

A Shrinking Space for Participation? Measuring the Participation of Civil Society Organisations in Abkhazia

GAELE LE PAVIC^{1, 2, *}  – SAID GEZERDAVA³ 

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ABSTRACT: In the literature, civil society organisations (CSOs) are often considered to be a crucial bridge between the state and citizens, ensuring that diverse voices are heard while the government is held accountable. However, little is known about CSO participation in contexts of prolonged contested statehood, as exemplified by the case of Abkhazia. Research has primarily focused on internal and external (geo)political dynamics related to Abkhazia, often overlooking the extent to which Abkhazian Civil Society Organisations (ACSOs) engage in decision-making and contribute to governance through activist or service-provision work. Our article addresses this gap by assessing ACSO participation using the Council of Europe Index on Civil Society Participation, which categorises engagement on a scale from low to high across four levels: information, consultation, dialogue, and partnership. We surveyed 32 ACSO representatives, enabling us to examine the current-day agency, impact, and influence of ACSOs. Combined with interviews and archival research, this approach provides a time-sensitive perspective on the evolution of CSO participation in Abkhazia, while also accounting for sectoral differentiation. Our study contributes to the body of literature on civil society participation in governance structures, highlighting the factors, extent, and evolution of this participation. The findings show that

1 Department of Department of Political Sciences – Ghent Institute for International and European Studies (GIES) Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

2 United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies, Bruges, Belgium

3 Independent researcher

* Corresponding author: gaelle.lepavic@ugent.be

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Abkhazian CSOs do not engage equally in participation, with most involvement confined to the ‘information’ stage, implying limited cooperation with authorities amid a shrinking space for participation.

KEYWORDS: Abkhazia, civil society organisations, participation, statehood contestation, Council of Europe

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1. Introduction

We have a political tradition that allows, for example, open expression of opinions on various matters. Our government can't be detached — in such a small society, it simply can't reside somewhere on Olympus, unreachable by the people. There was an attempt to build a wall between society and government institutions — and nothing good came of that for our leadership. Astamur Tania, an Abkhaz⁴ political analyst, in an interview with Inal Khashig, 24 April 2025

The above quote, drawn from the Abkhazian media programme *Chegemskaya Pravda*,⁵ highlights the importance of the connection between political power and citizens. In his well-known ladder of citizen participation, Arnstein (1969: 216) posited that while the principle of citizen participation is generally accepted, it becomes a contentious point when participation entails the redistribution of power. In addition, participation encompasses a vast array of possibilities with very different implications for both citizen participants and the structures of power in which this participation unfolds. Arnstein distinguished eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation. The first two at the bottom: *manipulation* and *therapy*, equate with *nonparticipation*. The next three, in the middle: *informing*, *consultation* and *placation*, relate to various *degrees of tokenism*. The last three, at the top, include *partnership*, *delegated power* and *citizen control*, reflecting *degrees of citizen power*.

While not explicitly mentioned by Arnstein, we argue that nowadays, civil society organisations are often key vehicles of participation, providing resources to citizens and acting as a counterpower to executive and judicial

4 We follow the distinction in Peinhopf (2022), whereby Abkhaz refers to ethnicity and Abkhazian to inhabitants, authorities and CSOs of Abkhazia.

5 *Chegemskaya Pravda* is a popular current media programme in Abkhazia, led by critical journalist Inal Khashig, who was labelled a “foreign agent” in 2025 by the Russian Ministry of Justice. *Chegemskaya Pravda* refers to a humorous, fictional newspaper which illustrates the absurdities and contradictions of Soviet life, as featured in the works of Fazil Iskander, a Soviet writer from Abkhazia.

power. Thus, we aim to explore the participation of Abkhazian civil society organisations in the governance of contemporary Abkhazia. We situate this participation within a longer historical trajectory, beginning in the early 1990s. We understand the term civil society organisation to encompass a broad array of groupings, from informal initiative groups to institutionalised organisations, with varying degrees of structure and engagement. While often conceptualised as the ‘third sector’, distinct from the state and the market (Salamon et al. 1999), this in-betweenness is insufficient to capture the complexity and polysemy of CSOs, which are shaped by and embedded in specific local, national, and transnational contexts.

When assessing civil society policy monitoring and advocacy, Fox (2016) distinguished four levels of activity: 1) local resource allocation and implementation; 2) subnational policy-making and implementation; 3) national policy-making; and 4) transnational policy-making. At each level, CSOs combine monitoring and advocacy, mutually informing one another with the authorities, in a circular relationship. This circularity echoes Batley and Rose’s (2011) model of cooperation between non-state service providers and governments, where iterative engagement reshapes service delivery and institutional arrangements over time in a similarly circular way. In a previous study, we applied this model to CSOs providing social services in Transnistria and Abkhazia, showing how local CSOs engage with local and national authorities along with international donors (Le Pavic et al. 2024).

In Abkhazia, the line between state and non-state actors is complicated by contested sovereignty. Abkhazia is recognised as an independent state by five other sovereign states: Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Syria. Other sovereign states consider Abkhazia part of Georgia, which continues to demand its reintegration (together with South Ossetia), arguing that Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) are ‘occupied by Russia’. Georgia and Abkhazia fought a war between 1992 and 1993 that led to Abkhazia’s separation from Georgia. While a ceasefire agreement signed in 1994 terminated the hostilities, the status issue and the issue of territorial delimitation were left unanswered, leading to the evolution of the ceasefire line into a contested object, framed as a *border* by Abkhaz, and as an *occupation line* in the official Georgian discourse, and an *Administrative Boundary Line* by international actors (Prelz Ultramonti and Le Pavic 2025). This contestation extends to terms and practices including ‘government’, ‘parliament’, ‘constitution’, and ‘passport.’

While Russia’s influence on Abkhazian socio-economic and political life is undeniable, we argue for recognising the agency of the Abkhazian population and society, including their role in shaping state- and nation-building processes (Gezerdava 2010; Ó’Beacháin 2016). We acknowledge the prominence of ethnicity in shaping belonging, with additional complexities interlinked with forced

population displacements, generational change, and variation among differently situated individuals (O’Loughlin et al. 2011; Peinhopf 2022). *Figure 1* below maps out some of the key contextual dynamics and topography. The Mingrelian population, a sub-ethnic group of Georgians that spans Georgian and Abkhazian-controlled territory, is an example of the complex social entanglement that characterises the object of our study (Broers 2012).



Figure 1. Map zooming on the territorial dynamics within and in the immediate surroundings of Abkhazia.

Source: concept by Gaëlle Le Pavic, cartography by Anne Le Fur.

Reflecting on the participation of CSOs in different contexts in countries that were once incorporated into the Soviet Union, CSOs were not absent during the time of the Soviet Union, in particular in its later years (take, for instance, the soldiers’ mothers’ committee formed during the Soviet war in Afghanistan). Yet a mushrooming of civil society organisations followed in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR (Nodia 2005; Aliyev 2015). This trend was fostered by international (Western) donors providing (financial) resources, often filling gaps left by the dismantlement of the Soviet structures that had not (yet) been replaced by those of the independent state (Atlani-Duault 2007). Even so, in a more recent study of Ukraine, Bila-Tiunova et al. (2019) found limited interaction between the

public administration and CSOs. This sheds light on the complex and non-linear entanglement between renewed state structures, market mechanisms, and citizens' participation, often channelled through CSOs.

