Youth Movements in Georgia: Civic Agency and Democratic Accountability in a Post-Soviet Context

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Abstract

Georgia's 2020-2024 cycle of democratic backsliding triggered a new wave of youth-led contention. This thesis traces how young activists confronted the "foreign agents" bills (2023-2024), contested the disputed 2024 parliamentary election, and carried forward campaigns on human rights, media freedom and judicial independence. Combining document and policy analysis, multi-platform media monitoring, and semi-structured interviews with journalists, grassroots organizers and opposition strategists, it applies process tracing to map event sequences and thematic coding to detect recurrent frames and tactical adaptation.

A comparative lens situates Georgian mobilization alongside Serbia's *Otpor!* and Ukraine's *Euromaidan*, isolating common repertoires - non-violent disruption, decentralized networks and symbolic politics, while showing how regime type and external leverage condition outcomes.

Findings reveal that, although barred from formal decision-making, Georgian youth movements shift national agendas by normalizing street protest, reframing European integration as a civic identity and generating international pressure that constrains state action. Their discursive and infrastructural innovations carve out autonomous civic space inside a hybrid regime, illustrating how norm entrepreneurship (Keck & Sikkink 1998) and networked mobilization (Tufekci 2017; McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001) can blunt democratic erosion even without immediate legislative wins.

By foregrounding generational agency, the study refines theories of social movements and post-Soviet democratization, emphasizing protest influence as an iterative process of agenda-setting, discourse production and reputational leverage. The conclusions speak to scholars and practitioners seeking to bolster democratic accountability in Georgia and comparable semi-authoritarian settings.

Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, **Shako Gegeshidze,** candidate for the MA degree in Public Policy with a specialization in Social Justice an Human Rights declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Youth Movements in Georgia: Civic Agency and Democratic Accountability in a Post-Soviet Context" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography.

I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

 Shako Gegeshidze

Vienna, 3 June 2025

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Introduction

Youth Activism and the Democratic Struggle in Georgia (2020–2024)

Between 2020 and 2024, Georgia saw youth groups leapfrog traditional parties as the primary channel for public frustration (CRRC Georgia 2024; Transparency International Georgia 2023). Students, artists, and young professionals drafted petitions, confronted parliament with legal critiques, and organized mass rallies that framed creeping authoritarianism as a threat to the country's European future.

Two flashpoints illustrate their centrality:

·   **The "foreign agents" bills** (March 2023; revived April 2024). These required NGOs, media outlets, and civic groups receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as agents "pursuing the interests of a foreign power." The draft law echoed Russia's 2012 legislation and triggered nights-long street occupations (Human Rights Watch 2013).

·   **The October 2024 parliamentary election.** OSCE/ODIHR (2024) observers recorded misuse of administrative resources, intimidation of public officials, and disinformation campaigns - all symptoms of what Bermeo (2016) calls *incremental democratic erosion*: subtle, legalistic strategies through which elected governments weaken institutions from within.

Movements such as *Geut* ("Stubborn"), the Shame Movement, and the Movement for Social Democracy transformed Rustaveli Avenue into a year-long civic forum, with speeches, public lectures, art installations, teach-ins, and public debates that blurred the line between protest and political education. Their sustained presence pushed youth from the margins to the center of democratic defense.

Georgia once embodied post-Soviet reform. After the 2003 Rose Revolution, spearheaded by the youth movement *Kmara!* - President Saakashvili's government dismantled the corrupt traffic police, introduced one-stop Public Service Halls, adopted merit-based hiring, and

propelled Georgia from 112th (2005) to 8th (2014) in the World Bank's *Doing Business* rankings (World Bank 2014). Freedom House and the World Governance Indicators likewise recorded notable improvements in governance and civil liberties during this period (Freedom House 2014).

The mood shifted after Georgian Dream took power in 2012. The behind-the-scenes dominance of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, combined with increasing judicial interference (Transparency International Georgia 2018), ushered in what watchdogs and scholars like Hellman (1998) term *state capture*: the re-purposing of public institutions by narrow elites to preserve power. Although the 2014 EU-Georgia Association Agreement formalized rule-of-law commitments (European Union 2014), a 2023 European Parliament resolution warned of ongoing backsliding in judicial independence, media pluralism, and anti-corruption enforcement (European Commission 2024).

Young Georgians who increasingly interpret the EU as a value system rooted in fairness, accountability, and transparency, have come to see this democratic unraveling as a breach of the social contract (CRRC Georgia 2024; Mikiashvili 2025). As Delcour and Wolczuk (2015) argue, the effectiveness of EU conditionality in Eastern Partnership countries depends not only on institutional compliance but also on the alignment of identity narratives, a condition now visibly fractured in Georgia.

Discursive Agency and Hybrid Mobilisation

Facing a regime that prefers legal harassment to open violence, youths built a dual infrastructure:

● *Physical space.* Since March 2023, Rustaveli Avenue has hosted daily teach-ins, candle-lit vigils, film nights, and constitutional readings—forming "subaltern counter-publics" that reclaim symbolic civic space (Fraser 1990).

- *Digital space.* The Facebook group *Daitove* ("Offer Shelter") evolved into a logistics hub with over 40,000 members; Telegram channels provided real-time alerts on police positioning; protest apps tracked riot movements; Instagram and TikTok amplified memes and visuals that lit up public buildings in EU blue-and-gold (Khubuluri, 2025; Mikiashvili, 2025).

Protest slogans such as "We Are Europe," "No to Russian Law," and "This Is Our Future" explicitly counter government claims that youth protesters are foreign-funded spoilers. Fact-checking videos, multilingual legal explainers, and civic livestreams neutralise state propaganda in real time, demonstrating discursive political agency (della Porta 2014; Tufekci 2017) and engaging in collective action framing that connects individual grievances with shared political meaning (Snow and Benford 1988).

Today's activists inherit the Rose Revolution's lesson that non-violent youth mobilisation can topple entrenched power, but they operate in a fully networked environment. Where Kmara! used graffiti and campus cells, groups organise via encrypted Telegram and livestream rigs - "leaderless but not disorganised." When organisers were detained in a June 2024 night raid, new channels spun up within an hour to crowd-fund bail and schedule the next march. Such horizontal structures, which align with Tufekci's (2017) concept of networked protest and reflect what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) describe as 'connective action', a digitally enabled form of decentralized mobilization different from traditional, hierarchical organizing.

Research Gap and Thesis Contribution

Although young people played key roles in both Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution and the 2023-24 protests the foreign agent law, most academic literature continues to focus on donor-

funded NGOs and formal opposition parties. In studies of post-authoritarian protest, the spotlight tends to fall on high-impact cases like Serbia's *Otpor!* or Ukraine's *Euromaidan* - movements that led to outright regime change. Less attention has been paid to slower, more symbolic struggles in hybrid regimes like Georgia, where elections still take place, but democratic institutions are increasingly hollowed out (Levitsky and Way 2010). This thesis steps into that gap by focusing on how youth movements operate and influence change under these more subtle, but no less significant, conditions.

This thesis draws on three semi-structured interviews: with a journalist from *Mtavari TV*, an activist from the Movement for Social Democracy, and a foreign-affairs strategist from *Droa*. It also uses process tracing to unpack three key episodes: the foreign agent law protests, election-related mobilizations, rights-based campaigns and compares them with two emblematic movements: Serbia's *Otpor!* (CANVAS n.d.) and Ukraine's *Euromaidan* (Onuch 2015).

