyword was "grant-eaters," which was repeated in 2024 but substituted for more punchy ["rich NGOs"](#). Pointing to the "unpatriotic" nature of civil society leaders was the key argument for the firebrand nationalists in 2002. It became the mainstream discourse of the ruling majority in 2024, especially its radicalized nativist offshoot – the People's Power MP group. This discourse was related to supporting minority ethnicities and religions in 2002 but evolved to mostly target NGO support to the queer

community in 2024 as witnessed by the Council of Europe [report](#).

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And finally, when CSOs are attacked, both defamation and physical violence are used to intimidate them. The attack on the Liberty Institute and regular 'vigils' of Guram Sharadze's supporters at NGO offices were hallmarks of 2002. In 2024, orchestrated [intimidation](#) of political opponents and civic leaders is still continuing as this article is being written.

... While Some Things Get Worse

While some systemic similarities are striking, there are also significant differences that point to a general backsliding.

Most notably, in 2002, the Georgian leadership remained on the pro-Western trajectory even though trying to squeeze NGOs. President Shevardnadze and a significant portion of the ruling party functionaries were invested in furthering their partnership with Western allies. By contrast, in 2021-2024, the Georgian Dream descended into full-on paranoia about the West, and its full extent was most eloquently embodied in a [statement](#) by its founder and leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Also, in 2002, NGOs succeeded in modifying or blocking successive damaging legislative initiatives by engaging with the government. Conversely, in 2024, the bridges of cooperation are burned. In 2002, NGOs were using networking, legal, and institutional channels to engage institutions: building advocacy coalitions, organizing parliamentary hearings, and working with the executive leadership and public administration in working groups. This was possible because, on the one hand, civic leaders had allies and champions with-

in the Parliament and, on the other, they could leverage expertise and political support from their Western donors and partners in a classical “boomerang pattern” described by Keck and Sikkink in 1998. By 2024, the Georgian Dream captured the state institutions to a comprehensive extent, making such engagement impossible.

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Finally, the erosion of the democratic system and institutions in modern Georgia is underpinned by the wanton dissipation of Western leverage, which made the 2002 compromises possible. Indeed, the lesson that Mr. Ivanishvili seems to have learned from 2002 is that compromising leads to the loss of the grip on power – indeed, the CUG was routed in the 2003 Rose Revolution and disappeared as a party. Instead of learning the lesson that attempts to cling to power by hardening the regime leads to catastrophic consequences, Georgia’s current po-

litical leadership seems to have concluded that its predecessors were just too weak to exercise strong enough control. Mr. Ivanishvili’s personal wealth insulates its political base from the economic effects of confrontation with the West significantly better – the CUG’s threadbare administration was highly dependent on the lifeline from the international financial institutions.

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But what the Georgian Dream disguises as its commitment to “[sovereignty](#)” against “liberalism” is, in fact, a thinly veiled attempt to consolidate its grip on power and effectively remove the only remaining independent check – civil society groups and the media. Georgians protesting in their thousands are not having that. And neither should Georgia’s partners. ■