In the South Caucasian context, too, there has been a rise in the number of civil society organisations over the past twenty years, with important contextual variations. Georgia's Rose Revolution (2003) initially fostered an increase in CSOs and an expansion of their room for action (Nodia 2005). Azerbaijani authorities have increased repression and shrunk space for critical CSOs (Aliyev 2015), a tendency that has grown stronger over the decade (Luciani 2023). Dynamics in Georgia, too, have shifted over time, with the 2024 wave of repressive measures affecting CSOs (Blichfeldt 2024). Looking at the social, institutional, and political context of Armenia following its independence from the Soviet Union, Babajanian (2005) points out that at the beginning of the 2000s, the World Bank-supported Armenia Social Investment Fund (ASIF) had limited local uptake, largely due to elite capture. Taking a critical look at EU Human Rights promotion in the region, more recent research shows how CSOs have appropriated EU mechanisms in ways that challenge the existing order in the Caucasus (Luciani 2022).

We build on this critical literature to analyse the participation of Abkhazian CSOs in today's Abkhazia. Previous research has emphasised the relative openness for CSO activities despite contested statehood, which tends to favour a higher degree of authoritarianism in other contexts (Kopeček et al. 2016; Popescu 2006). Popescu (2010: 11–13) outlines four phases in the development of Abkhazian civil society. Initially, ACSOs focused on mitigating the consequences of war through humanitarian aid and grassroots support. Secondly, from 1997–1998 onward, they became more involved in political dialogue, including with Georgian CSOs, supported by international organisations and donors. The 2003 power shift in Georgia altered this dynamic, with the Georgian government under Saakashvili's presidency becoming less receptive to dialogue while still allowing the development of CSOs in Georgian-controlled territory. Abkhazia, meanwhile, faced internal political upheaval following the contested 2004 presidential election between Raul Khajimba, backed by Russia, and opposition leader Sergei Bagapsh. The subsequent presidency of Sergei Bagapsh fostered a more CSO-friendly climate, with increased civil society engagement, exemplified by the 2007 election of activist Batal Kobakhia to parliament, where he chaired the Committee on Human Rights and Rule of Law. However, the society in Abkhazia remained deeply polarised, and ACSOs began engaging more actively in political issues, defending access to information, advocating for human rights and freedoms using judicial resources, while also promoting the Abkhaz language.

Following Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence in 2008, ACSOs increasingly focused on domestic political issues and democratisation, including elections, media freedom, and legal reform (Kopeček et al. 2016). Despite

these shifts, Abkhazia remains an ethnocracy: the presidency is reserved for ethnic Abkhaz, while ethnic Armenians, despite being a large minority, and Georgians, many of whom are disenfranchised, remain politically marginalised (Popescu 2006; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2013; Hammarberg and Grono 2017).

This article builds on and complements this body of work by offering an insider perspective and an in-depth analysis of the current ACSO participation, analysed through the lens of the Council of Europe's Index on Civil Participation in Political Decision-Making. Adopted in 2017, the Index outlines four levels of participation: information, consultation, dialogue, and partnership, each with defined criteria outlined in the findings section. The stages are defined as follows:

1. Information (lowest level): One-way provision of information from authorities to NGOs, acting as the vehicles for participation.
2. Consultation: Authorities seek opinions from NGOs on specific policies, while retaining the initiative. Methods include public hearings or written submissions.
3. Dialogue: Two-way, interactive communication built on mutual interests. This involves regular exchanges or joint policy recommendations.
4. Partnership (highest level): Shared responsibility and co-creation throughout the policy cycle, including agenda-setting and implementation.

We use this framework to assess how ACSOs participate in Abkhazia's governance and what conditions this participation: the location, years of existence type of activities, target beneficiaries, international partnerships, and support from foreign donors (including other countries as well as international organisations). Based on our previous research and experience, we hypothesise that long-established ACSOs based in the main city of Sukhum⁶ are likely to participate more than a CSO established within the last five years, in one of the six other districts of Abkhazia. We then test if ACSOs focus on children and youth; education and social support for vulnerable populations; advocacy concerning democracy and human rights; dialogue and peacebuilding; research; or ecology and rural development. Lastly, we will assess the correlation between ACSOs' participation and their partnerships with foreign countries and international organisations such as the United Nations.

Importantly, we acknowledge that the classification 'vulnerable' is debated in the social work literature, as it is often imposed by practitioners and poli-

⁶ Given our focus on Abkhazian Civil Society Organisations, throughout our article, we use toponyms as used by Abkhaz in English-language publications such as Sukhum, Gal, and Tkvarchal. We acknowledge the difference with Georgian toponyms in English-language publications: Sokhumi, Gali, and Tkvarcheli.

cymakers, contributing to curtailing the agency of those to whom the term is applied — people who rarely self-identify as such (Adams et al. 2017). In our case, this adjective defines a specific category of constituency identified by the ACSOs we surveyed. We highlight that not all women and members of ethnic minorities are by definition vulnerable, while children and people with disabilities may also be vulnerable; we single out these two categories due to the specificities of the support they receive from civil society. In addition, we highlight the intersectionality of vulnerabilities, for instance, in the case of disabled Georgian women (Crenshaw 2017). However, we acknowledge that ACSOs indicating that they support ‘people with Vulnerabilities’ overlap largely with those supporting children, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, and women. For the latter category, specific vulnerabilities are at play, for instance, in the case of female survivors of domestic violence (Giloyan 2021).

Several reasons informed our choice of the Council of Europe’s Index. First, its four types of participation allow us to move beyond a simple participation/exclusion binary, enabling a more nuanced and empirically accurate characterisation of ACSOs’ involvement in governance processes. Second, the broader membership of the Council of Europe — compared to that of the EU — helps to decentre the analysis, to some extent mitigating the EU-centric bias inherent in measurement tools developed within the EU framework. Thirdly, previous research has shown that Abkhazian CSOs maintained sustained engagement with governance structures for nearly two decades, especially from the late 2000s to 2015 (Gezerdava 2019). During this period, ACSOs contributed to the transformation process of the Abkhazian–Georgian conflict as experts and organisers, together with Georgian political and expert communities and international (primarily Western) specialists in democratisation and governance (Aqaba and Hintba 2011). This historical record provides a strong rationale for assessing the extent and forms of ACSO participation in contemporary Abkhazia’s governance structures. At the same time, given the progressive erosion of dialogue-based interaction between Abkhazian CSOs and the authorities — and the emergence of a more protest-oriented mode of engagement — the Index on Civil Participation in Political Decision-Making, with its graded levels of interaction based on the intensity of involvement (from minimal to high participation; CoE, 2009), offers a suitable analytical tool. It enables us to identify the degree of interaction occurring at each level and to determine which of these levels currently constitutes the effective ‘ceiling’ for Abkhazian CSOs.

To analyse the participation of civil society in Abkhazia’s contemporary governance, we draw on the theoretical framework developed by Marton et al. (2024). Their model traces partnership dynamics between state actors and non-state actors (NSAs) through a ‘4Vs’ framework of Voicing, Vowing, Vouching and Vetting — each shaped by third parties and the broader public, illustrat-

ing how state actors and NSAs form and sustain partnerships. In contrast, a parallel '4C' framework refers to Coercing/Creating, Capturing, Commanding, and Complying, identifying aspects of a proxyship-like relation between the actors concerned. Both the 4V and 4C interactions are relational, evolve, and may unfold simultaneously, sometimes in contradictory ways. In a previous study, we applied this model to examine the interactions between a fictional Abkhazian CSO and the Abkhazian authorities. We show that both sides actively engage in feedback and negotiation, influencing each other's agenda and priorities. The outcomes vary depending on shifting power balances rather than full partnership or proxyship dynamics (Le Pavić 2023).