At its core, the study asks: **How do youth movements in hybrid regimes translate their communication strategies and informal networks into real agenda-setting power?** The contributions unfold across four levels:

1. **Empirical** - This is the first systematic mapping of Georgia's decentralized, youth-driven activism across platforms and cities.

2. **Theoretical** - It sharpens existing concepts like *discursive agency, norm entrepreneurship* (Keck & Sikkink 1998), and *networked protest*, adapting them to hybrid regimes where formal politics often fail.

3. **Comparative** - It distinguishes between tactics that travel well across contexts and those that are deeply rooted in local political realities, drawing on Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine.

4. **Policy-relevant** - The findings offer EU and domestic reform actors a new lens for reading civic pressure - especially in systems where formal institutions are unresponsive but public mobilization is growing.

Methodology

1.1 Research Design and Rationale

This thesis applies a qualitative, structured-focused comparison (George & Bennett 2005) to ask how and why youth actors shape public agendas in hybrid regimes. A qualitative research design is essential for this study because mobilization under repression and norm contestation are deeply context-sensitive, they can't be captured through large-N datasets or simple metrics (Yin 2018). Instead of framing protests in binary terms like "success" or "failure," this design focuses on the mechanisms that drive influence over time: how activists frame issues, build coalitions, and leverage public reputation - even when policy change isn't immediate (Flyvbjerg 2006).

1.2 Case Selection

Primary case: Georgia (2020-24). Three within-case episodes capture escalating contention:

- **Protests against the 2023-24 Draft Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence.**

- **Youth mobilisation around the disputed 2024 parliamentary election.**

- **Ongoing campaigns on human rights, media freedom, and judicial reform.**

This study uses two comparative references: Serbia's *Otpor!* (1998-2000) and Ukraine's *Euromaidan* (2013-2014). All three countries: Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine share post-socialist legacies, aspirations for EU integration, and a history of youth-led protest. Yet, they differ significantly in their outcomes and the degree of international leverage they could exert. By applying a **most-similar-systems design** (Przeworski and Teune 1970), the comparison helps isolate which mobilization mechanisms are transferable across contexts and

which ones depend more heavily on internal regime cohesion or external geopolitical pressures.

1.3 Data Collection

Table 1

Source	Description	Rationale
Documents	**Parliamentary drafts of the 2023 & 2024 "foreign influence" bills, committee transcripts, the presidential veto, party statements; watchdog reports from GYLA, Transparency International Georgia, ISFED; external assessments from OSCE/ODIHR, the Venice Commission, and European-Parliament resolutions.**	**Tracks official framing, legal trajectories, and gaps between written standards and practice.**
Media & Social Media	**protest livestreams; Telegram posts; Instagram reels; protest-art images; coverage from independent outlets (OC Media, Netgazeti, Publika, TV Pirveli) plus selected international pieces (BBC, *Politico Europe*, etc.).**	**Captures real-time repertoires and counter-narratives; lets me triangulate grassroots accounts against elite messaging.**
*Semi-*structured interviews	**Irakli Bakhtadze, *Mtavari* TV journalist; Ekaterine Khubuluri, Movement for Social Democracy activist; Marika Mikiashvili, foreign-affairs secretary, Droa party. All in Georgian, May 2025; transcribed & translated by the author.**	**Supplies insider perspectives on media tactics, organisational choices, and state response.**

Researcher participation	My own role in the GIPA Student Movement, in planning meetings, street actions, and public statements offered firsthand insight into activist dynamics; while no formal field diary was kept, observational notes were recorded retrospectively to support reflective analysis.	Provides ethnographic insight while being bracketed analytically to manage bias.

1.4 Analytical Strategy

This study combines three strategies. First, process tracing (Beach and Pedersen 2019) reconstructs each Georgian protest episode - from trigger to mobilization, state response, and outcome. Second, thematic coding (Braun and Clarke 2006) is applied to interviews and digital data using a codebook informed by four lenses: discursive political agency (della Porta 2014), norm entrepreneurship (Keck and Sikkink 1998), networked protest (Tufekci 2017), and hybrid regime dynamics (Levitsky and Way 2010). Codes include democratic norm framing, tactical repertoires, repression/legitimacy, coalition-building, and emotion. Finally, cross-case synthesis compares mechanisms in Georgia to Serbia and Ukraine, testing which strategies travel and which depend on context.

1.5 Validity, Ethics, and Limitations

• Triangulation: claims are accepted only when supported by at least two independent sources (e.g., document + media, interview + video). • Ethics: all interviewees gave informed consent and approved name usage; data stored on encrypted drives; CEU guidelines and "do no harm" principle observed. • Limitations: restricted access to closed Telegram channels may omit covert coordination; small-N interviews limit generalisability but are offset by a rich digital corpus; rapid protest cycles complicate long-term outcome measurement.

Chapter 1: Political Crisis and the Rise of Youth Mobilization

The chapter investigates the turning point that marked by the introduction of Georgia's 2023 and 2024 "foreign agents" bills through the examination of how proposed legislation triggered an extended youth-driven movement. The analysis begins by placing the trigger events inside Georgia's democratic advancement while studying its EU membership goals. The chapter examines youth activists' opposition strategy to the law by utilizing historical pain along with national heritage and civic principles to build an opposing view. Through their communication methods and organizational frameworks and protest gestures these activists present fresh democratic engagement models which confront state authority together with conventional political engagement methods.

1.1 Context and Trigger Events

The proposed Draft Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence which Georgia introduced in 2023 triggered a major youth-led protest movement that became the most significant since the Rose Revolution. The People's Power movement introduced the law through their parliamentary faction even though they were no longer affiliated with the ruling Georgian Dream party yet maintained identical voting patterns with its legislative agenda. The proposed legislation turned into an immediate symbol of Georgia's democratic direction challenges and its national sovereignty and European aspirations. The proposed legislation demanded civil society organizations and media outlets operating with foreign financial support above 20 percent to disclose their funding. Organizations operating under foreign power interests must both enrol as "organizations carrying out the interests of a foreign power" and present yearly financial statements to the Ministry of Justice. Organizations that fail to comply with the requirements will face maximum penalties of 25,000 GEL

(Matsne.gov.ge 2024; ECNL 2023). The law failed to clarify what are "foreign interests", enabling the term to be interpreted widely. Legal specialists together with civic organizations raised immediate concerns about the law because of its unclear definitions and its strict penalties. Multiple observers from both within and outside Georgia's borders recognized the law as virtually identical to Russia's 2012 "foreign agents" legislation (Human Rights Watch 2013; Amnesty International 2021). President Vladimir Putin introduced the legislation in 2012 to apply a 20% funding threshold while using "foreign agent" terminology to destroy independent media and civil society organizations. Through time the Russian law evolved to encompass personal targets and unregistered activities which resulted in numerous organization shutdowns as well as arrests and forced expulsions (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Amnesty International, 2021). Marika Mikiashvili explained that authoritarianism functions to force Georgia back under Russian control (Mikiashvili, 2025). The law went beyond NGO oversight because it formed part of a strategic plan to shift Georgia toward a new geopolitical alignment. The law's emotional impact on citizens resulted from its perceived connection to the 1921 Soviet annexation of Georgia according to Mikiashvili. The structural parallels between the laws made it challenging for Georgian officials to deny any comparison. The laws share identical language features as well as surveillance tools which together create a framework to restrict civic space through the pretense of transparency when examined side by side.

