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## Urban Protest Movements in Tbilisi: Social Movements are Strong, but Big Capital is Stronger

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1 Kunchulia, K. 'vakis parki: vin chaitsvams "qvitel zhiletebs" tbilisshi?' ['Vake Park: Who Will Wear Yellow Vests in Tbilisi?'], 17 January 2019, Radiotavisupleba. <<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ვაკის-პარკი-ვინ-ჩაივტავს-ყვითელ-ვილეთებს-თბილისში-/29715904.html>> accessed 17 August 2019.

2 Liberali, 'qvelapers gavaketeḃ, rata vakis parkshi sastumro ar ashendes – kaladze' ['Kaladze: "I Will Do All in My Power to Stop Hotel Construction in Vake Park"'] 18 January 2019, Journal Liberali. <<http://liberali.ge/news/view/42550/qvelapers-gavaketeḃ-rata-vakis-parkshi-sastumro-ar-ashendes--kaladze>> accessed 17 August 2019.

3 Tsintsabidze, A., 'A Human Victory at Vake Park', 8 February 2019, Open Society – Georgia Foundation <<https://osgf.ge/voice/vakis-parkis-kacuri-gamarjveba/>> accessed 17 August 2019.

In mid-January 2019, Tbilisian urban activists prepared to wear yellow vests in protest. In the words of Nata Peradze, one of the key organisers of the urban environmental group, Guerrilla Gardeners: 'If the hotel construction is renewed in Vake Park, protests will also resume, and it's possible we will witness events similar to the yellow vests revolution in Tbilisi'.<sup>1</sup> Contestation over Vake Park started back in early 2014, when the construction of the Budapest Hotel was announced, triggering the most comprehensive urban mobilisation effort in defence of a recreational space in Tbilisi's recent history. Resonating with the tactics of the wave of the Occupy Movements in cities across the globe, the Vake Park defenders camped in tents for about eight months, hosted dozens of concerts, performances, public gatherings and prevented construction activities through their physical presence before the construction halted due to the court order. Urban activists such as Guerrilla Gardeners and the environmental NGO Green Alternative have engaged in a five-year long legal battle with the city government and investors. Finally, in January 2019, the Supreme Court of Georgia ruled that the permit for constructing a hotel in one of the central largest parts of Tbilisi, the Vake Park, could not be annulled and that construction should resume.

Surprisingly, the activists found an unexpected ally: Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze from the ruling party, Georgian Dream. Kaladze, who was elected in 2017, long after Vake Park protests, promised that he would do his best to stop the hotel construction.<sup>2</sup> The mayor met with the representatives of different concerned civic organisations, and afterwards personally negotiated with investors the relocation of the construction to another site. The city government's decision did not leave the activists content. Anano Tsintsabidze, a local urban activist and leader of the Initiative for a Public Space, an organisation instrumental in the Vake Park protests, outlined her concerns in a written analytical contribution. She argued that 'while we celebrate the victory [over Vake Park], we have to be clear that saving one park is not a victory, victory will be making systemic changes in city politics'.<sup>3</sup> Tsintsabidze contended that even if City Hall heard popular discontent in the case of Vake Park, officials preferred to solve the problem behind closed doors instead of engaging with legal, institutional mechanisms. Moreover, the mayor's decision to selectively back the Vake Park case highlights the hypocrisy of Georgia's political system. When it comes to other major urban development projects, the city

government disregards civic mobilisation and discontent, effectively siding with big capital.

In this essay, we build on and elaborate Tsintsabidze's analyses. We suggest that while Georgian urban movements came to gain substantial mobilisation power, at points influencing urban planning and governance-related decisions, these movements are always a few steps behind large capital in their capacity to shape urban politics. We kick off our discussion with a brief description of the context of the broader politico-economic shifts in Georgia. Through this lens, we analyse how urban movements came into existence in Tbilisi and gained substantial experience and voice while remaining largely excluded from urban planning and governance. The article is informed by the ongoing research of the three authors on different social movements throughout past five years which were published in both Georgian and English language edited volumes.<sup>4</sup> Empirically, we rely on our previously collected research material, on ongoing close observation of political developments in Tbilisi and on recent media articles.