The present article traces, first, the evolution of ACSOs since the early 1990s, and analyses their evolving role in public life. Specifically, we ask to what extent ACSOs participate in today's Abkhazia governance structures and what factors modulate this participation amid shifting domestic and geopolitical dynamics. As such, our study contributes to a body of literature on civil society participation in governance structures, which highlights the areas, mechanisms and outcomes of this participation (Bolleyer 2024; Keleher and Kosko 2019; Fox 2016; Belyaeva and Karastelev 2012; Patrushev et al. 2011; Saurugger 2007). We fill a gap in research on CSOs' participation in contexts of partial sovereignty. Additionally, our findings enrich and update previous policy research on CSOs' participation (see, for example, Rosenzweigova and Skoric 2016).

The remainder of this article presents our methodology, detailing the scale used to measure CSOs' participation. Next, in our findings section, we first map the ACSO landscape historically and then assess current participation patterns as a dependent variable, and their correlations with independent variables: localisation, duration of existence, number of staff and volunteers, type of activities, target audiences and international partnerships. We conclude with a discussion of how ACSO participation has evolved when assessed according to the Council of Europe scale over the last three decades, and identify areas for further research.

2. Methodology

The methodological design of the study features two stages: the first one involved an in-depth analysis of ACSO development dynamics over thirty years through archival search at the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes (CHP). This CSO has been active for more than 30 years. Since its early stages, this organisation has served as a resource and umbrella organisation for other ACSOs, and, as a result, it has accumulated substantial empirical material and knowledge concerning the state of civil society. Through actions supporting other ACSOs, such

as ‘defending the defenders’ (2015) and ongoing legal consultations for CSOs, the CHP is in contact with many ACSOs and has documented their evolving relationship with the Abkhazian authorities. Mapping CSOs’ operations based on their archives was facilitated by the role of CHP as an ‘umbrella’ organisation for ACSOs. This role gives CHP a comprehensive overview of the ACSOs. Additionally, desk research was conducted through keywords including ‘Abkhazia’ and the different denominations in the Russian language for the term ‘civil society’ (for more details on keywords and translation, Le Pavic et al. 2022).

In the second stage, we conducted a survey assessing the participation of Abkhazian civil society organisations, based on the Council of Europe’s concept of levels of participation, as explained above. Each level was operationalised as clusters of variables (C1 to C4), each comprising between five and seven criteria, totalling 24 criteria overall (C1.1 to C4.5). Each criterion corresponds to an indicator — formulated as a specific question — scoring on a scale from 0 to 3. This approach enabled us to quantify the civic participation potential of ACSOs (the dependent variable) along the four levels as a function of a range of independent variables corresponding to CSOs’ characteristics: localisation, duration of existence, number of staff and volunteers, type of activities, target audiences and international partnerships. Specifically, the methodology allowed for the calculation of cluster-level potential (for each of the four participation levels) and overall participation for all of the 32 surveyed organisations. The indicators and corresponding questions were developed with attention to the specific local context, and the second author coordinated and refined them through consultations with representatives of ACSOs, ensuring their relevance and applicability in Abkhazia.

The survey was distributed to a set of ACSOs listed by the local UNDP office, which keeps a relevant database. The main criterion for selection was a minimum operational history of five years. A total of 32 representatives from different ACSOs responded to the survey, covering nearly all districts of Abkhazia: Gagra, Gudauta, Sukhum, Ochamchira, Tkvarchal, and Gal (excluding Gulrypsh). Survey responses were analysed and visualised using the statistical capabilities of SPSS and R Studio, and Excel spreadsheets.⁷ While the second author, together with two volunteer assistants, conducted the survey, both authors have collected data over several years of academic engagement and activist involvement with ACSOs. We emphasise our own distinctive yet complementary situated gazes when conducting this research. Rather than treating positionality as either an instrumental credential for the external researcher or a *passage obligée* to disclose bias for the internal one (Gani and Khan 2024), we aim to move beyond such binaries. The article stems from a willingness to co-produce knowledge about a largely overlooked social reality, namely ACSOs,

7 We are grateful to Dr Jade Cemre Erciyes and Dr Dmytro Panchuk for their precious help with this.

challenging the narrative of their supposed absence under the rubric of ‘Russian occupation.’

We also acknowledge the restricted access to Abkhazia for Western researchers, which prevented the first author from conducting on-site fieldwork despite multiple attempts. Abkhazian authorities initially cited COVID-19 restrictions and later left entry requests unanswered. As a result, the first author conducted her Abkhazia-related doctoral fieldwork entirely online, reaching out to representatives of ACSOs involved in social service provision (Le Pavic 2025). One of these interlocutors, Said Gezerdava, responded to the invitation in June 2021, initiating a dialogue that has continued ever since (Smedes 2026). This co-authored article is part of that sustained exchange and a shared effort to convey the complexities of civil society in Abkhazia through the measuring scale of the Council of Euroin using a historically grounded lens. The co-authorship reflects the contribution of both scholars to this joint analysis, shaped by previous research and long-term engagement with the field.

For the first author, this work began in October 2020 with the start of a doctoral project on the impact of contested borders on the provision of social services (Le Pavic 2024c). The remote fieldwork in Abkhazia was made possible through the trust of five ACSO representatives and one Abkhaz staff member of an international organisation. A series of in-depth online interviews was conducted in 2021, averaging 1 hour and 45 minutes in length, with two interviews lasting over two hours. Several interviewees participated in follow-up interviews in 2022. All participants gave informed consent for the recording of the interviews. The researcher shared with the interviewees a dissemination brief summarising the findings of her first studies, which were conducted in both English and Russian (used by 2 and 4 participants, respectively). In 2023, a more focused case study on one Abkhaz CSO’s interaction with local authorities further deepened the analysis. This was accompanied by a sustained dialogue with Abkhaz scholars and activists, some of whom were invited to comment on an early draft of the article. In sum, despite the absence of on-site presence, enabling in-person meetings, the non-native researcher’s long-term, dialogical engagement contributed to building trust and fostering familiarity, arguably positioning her as a ‘trusted outsider’ (Bucierius 2013). This, prior research informs the findings section, specifically the historical evolution of ACSOs’ participation and the scope of their current activities. It contributes to the analytical discussion of the present article.

The second author, a representative of the Abkhazian civil society, has worked at the Abkhazian CSO CHP since 2007 and has been directly involved in its research projects, including studies on civil society. Before this research, the author was primarily engaged in theoretical and legal studies of civil society as a normative concept, as part of doctoral research at the Higher School

of Economics in Moscow (2016–2019). In the present study, the second author contributed by proposing a periodisation of the formation and development of civil society organisations in Abkhazia, based on empirical data and institutional change. This enriched the analysis with local contextual knowledge, allowing for a more accurate interpretation of the dynamics of civic participation and the interactions between CSOs and state structures. In addition, the second author proposed a methodology for analysing CSO civic participation based on the Council of Europe Index on Civil Society Participation.

3. Findings: Mapping the ACSO scene from the 1990s to the present

3. 1. Emergence of ACSOs focused on humanitarian and social support and involved in dialogue with Georgian CSOs

The beginning of the 1990s was marked by the emergence of formalised civil society institutions and the creation of more structured CSOs in the aftermath of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict (1992-1993). During this period, ties with international organisations and global/Western civil society, through International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), emerged and developed. These CSOs addressed pressing post-war needs in Abkhazia by providing medical, psychological, physical, and social support to various vulnerable groups namely: former combatants, and more broadly adults and children suffering from post-traumatic stress due to the war). The end of the military phase of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and its subsequent freezing significantly shaped the direction of civil society engagement during the initial phase. In addition to various forms of post-conflict recovery, a relatively small number of CSOs were engaged in peacebuilding efforts through dialogue with Georgian civil society.