Comparison of Georgian and Russian "Foreign Agent" Laws

Table 2

Provision	Georgia (2023–2024 Draft Law)	Russia (2012 Law & Amendments)
Scope	Applies to NGOs, non-profit organizations (NNLEs) and	Applies to NGOs, media outlets, and individuals

	media outlets receiving over 20% of their funding from foreign sources.	receiving any amount of foreign funding.
Threshold	Organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from foreign sources must register.	No minimum threshold; any amount of foreign funding triggers the requirement to register as a "foreign agent."
Label	Designated as an "organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power."	Labeled as a "foreign agent," a term with negative connotations in Russian.
Oversight Body	The Ministry of Justice, with authority to inspect and request detailed financial disclosures.	The Ministry of Justice and Prosecutor General's Office oversee compliance and can initiate inspections.
Penalties for Non-compliance	Fines up to 25,000 GEL (approximately $9,400).	Fines, suspension of activities, and potential criminal charges for repeated violations.
Definition of Political Activity	Not clearly defined; lacks specificity, leading to concerns about broad interpretation.	Broadly defined to encompass virtually any activity that could influence public opinion or policy, including criticism of the law itself.

Impact (to date)	International criticism, public outrage and protest, bill withdrawn and later revived, media targeting	The law has led to the closure of numerous NGOs, suppression of independent media, and a chilling effect on civil society.

Sources: ECNL 2023; Venice Commission 2023; Transparency International Georgia 2023.

Georgia's 2023-2024 draft "foreign influence" law violates the country's EU-Georgia Association Agreement (European Union 2014) commitments from 2014 regarding judicial independence and civil rights and anti-corruption policy and democratic governance. The 2023 enlargement progress report by the European Commission specifically stated that civil society and media restrictions in new legislation would damage Georgia's democratic institutions while obstructing its path toward EU membership (European Commission 2023). Multiple international legal entities have produced urgent evaluations demonstrating that the law violates European standards. The Venice Commission found the proposed legislation might suppress freedom of association while OSCE/ODIHR determined it could limit fundamental freedoms by constricting civic space (Venice Commission 2023; OSCE/ODIHR 2024). The European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL 2023) determined that proposed legislation poses a risk to personal privacy and may trigger intrusive monitoring while discouraging legitimate civic participation. The combined assessments demonstrate that this law threatens Georgia's democratic path toward EU integration.

However, the public response was not rooted in legal reasoning alone. For many, especially younger Georgians, the proposed law symbolized national betrayal. The March 2023 protests became an expression of identity and a vision for the country's future, going beyond the technical language of the bill. Student-led groups, informal collectives, and independent

activists gathered outside Parliament on Rustaveli Avenue to protest what they saw as a Russian-style assault on democracy at the symbolic heart of Georgian political life. Protesters quickly labeled the bill *"Rusuli Kanoni"* ("Russian Law"), framing it as authoritarian and imperial, a continuation of Georgia's painful history with Russian influence. This discursive move proved powerful, casting opposition not as partisan resistance but as a defense of national dignity and sovereignty. The display of Georgian and EU flags together on the streets visually reinforced this alignment of civic identity with European values (Berkeley Journal 2014; Euromaidan Press 2021). Diaspora protests across Europe and the U.S. echoed this framing with chants like "We Are Europe" and "No to Russian Law."

Youth-led organizations, including 12 Sartuli, Movement for Social Democracy, Geut, the Shame Movement, and regional student alliances, coordinated via decentralized online networks. The Facebook group *Daitove* (დაიტოვე), initially created to link distant protesters with local hosts, became a hub for safety alerts and legal guidance. Activists used Telegram and Instagram to share infographics, legal primers, and protest schedules, while mobile apps were developed to track police and organize escape routes during night raids. This digital infrastructure enabled rapid, adaptive responses even under surveillance.

From March 7-9, thousands of young people filled Rustaveli Avenue with sit-ins, concerts, and civic education sessions. According to journalist Irakli Bakhtadze, the protests were not led by any single party or figure, they were shaped by youth through self-organization and diversity. As he noted, "Anyone who observed the demonstration recognized that the future Georgians would stand before Parliament" (Bakhtadze 2025). This captures both the generational rupture and the emotional legitimacy behind youth mobilization.

Police deployed water cannons and tear gas, prompting protesters to livestream the violence (Tufekci 2017), which in turn drew even more support. The crackdown backfired, as

international criticism from EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, the U.S. State Department, and human rights organizations pressured the ruling party to withdraw the bill on March 10 (European Commission 2024; Civil.ge 2024).

But the retreat was temporary. In April 2024, the law was reintroduced with only superficial changes - replacing "foreign power" with "foreign influence", while preserving its core structure (Venice Commission 2024; ECNL 2023). Legal experts and civil society groups widely rejected the revision, and another wave of protests followed, again led by youth.

This two-phase confrontation has come to symbolize a deeper generational divide. For many young Georgians, the law represents not only the erosion of civic freedoms, but also a fundamental breach of trust in democratic institutions. Through a blend of street action, digital innovation, and narrative framing, youth protesters redefined what political participation looks like under hybrid authoritarianism. For them, protecting democracy became not just a political act but a form of everyday civic responsibility, rooted in identity, memory, and the dream of a European future (Khuntsaria 2025).

1.2 Framing and Strategic Messaging

Youth-led groups, grassroots networks, and civil society actors formed a broad, decentralized coalition to lead the protests against both versions of the "foreign agents" law in 2023 and 2024. What set this movement apart was its sharply defined narrative and its ability to evoke strong emotional resonance. Young Georgians reframed their resistance not just as policy critique, but as a struggle for democratic values, national identity, and the legitimacy of the state itself - all expressed through cultural symbolism and hybrid media strategies.

One of the most effective framing choices was renaming the bill the ***"Russian Law"*** (***rusuli kanoni***)**.** This shift drew strength from Georgia's long history of anti-imperial struggle and collective memory of Russian domination. By linking the proposed legislation to Russia's 2012 "foreign agents" law, which severely curtailed civil society and imprisoned dissenters

(Human Rights Watch 2013; Amnesty International 2021), activists framed the bill as not only authoritarian, but fundamentally un-Georgian.

The symbolic reframing turned the government's own argument on its head. While officials claimed the law would protect national sovereignty from foreign influence, protesters argued that it imported Russian authoritarian norms and thus undermined Georgian independence. This rhetorical move exposed a contradiction in the government's narrative, weakening its legitimacy and shifting the debate from legal technicalities to a moral and national crisis.

1.3 Asserting a European Identity

The protests positioned themselves in defense of Georgia's European future, while firmly rejecting Russian influence. On Rustaveli Avenue, demonstrators carried banners that captured the dual message: *"We Are Europe," "No to Russian Law,"* and *"Our Future is European"* (Bakhtadze 2025). These slogans reflected a deep conviction among young Georgians that their country's post-Soviet development, cultural identity, and political aspirations were fundamentally aligned with Europe.

The emotional impact of this messaging was especially visible during a candlelit Easter vigil. According to journalist Irakli Bakhtadze, protesters joined a night procession holding candles and reciting *"Home is Europe"*, blending religious ritual with political declaration. This moment directly countered the narrative that young activists opposed Christian values or national tradition (Bakhtadze 2025). Instead, it showed how civic identity could reinterpret cultural and religious symbols through a European democratic lens.

Visually, the message was reinforced by Georgian and EU flags flown side by side, face paint mimicking the EU's stars, and banners citing constitutional articles on democratic principles. These public performances combined emotional symbolism with legal legitimacy.

