

Urban protest movements in Tbilisi: movements are strong, but big capital is stronger

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In mid-January 2019, Tbilisian urban activists prepared to wear yellow vests in protest: 'If the hotel construction is renewed in Vake Park, protests will also resume, and it's possible we witness events similar to the yellow vests revolution in Tbilisi,' (Kunchulia, 2019) declared Nata Peradze, one of the key organisers of the urban environmental group, Guerrilla Gardeners. Contestation over Vake Park started back in early 2014, when 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 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.

Unexpectedly, the activists found an unexpected ally – Mayor of Tbilisi Kakha Kaladze from the ruling Georgian Dream party. Kaladze, who was elected in 2017, long after Vake park protests, promised that he would do his best so that the hotel construction does not take place (Liberali, 2019). 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.

City government's decision did not leave the activists agitated. Anano Tsintsabidze, local urban activist and the head of the leader of Initiative for Public Space, who have been instrumental to the Vake Park protests outlined her concerns in an analytical piece. 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' (Tsintsabidze, 2019). Tsintsabidze contended that even if the City Hall heard popular discontent in 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 cause, 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 piece, 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 the 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 to existence in Tbilisi and gained substantial experience and voice but still being predominantly 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 (Berikishvili & Sichinava, 2016). Empirically, we rely on our previously collected empirical material, ongoing close observation of political developments in Tbilisi, and on recent media articles.

Political turmoil of adopting market economy

To understand the context in which urban movements grew in independent Georgia, two important aspects of political-economic changes on the way of adopting a market economy should be outlined. First, much like many other former socialist states, since gaining independence in early 1990s Georgian society faced severe economic collapse followed by social insecurity and impoverishment of a significant proportion of the population. The early independence years were also marred with two ethnic and one civil wars, and a sustained 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 slow stabilisation of the political environment, although the state institutions were weak and corruption was all-encompassing. The nation-wide deterioration of socio-economic situation was associated with the everyday struggle for survival. While the market institutions were adopted slowly, the process left a room for the differentiation between the 'winners' and the 'losers' of transition. The second phase of adopting market economy was kickstarted since the Rose Revolution of 2003. This period has been associated with rapid marketising reforms, 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 is marked by continuation of market-reliant reforms, albeit with slightly more social cohesion component and significantly reduced overt state violence and repression (Baumann, 2010; Rekhviashvili, 2013, 2016; Timm, 2014).

The implication of these three phases for urban movements is that a substantive mobilisation energy of Georgian society was for long directed at broader democratisation efforts, revolutionary protests, 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)" (Pruijt, 2007), only gained foot by 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 mobilization of urban movements.

Second significant contextual aspect to comprehend the rise of urban movements in Tbilisi is related to a particularly, one could say uniquely, aggressive and extensive Neoliberal transformation of the city since the Rose Revolution of 2003 (Berikishvili & Sichinava, 2016; Salukvadze, 2009; Salukvadze & Golubchikov, 2016). The revolution government in mid-2000s inherited from the incumbent government a systemic disregard for urban planning, and diversity of extra-legal 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 pressing need for reintroducing transparent, socially and environmentally sensible urban planning and actively engaged in disposing urban space to privatization on the one hand, and state-led large construction and developmental projects on the other. Hence, the two aspects of the post-revolution urban politics – top down, unaccountable and erratic decision making and unprecedented scale of private construction in previously green or public spaces – prompted urban dwellers to start mobilizing in defense of urban heritage, cultural and historical identity and environment. In addition to these topics in past years increasing motorization rates enabled by car infrastructure development, lack of parking regulation and insufficient public transport provision, placed pollution and traffic regulation on urban movements' agenda.

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 the *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 time period, heritage activists objected Soviet military drills at the Davit-Gareji military polygon, and environmental activists countered the construction of Transcaucasian Railway. Indeed, all these initiatives bore mostly nationalistic character, they also highlighted the fact that environmentalist and heritage preservation issues were salient political questions for Georgians.

Although this type of protests was soon swallowed 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, against incumbent presidents and governments, and a revolution. 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, the issues of urban development became salient for a selected group of activists. The newly incepted activism was an outcry on the overt neoliberalization 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 privatized. 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 climaxed in 2011 when a group of activists stage a permanent protest against rebuilding of Gudiashvili square in the historic district of Tbilisi. Gudiashvili protests brought shifts to both dramaturgy and programming to Tbilisi's urban movements. Theatrical performances and 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 mobilized were still relevant if not more acute. For instance, Guerilla Gardening which emerged in the vanguard of urban activism, engaged in struggles for preserving Tbilisi's green areas encroached by a growing number of developers. Vake Park protests described in this piece earlier were also part of this struggle.

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. Panorama Tbilisi Project was initiated by a former prime minister of the country 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 center of the town was met with fierce opposition from the urban movements. Panorama Tbilisi protests brought together all urban activist groups in Tbilisi under the umbrella of Together movement. The movement staged several protest rallies against the construction of Panorama Tbilisi Project and against Ivanishvili but in vein. While urban protest rallies had been successful to counter 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 the large capital

It is undeniable that over the past decade Tbilisian Urban movements have consolidated a substantial mobilisation power, collected the experience of deploying diversity of repertoires from street protest and physical occupation of spaces to media visibility and court case filing, hence carved out a political opportunity space for having their voices heard, at points influencing urban planning and governance related decisions. Beyond the victory over 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.

Also, the recent Mayoral elections resonated with popular concerns, with current Mayor, Kakhi Kaladze emphasizing 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 of contentions behind closed doors, the mayor and his political team are indeed changing formal regulatory frameworks primarily to constrain wild construction sector (ITV, 2019). In a similar vein, the city invests increasingly in upgrading public transport fleet by low-emission vehicles, targeting phasing out of older buses from streets. On a national level, the state is slowly but steadily reintroducing emission controls and vehicle technical check-ups, in an attempt of addressing environmental concerns.

At those points when the state activates coercive and repressive apparatus, social mobilisation in response is prompt and vocal, and usually not marked by further repression. Protests in May 2017 against the police raid at Club Bassiani 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 comparing with the post Rose Revolution context, the very fact that quick and wide-based mobilisation is possible and state refrains from further repressions is already an important change. In summary, at this point urban movements are capable of waging and to a degree winning some of the contentions without facing too severe consequences in terms of repressive backlash.

It is also undeniable that the key obstacle to strengthening urban movements in Tbilisi is the large capital, enmeshed with state apparatus, 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 to the limits of urban mobilisation (Lorusso, 2018). Despite unprecedented mobilisation against the Panorama Tbilisi, unique merging of numerous urban movements, the project execution has not been hampered. Behind it, is the Georgian Billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, a man who contributed to toppling down of post-revolution government, now ex-prime minister, the leader of the ruling party. Despite distancing himself from the government, he is widely seen as a shadow effective ruler of Georgia. In principle, under his shadow rule, the urban as well as the national government increasingly bends to accommodate popular discontent, and to the least refrains from aggressive and violent coercion. However, his private development projects go unhampered, draw on state resources and consistent ignoring of resisting voices.

Limits of Tbilisian urban movements then are once more entangled with broader democratisation challenges. It is certainly unclear if such power shift are to be expected any time soon. The government currently retains loyalty to the strong man, while smoothing out popular discontent through enabling small scale victories. But it is clear that urban mobilisers will continue facing one and the major limit –

untouchability of the largest capitalist of the country – as long as public accountability mechanisms are not restored. Obviously, beyond that limit, urban mobilisers seem to have the space to push against and negotiate with the city, and a list of specific urban challenges is certainly not exhausted by the time.

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