Among the first ACSOs, from 1994 onwards, were the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes charity organisation (founded in 1994, Sukhum); the Foundation's Civic Initiative and Man of the Future (1994, Sukhum); the Association of Spinal Disabled Persons (AIS), now renamed the charitable foundation Association Inva-Sodiestvie (1996, Sukhum); the charitable organisation Centre for the Development of Civil Society (1997, Gagra); the Charitable Foundation Sukhum Youth House (1998, Sukhu);, the Gal District Women's Association (1998, Gal); the Association of Women of Abkhazia (1999, Sukhum); and the charity organisation Youth Initiative of Tkuarchal (1999, Tkuarchal). As reflected in their names, these organisations are involved in social service delivery, focusing mostly on youth, women and people with disabilities. Addi-

tionally, some are engaged in advocacy, policy input, and capacity building for representatives of other CSOs.

A spill-over effect played out, with CSOs such as the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes (CHP) supporting the creation and development of other CSOs, generating ‘offspring organisations’ often in partnership with international organisations, mostly UN agencies. By the late 1990s, the CHP had established a resource centre to support and strengthen the capacities of both established and newly emerging CSOs in Abkhazia. As such, we can trace back the genealogy of CSOs in Abkhazia to the above-mapped first-generation CSOs in the sense that they established a referential (normative) model for subsequent organisations.

A defining feature of this period was the emergence of several ACSOs as key actors in the unofficial peacebuilding process — namely, in dialogue between civil society representatives and experts from both the Abkhazian and Georgian sides, which continues to this day in various formats. Such engagement can be understood as sustained, internally motivated, bilateral or multilateral communication with counterparts on the other side of the conflict, as well as with other relevant actors (including international experts and INGOs), aimed at transforming and ultimately resolving the conflict. For many Abkhazian civil society activists, the primary motivation for participating in informal peace dialogues has been the desire to address the problem of Abkhazia’s isolation (see also Kvarchelia 2008).

Several ACSOs were both initiators and long-term participants in various peacebuilding processes, known under different labels as the ‘Irvine Process’ (a Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue conducted through conferences facilitated by the University of California, Irvine); the ‘Schlaining Process’ a decade-long series of informal meetings between Abkhaz and Georgian politicians and civil society activists, launched in January 1997 in Stadtschlaining, Austria; Conciliation Resources 2012) and subsequent initiatives such as the ‘London Process’ and the ongoing ‘Limehouse Process.’ While it is beyond this article’s scope to delve into these different formats, we conclude that they have had a key role in enhancing the participation of ACSOs in post-conflict governance and peacebuilding. Today, they remain among the few fora for populations from Abkhazia and Georgia to interact. Few Georgians can visit Abkhazia, while social pressure and surveillance by authorities are cited among the deterrent factors for Abkhaz to go to Georgia (see also Peinhopf 2022).

3. 2. Participation beyond peacebuilding: assessing ACSOs' participation in governance

From approximately the second half of the 2000s, we identify a new phase in the development of ASCOs. A defining feature of this stage is the growing involvement of civil society in democratisation processes and in promoting the principles of the rule of law within Abkhazia. ACSOs began to assert themselves as active agents in the areas of political regime transformation and state-building. However, the approaches of the authorities and civil society to these processes diverged significantly. For civil society actors, the reference point was a democratic project that stood in opposition to a model of hybrid (authoritarian) statehood. This distinction later became a dominant factor, serving as the primary driver of civic engagement and manifesting in various forms of political and social participation, which translated into changes in laws, policies and practices (see also Le Pavic 2024a).

During this period, a trend towards the increasing specialisation and professionalisation of ACSOs became evident, although many older ACSOs retained a model of broad, cross-cutting expertise. The institutional capacity of ACSOs in advocacy has significantly expanded through training, including the exchange of best practices with other ACSOs outside Abkhazia. With ACSOs' active participation and the expert support of international partners, including CSOs from other countries and INGOs, three key laws were adopted in 2008 aimed at broadening democratic freedoms and establishing a legal framework to protect civil rights and the freedom of identity-based self-expression. These include the Law on the Right to Access Information, the Law on Citizens' Appeals, and the Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women. International partners supported ACSOs' work in this area. For example, the British organisation Article 19 — named after Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the right to freedom of opinion and expression — provided support for the drafting of the Law on the Right of Access to Information. Teaming up with the Sukhum Media Club project, this support included the provision of model law and experts coming to Abkhazia to advise the drafting process, working with a local expert group, which included both civil society experts and representatives of the executive branch. After the draft law was prepared, it underwent expert evaluation by Article 19 (see report: Article 19, 2007). From 2010 onwards, the EU and UNDP grant mechanisms, such as COBERM/CSSR, supported the financial sustainability of many ACSOs.

An additional important indicator of the institutional evolution of Abkhazia's civil society is the emergence of new actors whose agendas diverge from those of the established ACSOs. These include both formal and more informal organisations such as the cultural platform SKLAD, the charitable foundation

for homeless animas BAGIRA, the Republic of Ideas Foundation for the Support of Education and Culture, the Foundation for Socio-Cultural Initiatives, the charitable organisation Kiaraz supporting socially vulnerable group, Apeipsh21, an association of journalist, IQan an educational organisation, and the Amch youth-focused socio-cultural initiatives. More informal structures have also emerged, such as Хара Хҭицунда (Abkha: Our Pitsunda), a youth protest movement formed in response to the political crisis over the transfer of part of the protected Cape Pitsunda territory to the Russian Federal Security Service. (Apsadgyl-info) These developments reflect significant institutional shifts, driven by new forms of civic engagement that are not genealogically linked to those of the longer-standing organisations.

The most recent development concerning CSOs in Abkhazia is marked by the emergence of organisations with expertise in social services, environmental issues, and those focused on specific social groups such as children, youth, and others. In 2022, we mapped 46 ACSOs which indicated being involved in providing social services to various beneficiaries, often with support from international donors and organisations whose priorities align with their own. Youth, children, including those with special needs, and women emerged as the primary target groups of these initiatives, which aim to foster economic and social inclusion and address gaps in social protection, such as in the case of survivors of domestic violence. Our study revealed constraints in social service provision related to partial recognition, too, impacting the daily lives of differently situated individuals accessing social services (Le Pavic et al. 2024).

3.3. Survey results: Description of the variables

Our survey covers 32 Abkhazian Civil Society Organisations (ACSOs), all of which have been established more than five years ago and are officially registered in Abkhazia. Both employees and volunteers within these organisations have at least five years of relevant experience, indicating a high level of organisational maturity. The graph below presents the number of employees and volunteers across the surveyed organisations, showing a balanced distribution between small-sized organisations (fewer than five staff and volunteers), medium-sized organisations (staff of five to ten), and larger organisations (staff of more than ten).

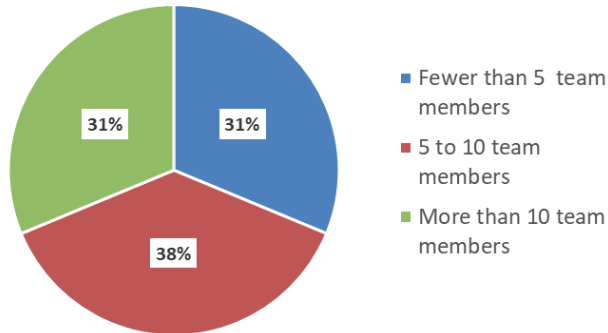


Figure 2. Organisational size: staff members and volunteers

Source: authors.