This dual framing, opposing authoritarianism while embracing European integration, gave the movement both moral clarity and political direction. Protesters cast themselves not as radicals, but as guardians of Georgia's progress since the early 2000s. For many, the "foreign agents" law was not just a legal threat to civic space, but a betrayal of Georgia's constitutional identity and European trajectory (Venice Commission 2023).

1.4 Emotional Politics and Generational Language

Emotional impact was central to the protest discourse. Activists translated political values into personal experience through recurring themes like betrayal, dignity, and hope, they used active phrasing. Slogans such as *"They are stealing our future"* and *"We will not be silenced"* appeared on protest signs, social media posts, and megaphone chants, giving the movement urgency and drawing in new participants, especially students and young professionals (Mikiashvili 2025).

The protests emerged from spontaneous clusters like university campuses, and digital spaces rather than established NGOs or political elites. According to Mikiashvili, the movement articulated a unified message from the start: *this law must be rejected outright* (Mikiashvili, May 2025). She described the framing as a mix of strategic planning and what she called an "irrational but powerful national identity" fueled by memes, humor, and shared cultural references.

This combination of vulnerability, authenticity, and humor helped build trust and solidarity. The youth-led narrative connected emotional resistance to geopolitical clarity, using informal Georgian-English code-switching on social media to expand the message's reach both domestically and internationally.

1.5 Hybrid Tactics: Digital Infrastructure and Cultural Resistance

Protesters in 2023–2024 combined online organization with street-level action to form what can be called a **hybrid infrastructure of resistance**. The Facebook group *Daitove*

(დაიტოვე – "Offer Shelter") played a key role in early mobilization. Initially set up to help rural protesters find free housing in Tbilisi, it quickly evolved into a grassroots platform with tens of thousands of users sharing protest timetables, legal aid resources, police movement alerts, and messages of solidarity (Khubuluri 2025). Its decentralized structure — lacking formal leadership — made it difficult for authorities to monitor or dismantle.

Protesters also relied on **Telegram** and **Signal** for encrypted coordination and especially **Instagram** for visual storytelling and livestreams documenting police violence. These tools served both **practical and symbolic** purposes: they enabled coordination while projecting an image of youth resilience and innovation to global audiences. Livestreams, in particular, challenged state narratives about foreign interference, instead framing the movement as a transparent, democratic force.

Alongside this digital infrastructure, **protest aesthetics** played a powerful role in shaping collective identity. Visual elements like banners citing Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution and slogans such as *"I Choose Freedom"* helped unify messaging. Rustaveli Avenue itself became a stage for symbolic protest: candles arranged into *"NO RUSSIAN LAW"*, chalk body outlines labeled *"Democracy"*, and EU star projections onto government buildings. These cultural interventions established what Nancy Fraser (1990) describes as **counter publics** - alternative political spaces where marginalized voices construct new imaginaries. Through art and symbolism, youth activists not only opposed the foreign influence law but also contested the government's claim to speak for the Georgian people.

1.6 International Outreach and Narrative Diplomacy

Protest leaders in Georgia understood that international perception plays a crucial role in the country's political landscape. To that end, they developed dual-language messaging and coordinated solidarity actions targeting foreign audiences. Open letters were sent to the European Parliament, the U.S. Congress, and international human rights organizations.

Predominantly English-language hashtags like *#NoToRussianLaw* and *#GeorgiaIsEurope* were used to maintain global visibility and signal alignment with democratic values. This strategy proved effective: EU and U.S. officials echoed the protesters' language in official statements, and major international news outlets adopted the movement's framing of the bill (European Commission 2023; U.S. State Department 2023; Mikiashvili 2025). Through this deliberate engagement, a feedback loop emerged - youth-led discourse shaped diplomatic reactions, which in turn amplified the domestic movement's legitimacy. A key strategic insight emerged from this process: in hybrid regimes that aspire to EU membership, activists can leverage **reputational pressure** from international institutions as a form of accountability.

Chapter 2: State Response and Activist Resilience

This chapter examines the Georgian government's response to youth-led protests against the "foreign agents" law and analyzes how activists adapted their strategies in the face of repression. Authorities employed increasingly aggressive tactics, including police violence, legal harassment, and surveillance tools such as facial recognition and financial penalties to deter dissent. In response, youth movements displayed remarkable resilience by adopting decentralized organizing structures, developing legal defense mechanisms, and advancing counter-narratives. This chapter argues that these dynamics reflect Georgia's slide into a hybrid authoritarian regime and highlights the strategic innovations youth activists have used to survive and resist within a shifting political environment.

2.1 State Response and Repression

During the initial March 2023 demonstrations, riot police deployed water cannons, tear gas, and stun grenades to clear protesters from Rustaveli Avenue. Most crackdowns occurred at night, under low visibility and without legal oversight (OSCE/ODIHR 2024). First responders, including journalists, were exposed to tear gas and subjected to physical violence. Independent media faced especially harsh treatment, as confirmed by multiple eyewitness accounts (Nicholls and Edwards 2024).

In a live interview with *Mtavari Arkhi*, journalist Irakli Bakhtadze recounted how riot police forcibly interrupted their broadcast and injured his colleague, who required several days of medical treatment (Bakhtadze 2025). He further noted that the Ministry of Internal Affairs had ceased responding to emergency calls from journalists, as it had become "understood" that no protection would be provided. These accounts align with reports by Transparency International Georgia and OSCE/ODIHR, which documented the targeted harassment of media personnel during the protests (TI Georgia 2023; OSCE/ODIHR 2024).

Human rights organizations also recorded widespread incidents of excessive force, arbitrary arrests, and intimidation. In 2024, the repression escalated further. Authorities began deploying undercover agents and quick-response teams in unmarked vehicles to conduct unauthorized arrests, often bypassing standard legal procedures (OSCE/ODIHR 2024). Mitchell (2024) emphasizes that, unlike in 2003, Georgia's current security sector is more centralized and loyal to the ruling party, enabling systematic repression without triggering internal institutional rupture.

Activists reported being physically assaulted during detentions and subjected to warrantless searches. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights condemned these actions, warning that the government was violating the fundamental right to peaceful assembly (OSCE/ODIHR 2024).

2.2 Legal Harassment and Surveillance

The Georgian government increasingly weaponized legal and administrative tools to intimidate and exhaust protesters. Several youth movement leaders were charged under vague public order laws, which rarely resulted in convictions but triggered prolonged legal proceedings. The aim was not prosecution but pressure: to impose financial and psychological burdens that would discourage sustained activism (ECNL 2023; TI Georgia 2023). Organizations linked to the protests were subjected to intrusive tax audits and warned of potential funding violations. At the same time, individual activists reported heightened digital surveillance, including phishing attempts and suspicious login alerts (TI Georgia 2023). These measures fostered a climate of fear especially among first-time demonstrators. Some educational institutions also used informal disciplinary threats to deter student participation, though no formal policies were publicly confirmed.

According to opposition strategist Marika Mikiashvili, the government's approach shifted from physical repression to what she called "financial terror." Protesters were issued

administrative fines of up to 5,000 GEL- more than four times the national median monthly

income of 1,200 GEL (Mikiashvili, 2025). Transparency International Georgia confirmed

that facial recognition cameras had been installed near protest sites in Tbilisi, and that footage

was used retroactively to identify and penalize protesters (TI Georgia 2024). These

surveillance systems were supplied by Chinese manufacturers, reflecting a global trend of

authoritarian technology diffusion (TI Georgia 2024). When activists turned to crowdfunding

platforms for support, the state froze domestic fundraising accounts, forcing organizers to

rely on UK-based services instead (Mikiashvili, 2025; TI Georgia 2023). As Mikiashvili

explained, online solidarity became a lifeline, sustaining both the morale and material

capacity of the movement.

