

# Transformation of Urban Protests in Tbilisi: From Spontaneous Activism to Social Movements

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## Introduction

Urban conflict as a mobilizing factor and a tool for influencing governmental policy has a long history. As processes of urbanization accelerated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cities gradually, and perhaps inevitably, became places where social struggle and emancipation came together (Mayer and Boudreau, 2012: 273). Conflicts originating in cities are not just public responses to restructurings of the built environment; they reflect broader economic, political, and social changes underway in society. As Jacobsson points out, “Urban grassroots mobilizations arise in response to new social cleavages and increased polarization as a consequence of neoliberalization and globalization processes as well as the transformation of state power and authority.”<sup>1</sup>

Henri Lefebvre introduced the city as an analytical category, thus creating room for discussion on the role of urban form in changing politics. Likewise, protests taking place in such space have the capacity for great social change.<sup>2</sup> Broadly conceived, then, the objective of our research is to study the social and political environment of Tbilisi, which served as a fertile ground for the rise of urban activism between 2007 and 2015. Through this discussion, we will also reflect on the political possibilities and controversies that are characteristic of contemporary Georgian society. This study investigates urban activist groups in Tbilisi in an effort to fill gaps in existing literature and to create a platform for further discussion on the potential of urban social movements<sup>3</sup>.

The new wave of urban protest movements analyzed here should be read against the backdrop of the numerous political protests of the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which had different agendas, atmospheres, and groups of attendees. One of the most notable historic protests in Tbilisi took place on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1978, when the city’s main thoroughfare of Rustaveli Avenue witnessed the joint demonstration of Tbilisi State University students and members of the general public defending the official status of the Georgian language. Throughout 1988 and 1989, the center of the city turned into the epicenter of mass rallies, culminating in the bloody massacre of protest participants by the Soviet army on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989. The first years of independence were marred with political protests and the civil war set in the central streets of Tbilisi. Finally, political protest rallies became an integral part of early

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobsson, Kerstin. *Urban grassroots movements in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Lefebvre, H. (1996)[1968]. *The right to the city. Writings on cities*

<sup>3</sup> This work is based on the Anthology of Urban Protest project undertaken by the Heinrich Boell Foundation Southern Caucasian Regional Office. For this study we analyzed nine different protest initiative case studies.<sup>3</sup> For a more complete portrait, we interviewed activists affiliated with Tiflis Hamkari, Safe Zone, Green Fist, Guerilla Gardening and Green Alternative, as well as the non-aligned Gudiashvili Square rally organizers. In all, we conducted fourteen unstructured interviews. The authors would like to thank to Nino Lejava, David Gogishvili, Maia Barkaia, and Suzy Harris-Brandts for their comments on the earlier draft of this paper

21<sup>st</sup> century Georgia, most vividly exemplified by the Rose Revolution of 2003, the November 7, 2007 rally, and April 2009 “cell protests.”<sup>4</sup>

The atmosphere of these protests resembled more that of an angry civil disobedience than positive community engagement. Thus, urban protest movements in Tbilisi passed several stages of development over time. These earlier protests involved political parties contesting official government rule, whereas the later protests discussed in this paper were more focused on acute issues of heritage preservation and changes to the urban environment. These latter protests also utilized different tactics and forms of expression, such as mixing entertainment-based festivals with protesting.

In what follows, we provide a brief history of urban protest movements in Tbilisi, an analysis of the structure of protest groups, and reflections from the protesters themselves. We conclude by assessing the factors of success and failure of these protests and describe the results achieved by urban activism in Tbilisi in recent years.

### **Setting the Scene for Urban Protests: Tbilisi and Urban Movements in an Era of Unfinished Transition**

Throughout the last three decades, Georgia has passed through several stages of transition in its social, economic, and political development. According to historian Stephen Jones, the transition encompassed periods of collapse, reform, stagnation, and acceleration.<sup>5</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, state institutions deteriorated or were hollowed-out, existing with only formal status. The resulting chaos was particularly palpable in the capital: transportation and utility infrastructure were nonexistent; informal buildings, such as garages, and apartment building extensions (ABEs) sprang up; and the streets turned into an arena for armed gangs. The state failed to provide even rudimentary security for its citizens. At the same time, because of the city’s unclear power structures, it was often forced to reckon with a disparate range of interest groups leading to chaotic development.<sup>6</sup>