In terms of geographical location, the surveyed ACSOs are concentrated in Sukhum, Abkhazia’s main city, followed by Ochamchyra and Gal, and then Gagra, Gudauta, and Tkuarchal. No surveyed ACSOs are formally based in the Gulrypsh district; however, several respondents reported operating activities in Gulrypsh without maintaining an office there. *Figure 3* below visualises the territorial distribution of the surveyed ACSOs. It highlights of relatively centralised civil society in Sukhum, even though many organisations’ activities extend across multiple districts of Abkhazia. The following section presents these different types of activities in greater detail

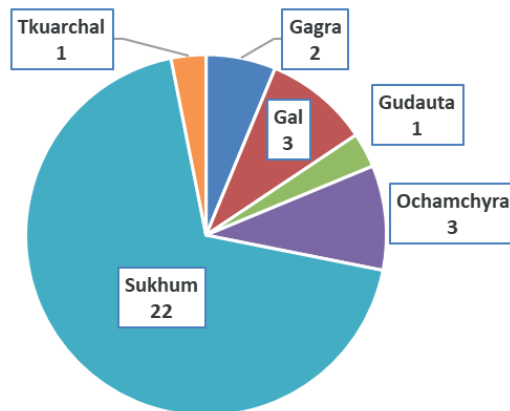


Figure 3. Distribution of ACSOs per district

Source: authors.

All surveyed CSOs are engaged in more than one field of activity, reflecting the multi-functional nature of civil society in Abkhazia. Education emerges as the most prominent area of engagement, followed by social support and youth-related activities. The fourth most common field is HIV/AIDS, identified as one of Abkhazia’s ‘greatest public health concern’ (Hammarberg and Grono 2017: 43; also confirmed by our interviews in 2021-2023) and closely linked to patterns of narcotics use (Le Pavic 2024b). Cultural, environmental, and health-related activities follow in terms of prevalence. One quarter of the surveyed CSOs reported activities focused on supporting other CSOs, primarily through training and information-sharing, followed by work on the rights of persons with disabilities. Nineteen per cent of organisations are involved in children and youth initiatives, psychological support, and activities focusing on women. Thirteen per cent engage in supporting local communities, peacebuilding, research, and sports. A smaller fraction of CSOs (six per cent) reported activities related to animal welfare, information literacy, media, internal dialogue, rural development, and veterans, while only 3 per cent (each) are active in infrastructure development and refugee-related activities. *Figure 4* visualises the distribution of these activity fields.

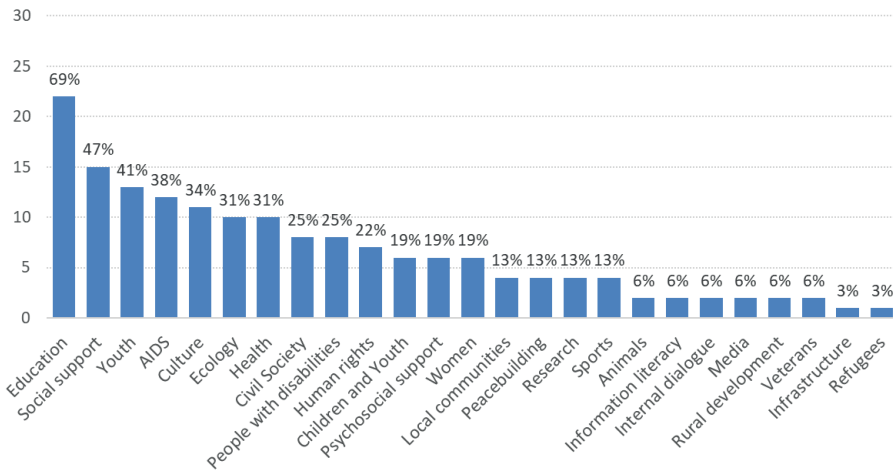


Figure 4. Activities of the surveyed ACSed

Source: authors.

Cross-analysis indicates that the majority of CSO activities are concentrated in Sukhum. No CSOs reported carrying out activities related to refugees, veterans, internal dialogue, media, policy research and advocacy, or rural development while based outside the capital. This absence should be interpreted with caution, as it reflects the small number of CSOs active in these fields overall:

the few organisations that are involved are headquartered in Sukhum but operate across multiple regions of Abkhazia. Conversely, a higher number of CSOs reported being active outside Sukhum than within the capital in several areas, notably in women’s issues, animal welfare, culture, civil society support, disability rights, psychological support, health, sports, children, and adolescents. This suggests that while organisational headquarters remain centralised, a significant share of civil society engagement takes place in regional and local settings.

The surveyed CSOs typically address multiple target groups. More than half primarily target youth, followed by the categories of the general public, children and adolescents, socially vulnerable groups, and educational institutions (including students). Over one-third of CSOs also focus on people with chronic illnesses or special health needs, and on people with disabilities (including children). Slightly under one-third reported targeting government bodies, indicating their engagement in advocacy and interaction with authorities. Less than 20 per cent of organisations focus on large families, women and girls, foreign citizens, other CSOs, or elderly people, while fewer than 10 per cent work with returned refugees, professional communities, and veterans or families of the deceased. Finally, only 3 per cent of surveyed CSOs reported targeting ethnic or religious groups, authorities, or political organisations. *Figure 5* provides a comprehensive overview of the distribution of target groups.

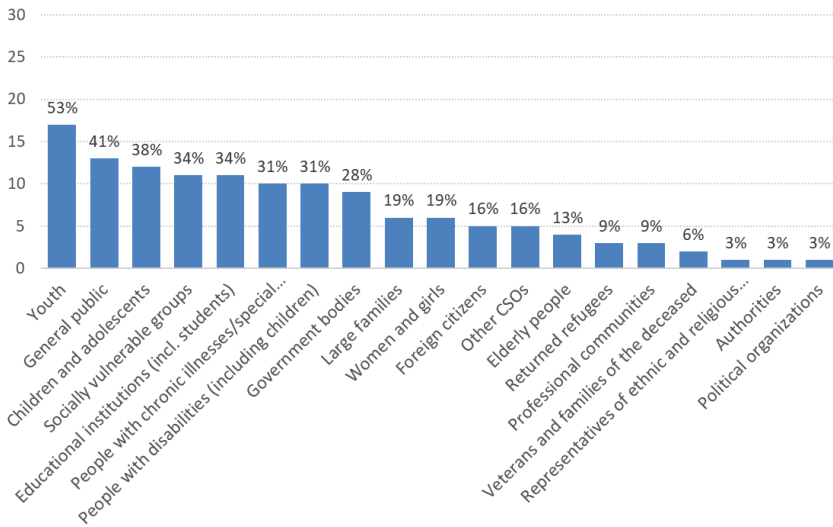


Figure 5. Target audiences of the surveyed ACSOs

Source: authors.

Our survey also examined the presence of international and foreign partnerships and funding compared with exclusively local cooperation. In this study, foreign partnership refers to collaboration between Abkhazian CSOs and third countries, while international partnership refers to collaboration with international organisations operating in Abkhazia, primarily United Nations agencies such as UNDP, UNHCR, UN Women, and WHO,; with the latter having opened an office in Abkhazia following the COVID-19 pandemic. These UN agencies are mainly funded by the European Union and its member states, as well as – until its closure in 2025 – USAID.

Among the surveyed CSOs, 15 organisations rely exclusively on international (including foreign) partners, while another 15 combine international (including foreign) and local partnerships. Only two CSOs reported having exclusively local partners. Notably, all reported partnerships involved financial support, underscoring the central role of external funding in sustaining civil society activities in Abkhazia. The graph in *Figure 6*, visualises this distribution of partnerships.



Figure 6. ACSOs' partnerships and funding sources

Source: authors.