The state also launched an aggressive disinformation campaign. Pro-government media

framed the protests as foreign-funded destabilization efforts, labeling participants as "agents

of chaos." Some outlets aired manipulated footage suggesting violence or external

orchestration (Civil.ge 2024; U.S. State Department 2024). This narrative sought to fracture

public opinion: while urban populations generally supported the protests, rural audiences

were more vulnerable to government messaging. The authorities adopted a dual

communication strategy, affirming support for protest rights in international forums while

branding youth activists as extremists at home. This two-faced approach aligns with patterns

common in hybrid authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010; della Porta 2014).

2.3 Activist Adaptation and Resilience

Despite escalating repression, the youth-led movement remained operational. Activists began

organizing "flash protests" to avoid detection and relied on decentralized coordination

systems to track police movements in real time. Digital platforms were used to circulate

urgent alerts about raids, while legal volunteers provided immediate assistance to detainees.

These tactics align with patterns observed in digitally networked protest movements (Tufekci

2017). Activists also documented state violence through livestreams, eyewitness accounts, and video archives - challenging the government's narrative and generating both domestic and international solidarity. By mid-2024, the movement had established a comprehensive support infrastructure, including legal aid, trauma counseling, media outreach, and secure communication tools. Although state repression reduced the visibility of some activities, it failed to dismantle the movement's core networks or suppress its strategic communication. This evolution into a sustained space of civic resistance reflects what Nancy Fraser (1990) terms *counter publics* - alternative arenas where marginalized voices generate oppositional discourse. It also illustrates the adaptive capacity of civil society under authoritarian constraint (della Porta 2014).

Chapter 3: From Protest to Policy - Civic Influence and Generational Change

The youth-led protests transformed Georgia's civic environment and political domain even though the foreign agents law became law. The chapter investigates the quick results generated by the movement together with its extended effects on Georgian society. The research investigates how young activists transformed protest symbolism into political action while altering societal dialogues and reshaping opposition dynamics. The chapter evaluates the worldwide effects of the legislation through the EU accession negotiation freeze and Georgia's modifications to its international alliances. The chapter concludes by evaluating the lasting impact of the 2023-2024 protest wave as a defining moment that reshaped Georgia's democratic accountability and policy influence under its hybrid governance system.

3.1 Immediate Outcomes and Influence

The youth-driven protests against the "foreign agents" law established themselves as a pivotal civic movement in Georgia's post-Rose Revolution period. The movement could not stop the law's adoption, yet its influence extended throughout legislative processes and public attitudes and European relations and Georgian civil society's development.

The law's immediate impact was harshest on independent media and NGOs, many of which faced severe financial restrictions. According to journalist Irakli Bakhtadze (2025), several organizations lost access to European funding almost overnight: *"Our organization shut down the moment the law passed. But we knew exactly why we were fighting."* In his account, financial repression was not incidental but central to the state's strategy - a method of legal authoritarianism aimed at silencing dissent by cutting off its material base. Yet, many media and civic groups resisted, framing their survival as a moral stance against institutionalized repression.

Simultaneously, young organizers worked to convert symbolic protest into long-term political engagement. The Movement for Social Democracy, led by Ekaterine Khubuluri, focused on mobilizing youth and developing their political capacity. *"The success of a movement,"* she explained, *"depends not just on turnout, but on how it adapts and builds competencies."* While her group's party registration bid was unsuccessful, they continued advocacy efforts - eventually securing airtime on Georgia's Public Broadcaster after sustained demonstrations. Khubuluri described the achievement as *"a small victory,"* but one that represented the movement's persistence under adverse conditions.

Journalists tracking the protests observed a generational shift in political engagement. According to Bakhtadze, the protests surfaced a new class of young leaders - not aligned with political parties, but emerging from student, artistic, and professional backgrounds. These actors saw politics not as something to avoid, but as something to claim. The movements born on Rustaveli Avenue may yet evolve into reformist parties capable of reshaping Georgia's political landscape.

Ultimately, the 2023-2024 protests revealed a growing generational divide in Georgian politics and contributed to a redefinition of civic participation in a hybrid regime context. While the law was passed, the movement succeeded in altering both domestic and international narratives about democratic power and accountability in Georgia.

3.2 Political Stalemate

The Georgian Parliament approved the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" through its votes on May 28, 2024 (Parliament of Georgia 2024) after a period of continuous protests as well as the presidential veto and international diplomatic rejection. President Salome Zourabichvili used strong language against the legislation when she vetoed it in May 2024, calling it "unconstitutional, anti-European, and politically suicidal" (Al Jazeera 2024). The Georgian Dream majority in Parliament disregarded the veto to enact the law thus leading

opposition groups to accuse the ruling elite of destroying democracy through institutional control.

The adoption of this law created a swift deterioration between Georgia with its Western alliance partners. Following the EU's December 2023 candidate status grant the European Union expressed its concerns that the new law endangered Georgia's candidacy. The European Commission took official action by freezing all accession-related talks while halting funding programs which supported governance and civil society development in June 2024 (European Commission 2024).

The United States halted part of its strategic partnership with Georgia through a formal announcement due to democratic regression and state violence against peaceful demonstrators (U.S. State Department 2024). Various American and European officials started advocating for financial penalties against senior Georgian Dream party members and travel restrictions for those who participated in the crackdown (Civil.ge 2024).

3.3 Domestic Polarization and Political Realignment

Activists faced a massive setback when the legislation passed, however the extensive duration of protests indicated a fundamental shift. The survey data from CRRC Georgia in May 2024 revealed that 70% of people between 18 and 34 years old opposed the law and EU membership support remained higher than 80% nationwide (CRRC Georgia 2024).

The protests helped to reactivate the opposition movement which had been inactive. Student collectives and informal activist networks together with civil society leaders took control of moral leadership and organizational functions as resistance centers which stepped in to replace old and fractured political parties, Mitchell (2024) highlights, the 2024 protests also drew in civil servants and segments of the private sector, revealing how opposition to the law transcended typical political divisions and became a shared defence of democratic norms.

President Zourabichvili started promoting a transition alliance which would bring European supporter organizations together before the upcoming parliamentary elections.

However, the ruling party remained entrenched. The ruling party employed its loyal media outlets alongside state facilities and administrative power to portray the protests as foreign-sponsored disturbances for domestic nationalism purposes (Transparency International Georgia 2023). Such dual messaging shows the distinctive characteristic of competitive authoritarian regimes by targeting both foreign nations and internal populations.

3.5 Resilience of Civil Society and Movement Legacy

Multiple NGOs and media outlets chose not to register under the new framework following the law's passage because they considered it unconstitutional and because the judiciary lacked independence. The organizations GYLA, TI Georgia and EMC simultaneously initiated domestic legal battles and submitted applications to the European Court of Human Rights (Transparency International Georgia 2023; 2024) to demonstrate how the law violated freedom of association and expression rights. The legal challenges did not stop the protests from creating a new civic imagination. 12 Sartuli, Movement for Social Democracy, Geut, together with unaffiliated regional networks gained political actor status independently from other organizations. The protest infrastructure which included Daitove, Telegram networks and livestream collectives maintained their role as both organizing centers and civic education platforms as well as collective defence mechanisms. Journalists frequently collaborated with protesters to defend them during the protests. According to Bakhtadze the protesters and journalists worked together to identify police officers, track riot units and share information about government meetings. Through our work we became part of the civic resistance (Bakhtadze, 2025). The changing observer-participant relationship demonstrates that independent media evolved into an active space for activism throughout the 2023-2024 protest wave which created politically engaged young citizens.