In the three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, changes to the built form of Tbilisi were generally characterized by a total rejection of planning regulations. A rapid shift to a market economy and the introduction of neoliberal reforms further resulted in dramatic physical transformations to the city. For our research respondents, the reason they decided to join protest movements in Tbilisi was to create a space to reflect upon these changes. The erosion of parks and other public spaces, and a disregard for urban heritage was for them a direct result of such transformations. In addition to any potential professional interests in urban issues or environmental concerns they may have had (for example, as architects, geographers, or urban planners), individual respondents were motivated by a discontent with existing political and economic structures directed toward erasing social activities from

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<sup>4</sup> Kabachnik, Peter. "Prison, Nuisance, or Spectacle? The 2009 “Cell” Protests in Tbilisi, Georgia." *Geopolitics* 18, no. 1 (2013): 1-23.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, Stephen. *Georgia: a political history since independence*. IB Tauris, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Van Assche, Kristof, Joseph Salukvadze, and Martijn Duineveld. "Speed, vitality and innovation in the reinvention of Georgian planning aspects of integration and role formation." *European Planning Studies* 20, no. 6 (2012): 999-1015.

the city. Tantamount to their concerns was the general lack of inclusivity in decision making, and many respondents repeated that they felt that the city should function as a space primarily for its citizens.

In the early 2000s, after the Shevardnadze government managed to consolidate power, the country initiated further reforms to transform itself into a market economy—albeit with varying degrees of success. Stabilization was hampered by the economic crisis originating in Russia in the late 1990s and was linked to widespread corruption in Georgia. Eventually, the malfunctioning political system culminated in the Rose Revolution which took place in November 2003 and resulted in the peaceful removal of the Shevardnadze government. The protests leading up to the Revolution erupted in Tbilisi as a form of public outcry against the manipulation of the 2003 parliamentary elections. These protesters represented a broad spectrum of Georgians including party activists and average citizens expressing discontent with Shevardnadze. Led by Mikheil Saakashvili, the protesters forced Shevardnadze to resign by storming the houses of parliament. Presidential and parliamentary elections following these events officially brought Saakashvili and his party to power in 2004.

Prior to these events, the first major urban protest in newly-independent Georgia took place when several activists and local inhabitants rallied against the mass felling of trees in Dighomi Recreational Park. During the protests, one of our respondents, artist Ana Gabriadze went out of her way to make sure the area retained its recreational status. She even involved politicians, including Saakashvili, who at that time was Chair of the Tbilisi City Council. Gabriadze organized exhibitions of her own work, argued with construction workers, and finally even lied down in front of a bulldozer on the construction site. The destruction of the Dighomi Recreational Park is typical of the attitude toward urban development which existed during Shevardnadze's era. Here, development mainly relied upon the black market, corrupt bureaucrats, and their cast of shady contacts.<sup>7</sup> Protest actions such as those of Gabriadze were thus crucial to garnering public opposition.

The period following the Rose Revolution is particularly significant for our study due to a number of structural changes that the Revolution brought about. The so-called "Georgian Economic Miracle" was based on a neoliberal developmental model involving mass privatizations and de-regulation.<sup>8</sup> This was a time when the central government—and to a large extent the president himself—were powerful players in various aspects of urban planning. Responding to the changes of this period, an extremely important wave of protests was initiated by the activists affiliated with Tbilisi-based heritage preservation group, Tiflis Hamkari. In 2007 the organization had begun a series of protests against the demolition of a house at 2 Leonidze Street. But according to the organizers, this particular rally had failed to attract large-scale popularity. As a result, the house was demolished. However, the protests were effective in convincing

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<sup>7</sup> Van Assche, Kristof, Joseph Salukvadze, and Martijn Duineveld. "Speed, vitality and innovation in the reinvention of Georgian planning aspects of integration and role formation." *European Planning Studies* 20, no. 6 (2012): 999-1015. P. 12

<sup>8</sup> Van Assche, Kristof, Joseph Salukvadze, and Martijn Duineveld. "Speed, vitality and innovation in the reinvention of Georgian planning aspects of integration and role formation." *European Planning Studies* 20, no. 6 (2012): 999-1015; Lazarus, Joel. "Neo-Liberal State Building and Western „Democracy Promotion:“ the Case of Georgia." In *7th Pan European Conference on International Relations*. 2010; Van Assche, Kristof, Joseph Salukvadze, and Martijn Duineveld. "Speed, vitality and innovation in the reinvention of Georgian planning aspects of integration and role formation." *European Planning Studies* 20, no. 6 (2012): 999-1015.

the developer to build a four-story structure instead of the initially-planned seven-story one. Although the Leonidze protests failed to restrain the demolition of the building, it did establish a new trend in protests in Tbilisi. These trends included exhibitions, historical city tours, and other non-violent forms of expression which were applied to social activism as a form of protest, a practice unseen before.