### Political Turmoil During the Adoption of a Market Economy

To understand the context in which urban movements grew in independent Georgia, two important aspects of political-economic changes during the adoption of a market economy should be outlined. Firstly, much like many other former socialist states, since gaining independence in early 1990s, Georgian society has faced severe economic collapse followed by social insecurity and the impoverishment of a significant proportion of the population. The early independence years were also marred with two ethnic conflicts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and one civil war, as well as a long-lasting contestation over political power. The history of adopting market economy can be broken down into three phases. The post-collapse years in the 1990s were associated with the slow stabilisation of the political environment, although state institutions were weak and corruption was all-encompassing. The nation-wide deterioration of the socio-economic situation resulted in an everyday struggle for survival. While market institutions were slowly introduced, the process left room for differentiation between the 'winners' and the 'losers' of transition. The second phase of adopting the market economy was kickstarted after the Rose Revolution of 2003. This period saw radical market reforms, as

4 Berikishvili, E., and da Sichinava, D. 'tbilisis sakalako protestis transpormatsia: spontanuri aktivizmidan sotsialur modzraobamde' [Transformation of Urban Protest in Tbilisi: From Spontaneous Activism towards Social Movement], in Sichinava, Chigholashvili, and Zazanashvili, Berikishvili (eds), *kalaki chvenia! urbanuli protesti da politika tbilishi [The City is Ours! Urban Protest and Politics in Tbilisi]* (Tbilisi: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2016), pp. 29–50.

### Activists' backgrounds and motivations

This work is based on the Anthology of Urban Protest project undertaken by the Heinrich Böll Foundation Southern Caucasian Regional Office. For this study we analysed nine different protest initiative case studies. 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 organisers. In all, we conducted fourteen unstructured interviews. Moreover, we base our findings on the private experiences of the authors gained through participant or nonparticipant observation on protest rallies or our direct involvement as ordinary citizens.

While looking at the demography of the activists we found out that the age groups of people who participate in the protests differs greatly. In particular, their age varies from 20 up to 60, they are usually university graduates, engaged in intellectual work often associated with preservation of cultural heritage, urban studies, architecture and geography, serving as one of the motivators for their involvement in activism. As for the geography of the participants – most of them live in the central parts of the city. In a way, we are dealing with relatively privileged social groups who can invest their time and often funds into the protests.

The motives of the activists are diverse; however, in most cases it is the professional interest in urban development issues that drove our respondents. For them involvement in protest actions became a way for 'professional realisation', with the site of protest serving as the 'space of realisation'. Being aware that city development is going in the wrong direction became a significant stimulus to join the protests. Another sufficient reason is the unsatisfactory living environment, and activists often referred to the lack of being involved in city development processes and the need to claim the city as theirs being the factor for their involvement in protests. Often, personal motives make up another reason why people grew socially active. Some of our respondents noted that their friends' involvement had been a great influence. At some point during the research it became evident that it would be quite complicated to seek informants of diverse social affiliations, which also speaks to the peculiarity of the protest movements in question.



Jens Liebchen, Gudiashvili Square reconstruction site, March 2019

Photo: Jens Liebchen, March 2019.