The 2023-2024 protest movement acted as a public vote to determine how Georgians want their democracy to look. The protest movement showed how youth activists can create political agendas while undermining official authority and gaining foreign backing without official power.

Youth-led movements in Georgia during the 2023-2024 period demonstrate how civic actors can transform political dialogue and restructure societal norms despite facing restrictions on space and institutional domination. The protests did not halt the "foreign agents" law from becoming law, but they developed a strong alternative perspective that drew from constitutional principles and emotional appeal as well as geopolitical awareness. The youth actors used symbolic framing together with hybrid mobilization strategies and digital infrastructure to establish themselves as both moral agents and political stakeholders.

The Georgian case shows how hybrid regimes produce paradoxical results where protesters gain discursive power and reputational benefits but lose out institutionally. The ability of youth movements to maintain civic engagement despite legal threats and surveillance demonstrates their innovative spirit and the weak condition of democratic institutions within semi-authoritarian systems (Levitsky and Way 2010).

The Georgian case exists as part of a larger pattern. Young people throughout Eastern Europe and post-Soviet territories actively fight against authoritarian trends and fight for political responsibility (Tufekci 2017; Keck and Sikkink 1998). The upcoming chapters will study the Georgian movement while comparing it to other youth-led movements in Serbia and Ukraine to gain deeper insights about youth activism under different regime types and political circumstances. Through this comparative analysis we can identify which strategic approaches move between nations while understanding how specific environmental conditions influence results and what role youth movements play in democratic contests and policy shaping.

Chapter 4: Comparative Cases - Youth Movements in Serbia and Ukraine

4.1 Serbia - Otpor! and the Fall of Milošević

The Serbian movement Otpor! functions as a landmark example of youth-led democratic transformation within post-socialist societies. During 1998 Otpor! appeared when Serbia experienced political stagnation combined with economic collapse and growing authoritarian rule under Slobodan Milošević. Despite the ruling party's oppressive policies along with divided opposition forces and widespread youth disinterest, Otpor! transformed young citizens' dissatisfaction into systematic peaceful resistance. The movement utilized symbolic political tools together with grassroots engagement and strategic pressure to help end Milošević's rule, which revealed valuable information about youth activism transforming political systems in hybrid and authoritarian environments (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006; CANVAS n.d.).

Serbia developed into an electoral authoritarian system in the late 1990s because official institutions maintained a formal structure but lost their actual power to the controlling forces. The security forces along with the judicial system and media outlets came under Milošević's control so he could maintain his power through patronage networks and coercive measures (Levitsky and Way 2010). The Kosovo War together with NATO bombing in 1999 led Serbia into a period of increased oppression alongside global diplomatic isolation. The economic breakdown together with high unemployment rates made public trust decline, especially among young people who faced restrictions in both domestic governance and international opportunities. People viewed traditional political institutions as useless and saw opposition parties as either ineffective or involved in collaboration with the government.

4.1.2 Emergence of Otpor!: Redefining Resistance

Students at the University of Belgrade established Otpor! in late 1998 to create a political organization that would avoid traditional partisan affiliations. The organization pursued

moral goals through creative means and nonviolent methods to fight fear and restore civic honor. A new understanding of resistance found strong appeal among people who spent their youth during war times and experienced social isolation (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006). The Otpor! organization established its brand using a black-and-white clenched fist logo which emerged as a cultural symbol representing both defiance and solidarity. The slogans "Gotov je!" ("He's finished!") functioned as immediate indicators for people to show their opposition to the government. Through street performances and graffiti initiatives and flash protests, the movement both challenged the authority of the regime and established dissent as a common practice while converting indifference into collective action (CANVAS n.d.).

4.1.3 Strategy and Infrastructure: Decentralization and Legal Preparedness

Otpor! utilized Gene Sharp's nonviolent strategies while operating through a network of self-governing cells that were based on cell structures, the organizational structure provided strong protection against government crackdowns (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006).. By 2000, Otpor! established its presence in more than 150 Serbian communities and trained thousands of people about protest methods along with media communication and legal protection techniques (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006). Between 1999 and 2000, around 2,000 activists were arrested - turning these detentions into evidence of regime violence. The movement's rights-based training and legal aid structures offered participants a layer of protection from the risks of mobilization.

Otpor!'s policy approach demonstrates the vital need for civic preparedness infrastructure that combines simple legal support systems with leadership training and decentralized structures to help civic movements survive repression and sustain their pressure on established regimes.

4.1.4 The 2000 Bulldozer Revolution

In the September 2000 elections, Otpor!came out with hundreds of thousands of citizens across Serbia for massive voter turnout. The group maintained its nonpartisan stance while building social frameworks that facilitated voter turnout and challenged the legitimacy of the regime. The refusal of Milošević to acknowledge defeat led to a nationwide uprising (BBC 2000).

A massive crowd of hundreds of thousands gathered in Belgrade on October 5, 2000, to start what would be known as the "Bulldozer Revolution." After Milošević abandoned his position, the parliament and state TV headquarters were attacked by protesters who forced him to step down the following day. Otpor! served as more than a symbolic force because it established the conditions for regime change through its work in disrupting narratives while building civic engagement (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006).

After Milošević's fall, Otpor! chose not to form a political party because its members feared elite domination. Otpor!'s members established the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), which developed into a worldwide training center for nonviolent activism. CANVAS materials containing the popular nonviolent conflict toolbox went on to shape youth movements that developed across various regions, including Georgia's Kmara! during the 2003 Rose Revolution (CANVAS n.d.).

Otpor! left behind both domestic and international impacts on its legacy. The youth-led protest movement demonstrated through its decentralized structure and strategic discipline and visually clear approach that hybrid regimes should follow this model for civic action. The importance of investing in long-term civic education and protest resilience and youth political agency becomes clear to both policymakers and democracy promoters.

4.1.5 Comparative Policy Lessons for Georgia

The Georgian protests from 2023–2024 utilized the same methods as Otpor!, including decentralization and emotional messaging and visible protests combined with digital platform

effectiveness. The civic defiance of protesters found its collective identity through slogans which included "We Are Europe" and "No to Russian Law" in the same way "Gotov je!" did (Interview with Bakhtadze 2025).

The underlying framework between these two systems differs substantially. Otpor! functioned within a dying authoritarian regime, but Georgia exists as a hybrid system with stable institutions together with a powerful ruling party. The combined absence of unified opposition forces and conventional political channels for young activists in Georgia restricts their power to convert their symbolic activism into effective policy changes.

The success of Otpor! demonstrates how civic movements should be integrated into democratization frameworks through strategic means. The Georgian government needs to create institutional channels that involve youth through participatory budgeting and student decision-making positions and clear media oversight. Local reformers along with international donors need to support capacity-building initiatives which convert protest power into democratic oversight systems.

The youth agency demonstrated by Otpor! can serve as a democratic transition mechanism because it operates within strategic organizations while using symbolic methods to achieve results under authoritarian regimes. The path to sustained policy impact for such movements requires them to shift from using symbols for disruption toward building institutional power. The transformation of youth-driven mobilizations in Georgia exists as an active and critical open challenge.