Participants were invited to respond to a set of questions (see *Annex 1*) reflecting the level of participation adapted from the Council of Europe's scale of CSOs' participation. Our results show slight variation, with the level 'information' associated with the highest average, followed by the level 'dialogue', slightly higher than the level 'consultation'. The highest level of participation, 'ship' was associated with the lowest average among the surveyed Abkhazian CSOs, meaning that the smallest number of surveyed CSOs had a level of participation that can be framed as partnership. *Figure 7* summarises our results.

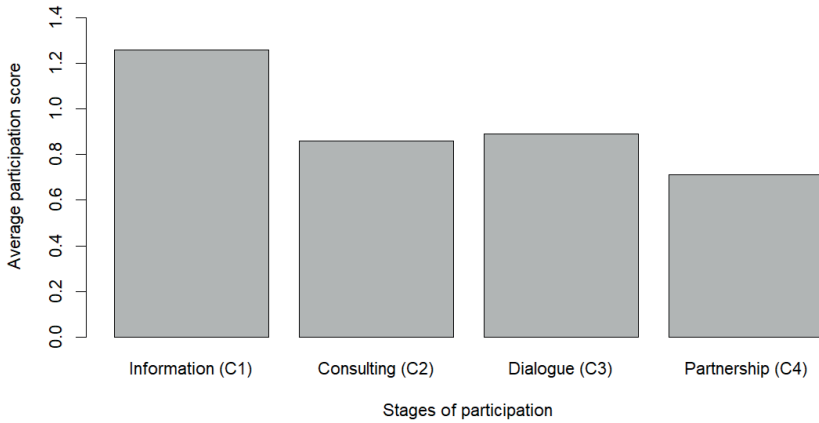


Figure 7. Average participation scores of ACSOs by participation stage

Source: authors.

Our results indicate that the level ‘information’ best captures the extent of the participation of the surveyed civil society organisations in Abkhazia’s governance. The higher average of the level ‘dialogue’ compared to ‘consultation’ is explained by the high response rate to the question ‘C 3.5: Has the CSO maintained working contacts with representatives of public authorities over the past 12 months?’, with 28 out of 32 CSOs indicating that they have contacts. The lowest average was obtained for the level ‘partnership’, indicating that most ACSOs do not act in a true partnership with the Abkhazian authorities – thus remaining independent. They participate but remain or are maintained at a relative distance from political governance, enabling critical participation. In the last section of the findings, we look at the independent variables that contribute to explaining the different levels of participation among ACSOs.

3.4. Survey results: Bivariate analysis

Figure 8 presents levels of participation according to CSO staff size (including volunteers). Contrary to expectations, a larger organisational size does not correspond to higher or more active participation. CSOs with more than 10 staff or volunteers consistently scored lower across all participation levels compared to organisations with 5 to 10 members. Moreover, the largest organisations participate, on average, less than the smallest ones at two level consultation and partnership. These findings suggest that organisational capacity, as measured by staff size, does not automatically translate into stronger participation, and may instead reflect differences in organisational focus, administrative burden,

or modes of interaction with authorities. This also points to a stronger participatory capacity among mid-size organisations of 5 to 10 members, which seems to drop with increasing or decreasing team sizes.

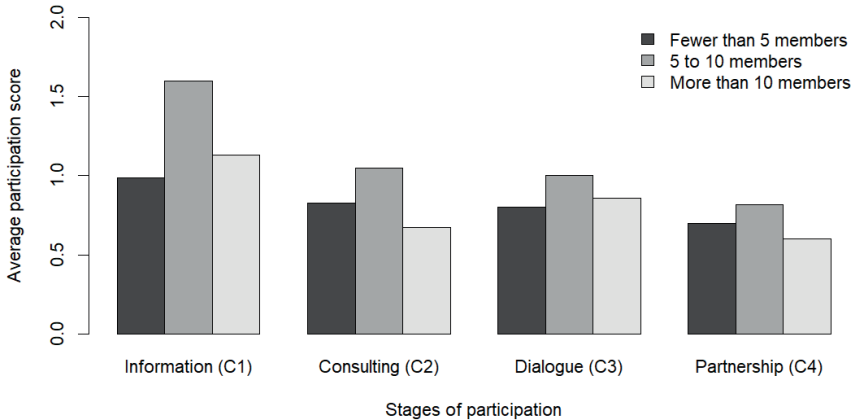


Figure 8. Participation levels by number of staff and volunteers per organisation

Source: authors.

As expected, ACSOs based in the capital, Sukhum, tend to participate more than those located in other regions. However, organisational location does not strongly differentiate levels of participation levels. In particular, on the levels of consultation and partnership, there is little to no observable difference between ACSOs based in Sukhum and those operating from regional locations, as *Figure 9* shows.

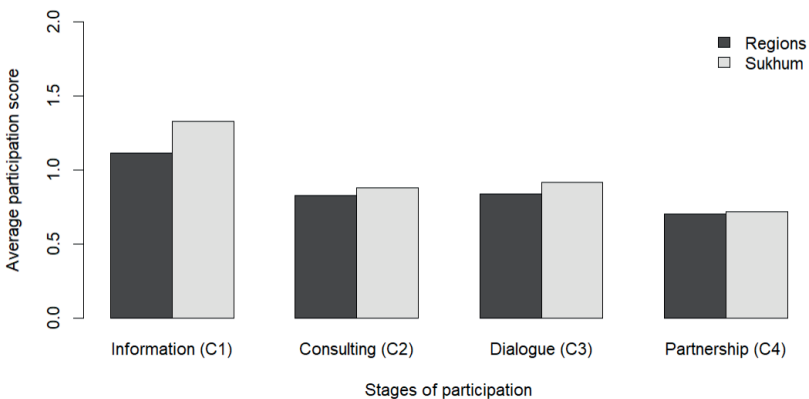


Figure 9. Participation by ACSO location

Source: authors.

The length of organisational existence influences participation patterns in a non-linear manner. More recent CSOs, established in 2019–2020, display, on average, higher levels of participation in the first level (information) and slightly higher engagement at the third level (dialogue) than other organisations. In contrast, CSOs founded before 2001 are more active in consultation and score slightly higher on the partnership level. Distinct participation trends also emerge among organisations established in 2001–2013 and 2014–2018, indicating variation across cohorts rather than a linear relationship between organisational age and participation. *Figure 10* illustrates this pattern⁸.

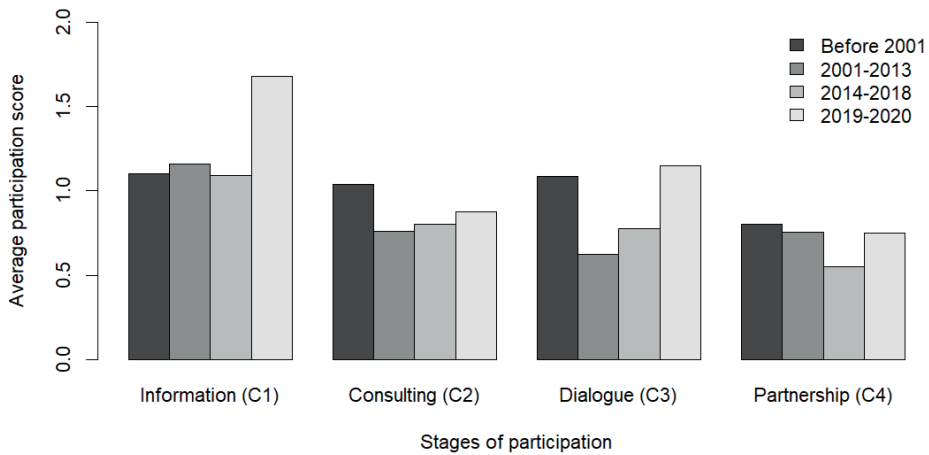


Figure 10. Participation levels by period of foundation

Source: authors.