The same group remained at the forefront of preservation issues in the city in the following years. Tiflis Hamkari was responsible for organizing protests against the dismantling of the former Marxism and Leninism Institute (IMEL) building on Rustaveli Avenue. Still, the largest protest they undertook was the epic battle for the defense of Gudiashvili Square, an important historic area located in the Old City. Although the initial rallies for preserving the square took place in 2007, they fully transformed into large-scale protests in 2011 when architectural renderings of the square's reconstruction appeared on social media.<sup>9</sup> That same summer, Tiflis Hamkari set up an archival photo display on the square to help raise awareness about its importance as a public space. Soon after, a larger group of activists formed to protest the transformations of the Square.

Interestingly, the group aimed to arrange rallies that would look like festivals. So-called "Mini-fest as Manifesto" events were organized in the hope of attracting larger audiences. These events integrated elements of entertainment, such as live music, theatrical performance, and carnival with more serious demands for heritage preservation. Such rallies completely rethought the forms of expression in public protests that had been in existence for decades. These new modes of protest were also implemented in later events, becoming a popular tool of mobilization in the hands of the public. This novel form of protest established at Gudiashvili Square was also quickly taken up by other groups such as Guerilla Gardening, an activist group founded in 2013 and concerned with greening underutilized spaces in Tbilisi.

In addition to the struggle to preserve the heritage of the city, protests against environmental issues were common during this period. For example, in 2010, when the government announced its plans to construct a new highway in the Vere Gorge, online activists created the "Save Mziuri" Facebook group. This page promoted protest against the loss of vegetation in the park and its adjacent river gorge and aimed to protect the area from potential developers.

In 2012 the country witnessed parliamentary elections. It was hoped that the changing government would bring about a new era in heritage and environmental preservation. In the buildup to elections, the opposition Georgian Dream Coalition readily expressed its sensitivity to cultural heritage and urban development.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, after the elections the public saw no significant change in investors' or the government's approach to urban spaces. Environmental activists particularly stepped up their effort, rallying for the preservation of a park at 10 Asatiani Street in 2013 and later for the preservation of the so-called "Squirrels Area" on a slope adjacent to Turtle Lake.

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<sup>9</sup> Zechner und Zechner GmbH. 2011. "Gudiashvili Square Redevelopment." December 16, 2011. [http://www.worldarchitecturenews.com/?fuseaction=wanappln.projectview&upload\\_id=18360](http://www.worldarchitecturenews.com/?fuseaction=wanappln.projectview&upload_id=18360).

<sup>10</sup> Bidzina Ivanishvili-Georgian Dream Electoral Bloc - Electoral program <http://www.ivote.ge/images/doc/pdfs/ocnebis%20saarchevno%20programa.pdf> [seen: 20.02.2016]

In 2014 news spread that a private investor was planning to build a hotel in Vake Park and the members of Guerilla Gardening started to mobilize to prevent the construction. The Vake Park rally was a combination of several elements. Participants camped out in tents for eight months in order to obstruct any attempt of construction activities. Vake Park protests also utilized the Gudiashvili Square model outlined above, with concerts and performances being used to garner greater public support. As of 2018, the project continues to be suspended, as the Guerilla Gardeners have gone to court to have the construction permit annulled.

In 2015, the Georgian Dream government announced two large-scale reconstruction projects in Old Tbilisi which threatened existing public space. The Mirza-Shafi Street reconstruction and the Panorama-Tbilisi project instigated another wave of protest as citizens considered such actions to be a continuation of the same type of unilateral approaches to urban development employed by the previous government. Following the presentation of these two projects, a protest movement organizing under the title “No to Panorama,” represented the first time in the city’s history when several protest groups came together in solidarity to resist top-down development. This is how what has come to be known as the “Together Movement” was born. The “No to Panorama” movement involved both street rallies and judicial components. On the one hand, the Movement organized protest rallies against the development while also relying heavily on courts to address the dispute.