4.2 Ukraine - Euromaidan and the Struggle for Europe

During November 2013 through February 2014, Ukraine experienced the Euromaidan movement which changed the course of its political development. The student-initiated protest against EU integration suspension by President Viktor Yanukovych transformed into a complete civic revolution which led to his removal from power. Through the "Revolution

of Dignity," Euromaidan proved that youth leadership combined with digital activism and public participation from all social classes could bring transformative change under authoritarian rule (Wilson 2014; Onuch 2015).

4.2.1 Political Context: A Nation at a Crossroads

The European Union Association Agreement presented to Ukraine in 2013 represented a symbolic step toward democratic principles and economic transformation alongside rule of law requirements (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). President Yanukovych faced pressure from the Kremlin that forced him to stop signing the agreement in November 2013, which caused widespread public dissatisfaction (Sasse 2014). The decision made by Yanukovych in 2013 became a deep point of frustration for many Ukrainians because it felt like a violation of their democratic goals and future prospects for their generation.

Public trust in formal institutions declined at a time when authoritarian rule strengthened and media freedom decreased while elite corruption worsened (Freedom House 2014). The political institutions of the state remained untrustworthy to the public while oligarchic networks took control of state institutions, making conventional democratic processes useless (Way 2015). Similar to the Serbian youth experience, the Ukrainian youth felt excluded from institutional politics yet believed they had the power to change things through civic engagement.

4.2.2 Mobilization - Digital Tools and Youth Agency

The Facebook post of journalist Mustafa Nayyem became the initial catalyst for public protests at Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti), according to Onuch (2015). A massive number of students and young professionals gathered at the site on November 21, 2013. Through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, social media networks played a crucial role in developing protest stories and planning logistics and bypassing state-controlled media outlets (Tufekci 2017; Etling et al. 2014).

The campus of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy functioned as a main hub for civic activism among students. Student unions started strikes along with teach-ins and overnight occupations despite receiving resistance from university administrators (Onuch and Sasse 2016). The networked youth movement of Euromaidan started as a decentralized protest which followed the horizontal organizational model that characterized protests since 2000 (Tufekci 2017).

4.2.3 Escalation and Repression

The violent police response on November 30 to peaceful protesters created a moment that sparked radicalization (Wilson 2014). The movement started with European integration support but evolved into a wider movement seeking accountability from the government as well as justice and dignity for all. The square developed into a self-contained community with medical facilities, legal services, and media centers (Onuch 2015).

The leadership of youth groups expanded their ranks to include civil society organizations, artists, veterans from past movements, and religious clergy. People established volunteer-run defenses along with decentralized defense units throughout the protest area while demonstrating strong civic self-organization (Kuzio 2015). The infrastructure supported the movement through harsh winter weather and intense security operations.

The study demonstrates how protest resilience systems consisting of legal aid networks, independent media, and public health support allow civic pressure to persist through prolonged activism without falling into chaos or despair (Bunce and Wolchik 2011).

4.2.4 Confrontation and Collapse: State Violence and Political Transition

In February 2014, the state security forces' violent confrontation with protesters resulted in more than 100 civilian deaths, which later became known as the "Heavenly Hundred" (Sasse 2014). These fatalities caused an international emergency that split the elite from their support of Yanukovych. Yanukovych faced mounting pressure that forced him to leave Ukraine on February 22. A parliamentary decision brought down Yanukovych from power

before members restored the 2004 constitution to establish a temporary government and schedule new elections (Wilson 2014).

The combination of youth moral advocacy, extensive civic coalitions, and visible government brutality together created a point of no return for Yanukovych's regime (Way 2015). State overreach against nonviolent protesters serves as a crucial mechanism to trigger elite defections, which in turn accelerates regime breakdown—particularly when international observation is present (Levitsky and Way 2010).

4.2.5 Legacy and Policy Relevance

Euromaidan's legacy is complex. The revolution succeeded in removing a corrupt regime, yet Ukraine faces ongoing challenges with institutional reforms as well as territorial stability and elite responsibility (Sasse 2020). The movement established a vital precedent that youth-led civic activism can break powerful regimes while changing national priorities.

Policy-wise, Euromaidan illustrates several key takeaways:

• Digital platforms strategically used by civil society strengthen democratic engagement while expanding civic activism (Tufekci 2017).

• Youth movements achieve success when they operate within established civic frameworks, which include NGOs along with universities, independent media, and legal organizations (Onuch and Sasse 2016).

• Civil movements succeed against repression because they maintain disciplined organization and strong moral backing alongside broad public support (Bunce and Wolchik 2011).

The international EU and OSCE eventually joined the mediation process, but the movement gained its victory from domestic sources. Domestic civic infrastructure stands as the fundamental factor which enables democratic openings to endure (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015).

4.2.6 Lessons for Georgia

The case of Euromaidan offers Georgian youth movements both motivational value and warning signs. The Ukrainian and Georgian youth movements employ digital technology alongside civic imagery to resist authoritarian tendencies. The situation in Georgia differs from Ukraine because its political institutions function more steadily, while its political environment remains less explosive. The ruling party exercises stronger dominance over media channels and voting procedures, yet the fragmentation of powerful groups remains weak (Transparency International Georgia 2024).

Georgia should adopt three important lessons from Euromaidan: how narratives work as a political force, how distributed networks matter, and how to maintain activism past protest peaks. Protest movements fail to achieve transformative change when there is no parallel development of alternative political structures, institutional oversight, and civic education systems.

Chapter 5: Cross-Case Insights

The paths of Otpor! in Serbia, Euromaidan in Ukraine and modern youth activism in Georgia show both the transformative potential and ongoing obstacles that civic agency faces within hybrid and authoritarian regimes. Each movement, despite different political environments, demonstrates that youth serve as vital forces for democratic opposition—yet their ability to reshape governance depends on existing institutional and structural factors. By studying these post-Soviet and post-socialist regions comparatively, we can observe both the common protest strategies and the distinct outcomes that young activists face.

5.1 Shared Repertoires of Action and Organizational Logics

The three cases exemplify Tufekci's (2017) concept of "networked protest": decentralized, digitally coordinated movements that bypass traditional hierarchies. Youth activists in Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia built adaptable, loosely structured networks using tools like encrypted messaging, social media, and localized organizing hubs to respond quickly, adapt to repression, and evade surveillance. From Otpor!'s local cells to Euromaidan's live-streamed occupations and Georgia's Telegram-based coordination through Daitove, digital agility became central to their operational DNA.

Symbolism and narrative also played a critical role in shaping public perception and mobilizing support. Serbia's clenched fist, Ukraine's fusion of national and EU flags, and Georgia's transformation of Rustaveli Avenue into a stage of democratic authorship all reimagined patriotism as a civic duty of resistance (Onuch and Sasse 2016; Tufekci 2017). These symbolic repertoires helped frame protests not just as opposition to authoritarianism, but as morally grounded expressions of public will.

These movements cultivated a culture of participatory citizenship. As journalist Irakli Bakhtadze observed, "Young people no longer expect politicians to lead the way, they're creating their own political groups… those same youths who faced arrest and penalties

continue to stand on Rustaveli Avenue every day" (Bakhtadze 2025). His account points to the rise of a civic generation unwilling to settle for passive opposition, a generation actively forging new paths between street mobilization and institutional engagement.

5.2 Structural Context and Regime Type

While youth-led protest movements in Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia employed similar repertoires, their outcomes varied widely due to structural regime differences.