To examine the relationship between types of activities and levels of participation, we first aggregated the 25 individual activity categories into five broader thematic groups: democracy and peace; ecology and infrastructure; education; social support and health; youth and sports. *Table 1* presents this aggregation and indicates the number of organisations active within each thematic category.

⁸ The periodisation is based on 25% quartiles of ACSOs per respective periods.

Table 1. Number of organisations active in five thematic categories

Activity (aggregated)	No. of organisations	Percent
Democracy and peace	22	69%
Ecology and infrastructure	13	41%
Education	22	69%
Social support and health	18	56%
Youth and sports	16	50%

Note: All organisations are involved in more than one activity level.

Source: authors.

The results indicate only limited variation across the four participation levels among ACSOs. At the information and dialogue levels, the aggregate category social support and health display a slightly higher participation score than democracy and peace do. By contrast, democracy and peace record the highest average levels of participation at the remaining two levels, namely in consultation and partnership.

The aggregate categories ecology and infrastructure consistently record the lowest participation scores, together with youth and sports, at the first three levels of information, consultation, and dialogue. However, at the partnership level, the category ecology and infrastructure scores marginally higher than the other aggregate categories. These patterns are visualised in *Figure 11*.

Overall, the findings do not support the assumption that participation is systematically higher in activity areas often perceived as less politicised—such as social support and health or youth and sport—compared to more politically sensitive domains like democracy and peace or ecology and infrastructure. The final aggregate category, education, shows slightly lower average participation across the four levels. This may reflect a more top-down governance structure in the education sector, where interactions with CSOs leave comparatively less room for bottom-up engagement.

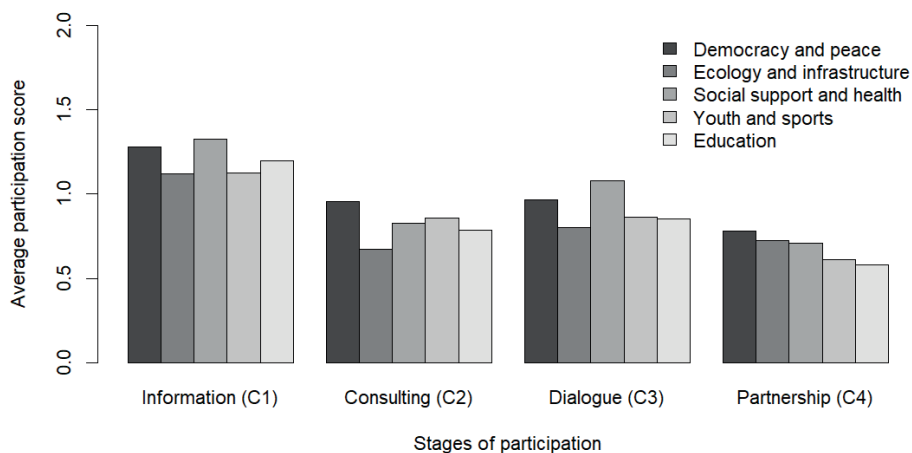


Figure 11. Participation related to the surveyed ACSOs’ activities by wider categories

Source: authors.

With regard to target audiences, we aggregated the 21 individual categories into four analytical groups: youth, children, and women; vulnerable groups; authorities; and the general public. *Table 2* summarises these four target audience aggregated categories.

Table 2. Number of organisations targeting distinct audiences

Target audience (aggregated)	No. of organisations	Percent
Youth, children and women	21	66%
Vulnerable groups	16	50%
Authorities	16	50%
General public	14	44%

Note: All organisations cover multiple target audiences.

Source: authors.

Given their focus on authorities, one might expect ACSOs which declare that they target this specific group to score higher across all four levels of participation. However, our results show that ACSOs working with ‘vulnerable groups’ actually participate slightly more on average in consultation and dialogue, have similar average participation to those targeting authorities in partnership, and only marginally lower participation at the information level. This pattern may

reflect advocacy efforts by ACSOs representing vulnerable groups to advance social rights and protections in Abkhazia.

ACSOs targeting the general public demonstrate the lowest average participation across levels, except at the information level, where those organisations focusing on youth, children, and women show the lowest participation. These findings differ somewhat from the participation patterns by sphere of activity, where ACSOs involved in social support and health do not, on average, exhibit higher participation than those in other sectors. This discrepancy may be explained by the advocacy activities for targeted groups reported under the aggregated category of vulnerable groups. Nonetheless, it is important to note that overall variation in participation remains limited, as illustrated in *Figure 12*.

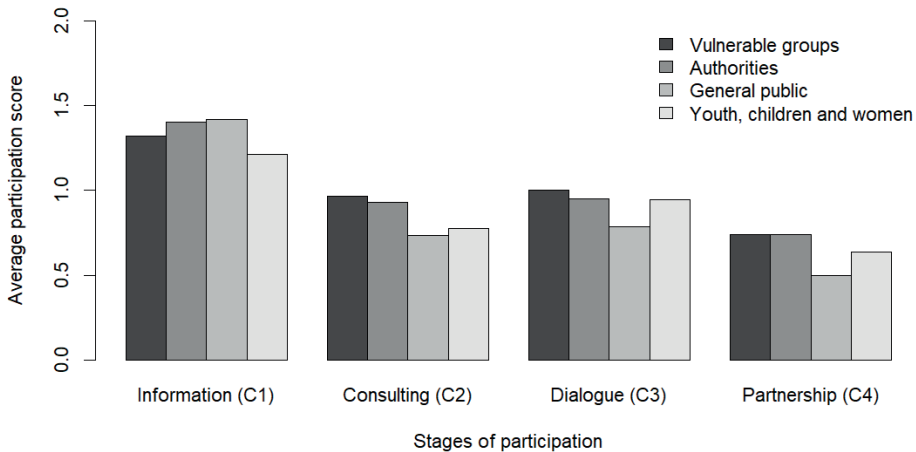


Figure 12. Levels of participation related to the surveyed ACSOs’ target audience

Source: authors.

Lastly, our survey clearly shows that organisations receiving a combination of international and local funding participate more actively across all four levels than those funded solely by international (including foreign) sources. This finding is unsurprising, as funding relationships typically involve collaborative engagement that fosters participation, as illustrated in *Figure 13*.

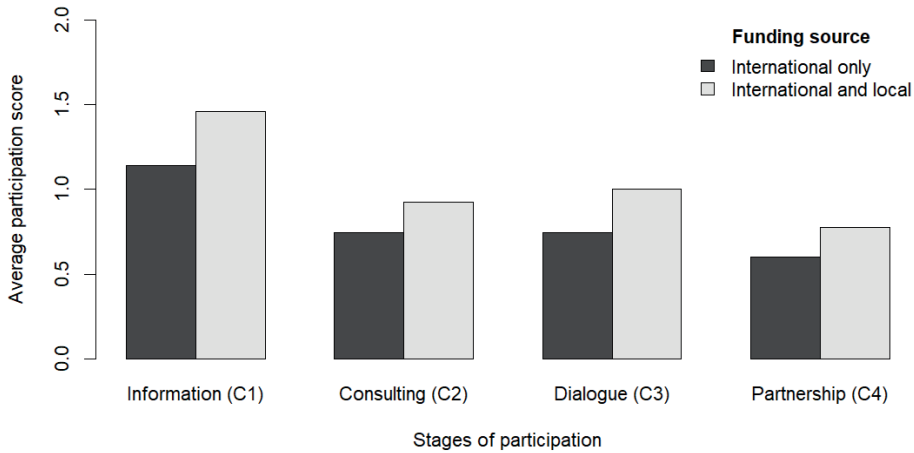


Figure 13. Level of participation related to the surveyed ACSOs’ funding sources

Source: authors.