Panorama Tbilisi project

Photo: Esmā Berikishvili, August 24, 2019.

well as the strengthening of state institutions, including state repressive and coercive power, and deepening socio-economic inequalities. Finally, since the peaceful electoral power change in 2012, Georgian politics has been marked by the continuation of market-reliant reforms, albeit with slightly more of a social cohesion component and significantly reduced overt state violence and repression.<sup>5</sup>

The implication of these three phases for urban movements is that the substantive mobilisation energy of Georgian society was, for a significant period of time, directed at broader democratisation efforts, revolutionary protests and violent and lately also peaceful changes in political power. Hence, the emergence of specifically urban social movements, understood as those ‘social movements through which citizens attempt to achieve some control over their urban environment (the urban environment comprises the built environment, the social fabric of the city, and the local political processes)’,<sup>6</sup> only gained momentum by the mid to late 2000s. Importantly, the peaceful change of power in 2012 was perceived by various social movements, including urban movements, as a substantial widening of political opportunities, marking diversification and increasingly vocal mobilisation of urban movements.

Secondly, a significant contextual aspect behind the rise of urban movements in Tbilisi is the uniquely aggressive and extensive neoliberal transformation of the city since the Rose Revolution of 2003.<sup>7</sup> The new government of 2003 inherited from their incumbents a systemic disregard for urban planning, and a diversity of extralegal urban development, be it waged by individual urban dwellers (garages, building extensions, and land appropriation) or larger-scale construction projects executed by intertwined business and political elites. While the post-revolution government managed to consolidate state administrative capacity and gained more power in shaping urban development, they ignored the pressing need for reintroducing transparent, socially and environmentally sensible urban planning and actively engaged in disposing urban space to privatisation on the one hand, and state-led large construction and developmental projects on the other. Hence, two aspects of post-revolution urban politics – top-down, unaccountable and erratic decision-making and an unprecedented scale of private construction in previously green or public spaces – prompted urban dwellers to start mobilising in defence of urban heritage, cultural and historical identity and environment. In addition to

5 Baumann, E. ‘Post-Soviet Georgia: The Rocky Path towards Modern Social Protection’, 10 September 2010, European Social Policy Analysis ESPANET. <[http://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins\\_textes/divers12-06/010053217.pdf](http://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins_textes/divers12-06/010053217.pdf)> accessed 17 August 2019

Rekhviashvili, L. ‘Development and the Role of the State: Visions of Post-Revolutionary Georgian Government’, *Caucasus Social Science Review*, vol. 1, no.1 (2013), pp. 1–20.

Rekhviashvili, L., ‘Counterbalancing Marketisation Informally: Georgia’s New Institutional Reform and its Discontents’, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2016), pp. 255–272. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0965156X.2016.1260657>>

Timm, C., ‘A Liberal Developmental State in Georgia? State Dominance and Washington Consensus in the Post-communist Region’, Research Paper no. PFH.FOR.058.1403, Private University of Applied Sciences. <[https://www.pfh.de/fileadmin/Content/PDF/forschungspapier/a-liberal-developmental-state-in-georgia\\_timm.pdf](https://www.pfh.de/fileadmin/Content/PDF/forschungspapier/a-liberal-developmental-state-in-georgia_timm.pdf)>

6 Pruijt, H. ‘Urban Movements’, in Ritzer (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 1. <<http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/b.9781405124331.2007.>>

7 Salukvadze, J. ‘Market Versus Planning? Mechanisms of Spatial Change in Post-Soviet Tbilisi’, in Assche, Salukvadze, and Shavishvili (eds), *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi: Where Europe and Asia Meet* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), pp. 159–185; Salukvadze, J., and Golubchikov, O., ‘City as a Geopolitics: Tbilisi, Georgia – A Globalizing Metropolis in a Turbulent Region’, *Cities*, vol. 52 (2016), pp. 39–54. <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.11.013>>.

these topics, in recent years increasing motorisation rates enabled by car infrastructure development, lack of parking regulation and insufficient public transport provision, placed pollution and traffic regulation on the agenda of urban movements.