- **Serbia**: Otpor! confronted a deteriorating personalist dictatorship. A convergence of elite defections, economic instability, and international pressure created a narrow political window. Otpor!'s coordination with opposition parties, backed by disciplined civic resistance, helped trigger Milošević's downfall (Binnendijk and Marović 2006).

- **Ukraine**: Euromaidan escalated after state violence eroded the Yanukovych regime's legitimacy. Elite fragmentation, popular defiance, and international mediation led to regime collapse, but at great human and political cost (Wilson 2014; Sasse 2014).

- **Georgia**: Youth activists confront a more resilient hybrid regime. Georgian Dream operates within formal democratic institutions but undermines them through informal dominance over courts, elections, and media. This competitive authoritarianism relies on managed pluralism, legal intimidation, and procedural control rather than overt violence (Levitsky and Way 2010).

As Marika Mikiashvili noted, Georgia's regime has learned from regional precedents: "They saw how repression backfired in Ukraine, so they prefer boiling-frog authoritarianism, gradual legal pressure rather than violent crackdown" (Mikiashvili 2025). She also observed that while Serbia proposed a 'foreign agents' law in 2024, it stalled, unlike in Republika Srpska, where the law passed. This highlights how regimes adapt suppression strategies to local resistance levels.

These structural differences matter. In Georgia, electoral change remains possible in theory, but institutional capture blocks meaningful reform. Youth movements are visible but remain structurally excluded from influence—a hallmark of hybrid regimes where protest visibility does not translate into institutional leverages (Levitsky and Way 2010).

5.3 The Symbolic Versus the Institutional

The key distinction emerges from how protest forces transform into institutional modifications. The imperfect nature of Otpor! and Euromaidan did not stop them from successfully breaking their respective political systems (Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Onuch and Sasse 2016). The ruling party maintained absolute control over Georgia when the "foreign agents" law passed in 2024 even though people continued to protest.

The assessment of the movement as unsuccessful fails to appreciate its different ways of producing change.

- Patriotism underwent a transformation into a force that opposed the government while separating it from the ruling party's dominance.

- The exposure of democratic deficiencies in Georgia's system intensified local and international criticism of its governance (Transparency International Georgia 2024).

- The movement created sustainable civic systems including legal support networks and protest centers that continue beyond this political crisis.

These movements establish what Nancy Fraser (1990) calls "counterpublics," which function as alternative democratic spaces for cultivating democratic values through practice even when official institutions exclude them.

The creation of such spaces under a regime which seeks total political control constitutes an important form of resistance.

Strategic Dilemmas and Unanswered Questions

The situation in Georgia demonstrates that protest movements face significant obstacles when operating within hybrid authoritarian regimes. Georgian youth movements failed to establish lasting institutional power or develop lasting alliances with traditional opposition parties unlike Otpor!. Unlike Euromaidan, they have not precipitated a regime collapse or catalyze elite defection. The moral clarity and innovative approaches of youth activists do not protect them from structural barriers to formal politics as well as geographical limitations and electoral disadvantages faced by newcomers.

The movements encounter internal problems related to maintaining their coordination and sustaining their operations. Some movement leaders advocate to keep the organization independent and grassroots while others support seeking formal political positions. The strategic disagreement about staying outside institutional politics versus entering it duplicates the post-movement discussions observed in Spanish 15M and Ukrainian post-Maidan civic field (Flesher Fominaya 2014; Wilson 2014). A unified long-term strategy for Georgian youth resistance remains absent which puts the movement at risk of fragmenting before achieving stable civic power.Movement for Social Democracy activist Ekaterine Khubuluri stated: "We did not register as a political party because of an unofficial order from the state. The government fears us but lacks motivation to participate or offer any compromises" (Khubuluri 2025). Her statement represents a fundamental characteristic of competitive authoritarian regimes because they permit symbolic youth civic engagement but actively work to diminish it whenever it poses threats to established power dynamics. The engagement space remains unstable because participants maintain visibility through vocal actions but encounter institutional barriers that prevent their advancement.

The current landscape of international backing faces an unstable situation due to changing domestic limitations. The EU, OSCE and U.S. have strongly supported Georgia's civic space

through official statements yet their ongoing commitment to youth-led movements remains both unpredictable and delayed in its reactions. Many spontaneous organizations operate outside of conventional funding systems that serve established non-governmental organizations. The absence of legal training and digital security support together with continuous mentorship makes youth activists more susceptible to both exhaustion and governmental persecution. External actors who want to support democratic resilience must find ways to bridge this gap if they intend to do more than react to opposition.

The present situation generates several unanswered strategic questions about Georgia's forthcoming trajectory.

·   Youth-led movements need to develop their capabilities from moral protests into policy advocacy which could eventually lead to governance positions like Otpor! alumni through CANVAS.

·   The process of digital activism fragmentation needs to evolve into organized structures that possess policy influence like the civic coordination observed during Euromaidan.

·   What mechanisms - legal, educational, or electoral - are needed to bridge the civic-institutional divide in a system where informal power resists formal accountability?

These questions go beyond academic research because they expose the fundamental challenge of democratic reconstruction in states that emerged from the Soviet era. Institutional change becomes attainable when civic legitimacy unites with political opportunity as Serbia and Ukraine demonstrate in different contexts. Georgia's movement has successfully developed civic legitimacy but needs to achieve political opportunity to advance its cause.

Final Reflections - From Protest to Policy

The 2023-2024 youth protests in Georgia should not receive their sole evaluation based on the status of the "foreign agents" law. Their true value emerges from three critical aspects: the revival of democratic ideas, the restoration of public confidence and the development of youthful power despite challenging circumstances. These initial steps follow the basic progression of public policy development which forms both present-day protests and future requirements for transparency alongside accountability and representation.

The combination of elite shifts with institutional rupture and international pressure and youth movement involvement creates conditions for political transitions according to comparative examples between Serbia and Ukraine. The process in Georgia demonstrates a drawn-out process which depends on sustained civic development and digital infrastructure creation and the formation of youth alliances across different generations.

This research was informed not only by external observation but also by firsthand participation in the GIPA student movement, offering a grounded understanding of youth political agency under pressure.

Public policy actors at home and abroad must dedicate resources to building enduring civic capabilities if they want to tap into this potential. This includes:

● Legal reforms to guarantee freedom of assembly and political participation;

● The educational system needs transformation to teach democratic principles together with civic competencies.

● The government should establish youth councils together with participatory budgeting and political innovation initiatives.

Youth resistance in Georgia requires protection from state oppression while gaining full integration into democratic structures. Protecting protest rights stands as a vital matter yet

remains insufficient by itself. The fundamental test along with potential opportunity emerges from turning protest symbolism into lasting institutional achievements. A dedicated continuous support system must exist to help youth members move from protest activities into policy development and street-based opposition into governance participation. Georgia's youth movements will determine their lasting influence based on their power to transform moral authority into policy effect while institutions demonstrate openness to this change. The question goes beyond civic expression because it serves as a vital element for democratic transformation. Building institutional resilience from below requires legal reform alongside educational investment and political design which treats youth as co-authors instead of disruptors in the democratic project.

The central unfinished in Georgia is forgoing institutional change from the very foundations of civic resistance. However, there is a deeper movement that is quietly emerging from the student assemblies, the digital campaigns, and the marches indicating that a political generation is unwilling to settle for an empty democracy. The work is not done yet, but it is underway. And that shared commitment shows us the beginnings of a more accountable and a participatory future.

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