### **Protesters, the Arena of Protests, and Party Politics**

In studying the structure of these protest groups, we found that the majority were not formally established organizations and had no clear leader, with each member having equal rights. Many of our respondents noted that they did not view the formalization of their movement as a necessity, preferring instead a model of participation with an open framework. For example, as Mariam Bakradze, a Guerilla Gardener said: “Guerilla Gardening is an ordinary civic organization, whose main value and attraction lies in it being a *movement*, not an *organization*: it being a live, ongoing process.” Similarly, recruitment into the Guerilla Gardeners followed an open membership approach, where interested participants were not subjected to any particular qualifying procedures. This model of participation extended to funding structures, with the majority of groups being funded through voluntary member contributions. On the one hand, self-funding and enthusiasm-based activism ensured that urban protest groups were freer in their action planning and execution. On the other, however, if more secure sources of funding were available, these groups may have had more access to the resources needed to better mobilize people to take part in their protests.

Even though the scene of urban activism in Tbilisi encompasses several groups, the methods they use to plan and organize rallies share certain key approaches. For example, the use of social networks to mobilize members and disseminate information is a common practice. The activists mostly communicated via Facebook, which proved to be a useful tool in recruitment, and the discussion and decision-making processes. Actions were mainly planned in closed Facebook groups where a consensus was reached by various methods. There are, however, notable exceptions. Members of the “Green Fist” movement abandoned Facebook as a platform to make important decisions and because they preferred in-person meetings to discuss various issues, including planning rallies. Green Fist member Khatia

Maghlaperidze stated: “face-to-face meetings are important; however much you may post on Facebook, meetings are still necessary. Once every few days, or even every day during times of crises, we will meet and talk about what needs to be done. Tbilisi State University garden is usually the place.”

In most of the activist groups studied, members did not explicitly engage with official party politics, but still saw their actions as political. For these activists, involvement in popular protest was a crucial expression of citizenship. Urban activists try hard to maintain distance from partisan politics because they were worried about being manipulated by politicians. For example, Manana Kochladze stated: “when politicians show up... they start to manipulate.” However, as her colleague Mariam Bakradze reiterated, anything urban activists undertake is indeed political: “everything that surrounds us, everything that is happening is certainly politics.” Another protester, Nika Davitashvili of Guerilla Gardening claimed: “it is not only what happens in parliament, with the government administration, in the city council, or city hall... there is much more politics in what ordinary citizens do.”

There are several actions that have prevented party politics from creeping into the city’s protests and rallies. For example, activist groups have prevented the presence of overt political symbols, including party slogans and flags and have instead requested that politicians participate solely as citizens. That said, the disagreement about the co-existence of social and political components within the same protest was a key factor that inhibited the consolidation of the city’s various protest movements. Conflict within the “Together Movement” in 2015 is a good example. The movement organized a rally against the Panorama Tbilisi project on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015, where all the groups participating were represented by their respective insignia: Guerilla Gardeners were wearing green caps, while Green Fist brought red and green flags. The rally attracted a large crowd and was very impressive and quite noisy. As it ended, however, it became evident that the groups involved disagreed about a number of issues, such as the degree to which political opinions should be expressed at a rally. In line with this, red flags used by Green Fist had been perceived as a deal breaker, as they were too affiliated with the group’s political stances. Some participants thought such paraphernalia gave the rallies an unacceptable political shading. As the disagreement deepened, the Together Movement unfortunately disbanded.

Notwithstanding our respondents’ lack of official political involvement, some emphasized that anyone who was actively engaged with the cause should ensure that political demands are made. For instance, Tiflis Hamkari activists Alexandre Elisashvili and Tamar Amashukeli expressed the need to shift urban topics into mainstream political discourse. Moreover, Elisashvili eventually ran as an independent candidate in the 2017 Tbilisi mayoral elections and was able to finish second after government-endorsed candidate Kakha Kaladze.

## **Reflections of Protesters**

Our interviewees’ assessments varied when they spoke of the results that the movement had brought about. Their ambivalent attitudes could be explained by their differing opinions and expectations about what the protests were supposed to accomplish. The respondents extensively discussed both extremes: the shortcomings of their groups’ activities and their most positive and memorable experiences. For the

majority of our informants, these included the Gudiashvili Square protests, the “No to Panorama” movement, and the Vake Park rallies.