## A Brief History of Urban Movements

Tbilisi’s contemporary urban activism is nurtured from the socio-political complexities of transition to capitalism, although the role of protest traditions should not be denied. One key source of urban activism stems from the late 1980s when the shattered Soviet system started tolerating protests. In this period, heritage activists protested Soviet military drills at the Davit Gareja military training area, and environmental activists resisted the construction of the Transcaucasian Railway. Indeed, all these initiatives were mostly nationalistic in character, although they also highlighted the fact that environmentalist and heritage preservation issues were salient political questions for Georgians. These types of protests were soon swallowed up and overtaken by political rallies. During the last three decades of Georgia’s political history, the country’s capital was the epicentre of protests for the country’s independence, demonstrations against incumbent presidents and governments and revolutions. These rallies featured a dramaturgy of despair and radicalism. Protests were often choreographed by the political parties which by playing the existing dissent against political class in the country’s society tried to achieve specific political goals.

Starting from 2007, issues of urban development became salient for a selected group of activists. Their newly incepted activism was an outcry against the overt neoliberalisation of urban planning practices, especially in the field of heritage preservation. As the rules of preservation were manipulated to accommodate investors, several buildings lost heritage status and were privatised. These facts ignited various protests between 2007 and 2010. Rallies against demolitions of a historic building on Leonidze street and the Institute of Marxism and Leninism building on Rustaveli street were the first and the most vocal of its kind. Tbilisi’s newly emerged urban movements came to a head in 2011 when a group of activists staged a permanent protest against the rebuilding of Gudiashvili Square in the historic district of Tbilisi. The Gudiashvili protests brought



shifts to both the dramaturgy and programming of Tbilisi's urban movements. Theatrical performances and a festive atmosphere at rallies attracted even those who previously were reluctant to participate in any protest rally. The carnivalesque undertone of urban protests were later adopted by other groups as well.

The change of Georgia's political leadership in 2012 did not necessarily bring dramatic shifts in politics or economic approaches. Continued neoliberal policies meant that the issues which kept urban activists mobilised were still relevant, even, in some cases, more acute. For instance, Guerilla Gardening, which emerged as the vanguard of urban activism, engaged in struggles for preserving Tbilisi's green areas which faced encroachment from a growing number of developers. The Vake Park protests described in this piece were also part of this struggle at an earlier stage. Tbilisi's scattered urban movement scene came together against a multi-billion Panorama Tbilisi project. The Panorama Tbilisi protests showed the potential of unity and simultaneously exposed the weaknesses of urban activism in Georgia. The Panorama Tbilisi project was initiated by former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who also happens to be the wealthiest man in Georgia. The project, which envisages constructing large office and hotel buildings in the very centre of the town, was met with fierce opposition from urban movements. The Panorama Tbilisi protests brought together all urban activist groups in Tbilisi under the umbrella of the Together movement. The movement staged several protest rallies against the construction of Panorama Tbilisi Project and against Ivanishvili but without success. While urban protest rallies



**Gudiashvili protests 8 February 2012**

Photo: Tsira Elisashvili

8 ITV, 'koepitsientebis mateba da ka-2 koepitsientebis gaqidva aghikveteba – kaladze' ['Kaladze: "Increases and purchases will be prevented"'], 15 February 2019. <[https://itv.ge/news/kakha-kaladze-koeficientebis-mateba-da-ka-2-koeficientebis-gayidva-aghikveteba/?fbclid=IwAR2n03UgncAOrRP8UMKPoWML2VqVMhU8qb7f0UKki\\_hXm\\_e2KsWSBdvCLb0](https://itv.ge/news/kakha-kaladze-koeficientebis-mateba-da-ka-2-koeficientebis-gayidva-aghikveteba/?fbclid=IwAR2n03UgncAOrRP8UMKPoWML2VqVMhU8qb7f0UKki_hXm_e2KsWSBdvCLb0)> accessed 17 August 2019.

had been successful in countering isolated incidents of urban encroachment, they failed to counter a multi-billion project backed by the most powerful man in the country.