4. Concluding discussion

Our survey findings complement and deepen the understanding of Abkhazia’s civil society landscape. The data reveal that ACSOs vary significantly in size, seniority, target audience, and areas of focus, yet most demonstrate sustained experience and institutional stability. While larger organisations do not necessarily participate more actively than medium-sized ones, those with a combination of local and international funding tend to be more engaged across all levels of participation. Geographically, civil society activity is concentrated in Sukhum, though many organisations maintain outreach to Abkhazia’s districts, reflecting both centralisation and regional engagement. Thematically, ACSOs are predominantly active in social support, education, and youth-related initiatives, while advocacy around democracy and peace remains influential despite increasing political pressure that otherwise indicates a shrinking space for participation.

We align with Popescu’s (2010) analysis and build upon his study of ACSOs by tracing key stages in their evolution. Two prominent features emerge. First, core actors among ACSOs have maintained continuous engagement and active participation in Abkhazia’s socio-political landscape. A defining characteristic of these organisations is their sustained responsiveness to political and socio-economic agendas set by Abkhazian authorities, which has allowed them to function as contributors to law making and policy formulation. The evolving priorities of these CSOs – from addressing immediate post-conflict needs to engaging with broader governance issues – reflect their adaptability to shifting political

and social challenges, as captured by the periodisation of ACSOs' development outlined in our findings section. These shifts have fostered new trajectories of civic engagement, reshaping the values and practices prioritised within Abkhazian society: namely, contributing to a democratic system and breaking Abkhazia's isolation, including through dialogue with Georgian CSOs.

In their early stages, ACSOs focused primarily on civic self-organisation, capacity building, post-war rehabilitation, and peacebuilding. Over time, their attention shifted towards thematic specialisation and more proactive involvement in policymaking, particularly efforts to democratise governance. This was subsequently followed by a phase characterised by the expansion of socio-cultural activities alongside a relative decline in direct policy engagement. The current phase (from the 2020s onwards), however, signals a renewed politicisation of civil society, marked by the emergence of protest practices amid mounting political pressure from the governments of Abkhazia and Russia that shrink the space for ACSOs' participation.

It is important to emphasise that participation is unevenly distributed across Abkhazian CSOs. Organisations established within the last five years tend, on average, to exhibit lower levels of participation compared to longer-standing entities. At the same time, more established CSOs, benefiting from greater institutional resilience, often compensate for these gaps. This dynamic becomes particularly significant in a context of increasing pressure on civil society, especially affecting organisations that sustain cooperation with international institutions and foreign partners.

Our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of ACSOs in 2025 and of the genealogy of these civil society organisations since the beginning of the 1990s. Our data indicate that the lowest average level of engagement is observed in the form of 'partnership', suggesting that most ACSOs do not reach full partnership with the Abkhazian authorities. At the same time, they thus maintain their independence. Meanwhile, organisational capacity, as measured by staff size, does not appear to translate directly into stronger participation. Rather, variations in participation seem to reflect differences in organisational focus, administrative constraints, and modes of interaction with authorities. In this respect, mid-sized organisations (5–10 members) demonstrate comparatively stronger participatory capacity, while both smaller and larger organisations tend to exhibit lower levels of engagement. Furthermore, the results do not confirm the assumption that participation is systematically higher in activity areas typically perceived as less politicised, such as social support, health, or youth and sport, than in domains like democracy and peace or ecology and infrastructure. Notably, the education sector shows slightly lower average participation across stages, which may point to the role of top-down governance structures limiting opportunities for bottom-up engagement.

Our findings contrast with Babajanian's (2005) research, highlighting how Abkhaz CSOs remain deeply rooted locally, with many leaders originating from the national movement that opposed Georgian control. Notably, some of these actors transitioned into ACSO leadership, sustaining a difficult but ongoing dialogue to this day. However, activists increasingly report that their operational space has significantly contracted since the 2020s, a trend already evident over the last decade, with the pending but so far resisted legislation on foreign agents (Hammarberg and Grono 2017: 31). This shows that ACSOs remain neither in full partnership nor in proxyship with the Abkhazian authorities, confirming the findings of our previous study (Le Pavic 2024a).

Further research could explore the implications of the shrinking space for participation and the resistance of ACSOs to this trend, along with the evolving nature of governance structures to civil society relations in Abkhazia, and how ACSOs navigate the dual pressures of internal governance and external geopolitical dynamics. Qualitative studies could usefully complement our survey and provide more in-depth explanations of ACSOs' patterns of participation. Lastly, comparative research could measure the participation of CSOs in other entities, such as Transnistria.

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Annex 1

The first stage of participation is captured by the ‘**information**’ level; seven components are included: **C 1.1** How many letters (formal requests/inquiries) did the CSO send to public authorities during the last full month of operation? **C 1.2** How many in-person meetings and telephone conversations with representatives of public authorities did the CSO hold during the last full month of operation? **C 1.3** How many studies in the organisation’s field of activity has the CSO conducted over the past five years? **C 1.4** What proprietary information resources does the CSO have, and how often are they updated? **C 1.5** How many public statements/comments/interviews by CSO staff appeared on social media and in the media during the last full month of operation? **C 1.6** How many statements, appeals, articles, and expert opinions were produced over the past 12 months? **C 1.7** How many expert opinions and legislative commentaries (public expertise) has the CSO produced over the past five years?

The second level is ‘**consultation**’, measured through the following questions: **C 2.1** How many times over the past 12 months were CSO representatives invited to meetings and other official working events of public authorities (hearings, committees, etc.)? **C 2.2** How many times over the past 12 months were CSO staff invited to roundtables, meetings, negotiations, conferences, or forums organised by public authorities? **C 2.3** How many times over the

past 12 months did the CSO organise roundtables, meetings, negotiations, conferences, forums, etc., involving one or more representatives of public authorities? **C 2.4** How many times over the past 12 months did the CSO conduct educational trainings or seminars involving representatives of public authorities, including those initiated by the authorities themselves? **C 2.5** How many times over the past five years has the CSO conducted campaigns (informational or advocacy-related) aimed at changing policy and law-enforcement practice in the interests of its target groups? **C 2.6** How many times over the past five years have CSO representatives monitored electoral processes at the local and republican levels? **C 2.7** How many times over the past five years has the CSO conducted quality control (monitoring) of the provision of public services?

The third level is **'dialogue'** measured by the following questions: **C 3.1** How many times over the past 12 months has the CSO represented beneficiaries' interests and defended their rights before public authorities, courts, and other law-enforcement bodies? **C 3.2** Have CSO staff members been nominated to, and elected to, representative bodies of public authority over the past five years? **C 3.3** How many times over the past five years has the CSO initiated the creation of working groups/commissions involving representatives of public authorities? **C 3.4** Are or were CSO staff members also members of the Public Chamber? **C 3.5** Has the CSO maintained working contacts with representatives of public authorities over the past 12 months?

The fourth and last level is **'partnership'**, measured by the following questions: **C 4.1** Does or did the CSO have formalised partnership agreements (agreements, memoranda, etc.) with public authorities, and in what form? **C 4.2** Does or did the CSO jointly implement projects or activities together with public authorities? **C 4.3** How many times over the past five years have CSO representatives participated in working groups, commissions, or other structures established by public authorities to address issues on the public-policy agenda? **C 4.4** How many times over the past five years has the CSO received commissions from public authorities to carry out analytical work, including expert review of draft and existing legal and regulatory acts? **C 4.5** How many times over the past five years has the CSO participated in drafting normative legal acts (NLAs) and amendments thereto, as well as in the development of strategic planning documents—programmes, strategies, concepts, etc.?