The main indicator of success described by most respondents was the temporary suspension of the opposed projects. Interestingly, other respondents deemed this outcome as one of the demonstrations’ failures since there was no guarantee against future development. Reflecting the former position, Nika Loladze of Guerilla Gardening stated: “If we consider both rallies [Gudiashvili Square and Vake Park] successful, then success will lie in freezing the problem, not resolving it.” Expressing a more ambivalent position, Tamar Gurchiani claimed: “If we measure success by the fact that Gudiashvili Square is not a Chanel boutique store now, then yes, we were successful. But, they still managed to turn the area into a hell.”

Another positive outcome the respondents named was informing the public more broadly and raising awareness on urban issues. Right up to the Gudiashvili rallies, almost all the protests “either had been directed at state-level problems or had taken place with each group defending the rights of their own” (Nika Loladze). As a result, respondents felt that today the number, geography, and interests of those involved in urban protest movements are much larger than before. More people are getting to know about the various local hot-spots in Tbilisi, which has had a very tangible result. Being more informed also diminished the citizens’ sense of indifference. Just based on the Vake Park movement alone, many people concluded that their voice mattered and that there was a point in them taking to the streets.

### **Concluding remarks**

Over the course of the past three decades, activism in Tbilisi has shifted from political critiques to more focused concerns related to the built environment. Describing urban social movements more broadly, Della Porta and Diani claim that informal contacts based on shared beliefs and solidarity on the one hand, and conflicts that will unite people and groups on the other, are crucial components to effective urban social movements. The empirical data we collected corroborates such claims.<sup>11</sup> We found that informal contacts play a significant role in the lives of urban groups, helping the activists to solve their problems. While Tbilisi’s urban social movements have been effective on many fronts, the range of issues addressed by the protesters remained limited, including only those of urban heritage, cultural and historical identity, and the environment. Economic inequality, the right to decent housing, and homelessness, often remained outside the focus of Georgian urban protesters.<sup>12</sup>

The groups in Tbilisi used different resistance tactics—noisy rallies, performances, and legal struggles—and were generally characterized by the specific features suggested by Manuel Castells: their protests

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<sup>11</sup> Della Porta, Donatella, and Mario Diani, eds. *The Oxford handbook of social movements*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> The only exception was the initiative suggested by Urban Reactor and entitled “House for All” in which the activists reacted to eviction of refugees from various buildings.

were related to the city; and they were limited by and based in a particular urban area.<sup>13</sup> Apart from these features, group identity, ideological position, and organized collective demands plays a significant role for urban social movements,<sup>14</sup> and this was as well evidenced in the case of Tbilisi.

In the course of analyzing the origins of urban social movements in Tbilisi, we became aware of the role that the social and political environment has played in their development. According to sociologist Sidney Tarrow,<sup>15</sup> people generally engage in contentious politics when new opportunities for resistance emerge. The changes that began during the latter stage of Shevardnadze's regime and led to the Rose Revolution could be seen as one such opportunity for urban protests in Tbilisi. Indeed, the Rose Revolution brought about major changes, but establishing effective public protest in its aftermath was also challenging. For example, while Tiflis Hamkari stepped up its activities in 2006, its efforts still remained spontaneous and lacked mass popularity. The political rallies of November 2007 and their well-shaped organizational character overshadowed other, less prominent, forms of urban activism taking place at the same time.

When the Georgian Dream coalition attempted to introduce urban issues in its political agenda prior to the parliamentary elections of 2012, these issues began to receive greater attention, which also created a new opportunity for resistance. As the activists themselves reflected, under the new government politicians appeared to hear their concerns but fell short of implementing actual changes, whereas under the previous government their voices were hardly heard at all.

Urban social movements in Tbilisi are now being presented with an opportunity to shift towards conventional party politics, an arena that could gain them more mainstream popularity. Entry into party politics by some activists, such as Elisashvili or Amashukeli, suggests that the urban agenda will shortly take up a significant portion of Georgia's political discourse and that spontaneous activism will gradually turn into a more structured social movement strongly grounded in its urban roots. For those in support of these issues, this points in the direction of more promising future.

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<sup>13</sup> Castells, Manuel. *The city and the grassroots: a cross-cultural theory of urban social movements*. No. 7. Univ of California Press, 1983, page 328

<sup>14</sup> Tilly, Charles. *Regimes and repertoires*. University of Chicago Press, 2010, page 185

<sup>15</sup> Tarrow, Sidney G. *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. Page 29