### Experienced but Still Powerless Against Big Capital

It is undeniable that over the past decade Tbilisian urban movements have consolidated a substantial mobilisation power, collected the experience of deploying diverse repertoires – from street protest and physical occupation of spaces to media visibility and court case filing– and hence carved out a political opportunity space for having their voices heard, at points influencing urban planning and governance-related decisions. Beyond the victory with the Vake Park case, other developments in Tbilisi urban politics also reflect direct and indirect influence of urban movements' efforts. Among those, raising levels of public awareness concerning issues of urban environment and broadened social base and spatial spread of urban movements are key. In addition, the recent Mayoral elections resonated with popular concerns, and the current Mayor Kakhi Kaladze emphasised urban environmental issues in his electoral campaign. Despite his initial stiffness, the mayor also had to submit to the demands of Tbilisi metro drivers, increasing their salaries as of January 2019. Beyond solving some contentions behind closed doors, the mayor and his political team are indeed changing formal regulatory frameworks primarily to constrain the wild construction sector.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, the city invests increasingly in upgrading the public transport fleet with low-emission vehicles, targeting the phasing-out of older buses from Tbilisi's streets. On the national level, the state is slowly but steadily reintroducing emission controls and vehicular technical check-ups, in an attempt to address environmental concerns.

At those points where the state activates the coercive and repressive apparatus, social mobilisation in response is prompt and vocal and usually not marked by further repression. Protests in May 2017 against a police raid on the Bassiani Club are illustrative. Thousands of young people gathered in defence of urban cultural spaces against police violence in May, staging so called 'dancing' or 'techno' protests, behind the slogan 'we dance together we fight together'. The success of these protests and associated movements is debated, but seen in a historical perspective, especially



**Protesting Panorama Tbilisi project  
31, January, 2015**

Ivane Goliadze

9 Lorusso, M, 'The Panorama Tbilisi Project: A Monster in Town', 4 April 2018, OBC Transeuropa. <<https://www.balcanicaucasus.org/eng/Areas/Georgia/The-Panorama-Tbilisi-project-a-monster-in-town-186839>> accessed 17 August 20.

comparing in the post-Rose Revolution context, the very fact that quick and wide-based mobilisation is possible, and that the state refrains from further repression is already an important development. In summary, at this point urban movements are capable of waging and, to a degree, of winning some conflicts without facing too severe consequences in terms of a repressive backlash.

It is also undeniable that the key obstacle to strengthening urban movements in Tbilisi is big capital, which is enmeshed with the state apparatus and beyond the reach of any popular accountability. The Panorama project, the largest urban development project that Tbilisi has witnessed since independence, recently labelled as 'a monster in town' or 'a pharaonic real estate project', is illustrative of the limits of urban mobilisation.<sup>9</sup> Despite the unprecedented mobilisation against the Panorama project and the unique merging of numerous urban movements, the project's execution has not been hampered. Behind it is the Georgian Billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, a man who contributed to the toppling of the post-revolution government, now ex-prime minister and leader of the ruling party. Despite distancing himself from the government, he is widely seen as the shadow, de facto ruler of Georgia. In principle, under his shadow rule, urban as well as national governments increasingly bend to accommodate popular discontent, keeping aggressive and violent coercion to the minimum. However, his private development projects go unhampered, draw on state resources and consistently ignore dissenting voices.

The limits of Tbilisian urban movements then are once more entangled with broader democratisation challenges. It is certainly unclear if power shifts should be expected any time soon. The government currently retains loyalty to the strong man, while smoothing out popular discontent by permitting small scale victories for urban movements. But it is clear that urban mobilisers will continue to face one – the major – limit: the untouchability of the largest capitalist in the country. As long as public accountability mechanisms are not restored, this situation will not change. Obviously, beyond that limit, urban mobilisers seem to have the space to push against the city authorities and continue trying to re-negotiate their urban spaces. Their overtime persistence and activation of gained experience seems ever more important, as the number of contested development projects and corporate assaults on public space are still only increasing over time.