



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**ANALYZING MASS DEMONSTRATION AND COUNTER-
DEMONSTRATION IN 21ST CENTURY GEORGIA**

THEO SCHENCK

207

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

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ISSN 1512-4835

ISBN

Introduction

In March 2023, Georgians took to the streets of Tbilisi to protest the bill “Law On Transparency of Foreign Influence.”¹ This is not the first mass protest in the capital of a country that has already seen large-scale demonstrations in the more than 30 years since its independence, perhaps most notably in the 2003 Rose Revolution. In many cases, protest has produced real results and fulfilled the protesters’ demands. The goal of this article is to analyze the why and the how of Georgian mass demonstrations. It will seek to discuss and ultimately answer the question: “What patterns can be seen throughout events of large-scale demonstrations in Georgia’s recent history, and what lessons can be drawn from them?” In doing so, it will be necessary to differentiate between dividing forces and interests in Georgian society. Specifically, the opposing interests of liberal and nativist² will need to be addressed. For the purposes of this article, “liberal” protests are associated with anti-authoritarian and pro-Western demonstrations, and “nativist” protests are associated with groups espousing illiberal, nationalistic ideologies and tend to demonstrate against what they view as Western influences on Georgia.

Reasons for Liberal Protests

Perhaps the most obvious point of frustration for the Georgian people is the government’s closeness with Russia. As only a small percentage of Georgians say that their country should align with Russia (as opposed to the West), and the vast majority consider Russia a threat,³ multiple mass protests have occurred in recent years in reaction to the government’s perceived openness to Russian interests. In a country where three quarters of the population supports European Union membership (a figure that has remained stable for years),⁴ it should come as no surprise that these protests take on a pro-European, pro-Western character. Since the 1990s, Georgian governments have taken steps towards integrating with Western institutions, and the ruling Georgian Dream party has made commitments to joining the EU, including signing an Association Agreement⁵ and applying for EU candidate status alongside Ukraine and Moldova.⁶ Still, a quarter of Georgians blame their government’s lack of political will for the country remaining distant from the EU.⁷

The geopolitical alignment of recent large-scale protests is clear from the symbols used by demonstrators. In addition to the Georgian flag, the flags

of the EU, NATO, Ukraine, and the United States could be seen waving in the mass of protesters during the events of March 2023, and people held signs written in English.⁸ In 2022, upon Georgia being denied EU candidate status (it was the only country of the three that applied that year not to be granted this status), 60,000 people protested the decision in a demonstration referred to as a “march for Europe.”⁹

The pro-Western aspects of demonstrations tend to go hand-in-hand with protest action against Russia. The 2019 protests, for example, were triggered when a member of the Russian Duma arrived in Tbilisi for the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy and disregarded Georgian parliamentary protocol,¹⁰ and the “Foreign Agent” law that was the object of the 2023 protests was widely seen as having been modeled on a similar Russian law passed in 2012.¹¹ Just 12% of Georgians believe that their country will benefit from favoring relations with Russia over Europe, and three quarters blame either Russia as a state or Putin personally for the war in Ukraine.¹² In line with these attitudes, anti-Russian symbolism could also be seen in the most recent mass protest – “Stop Russia” and “No to the Russian law” were written on signs, and crossed-out hammers and sickles were also visible.¹³

Dissatisfaction with a perceived decrease in standard of living and that Georgian society and democracy are being eroded are also key factors of discontent, especially in the capital. A study published in August 2022,¹⁴ conducted by the National Democratic Institute and funded by the Government of the United Kingdom, found that 55% of Tbilisi residents believe that “Georgia is going in the wrong direction” (in comparison, 44% of respondents from the country as a whole gave that answer), while only 30% of respondents consider Georgia to be a democracy. Georgians have struggled against authoritarianism before –demonstrations were initiated in 2007 following the arrest of a critic of then-president Saakashvili that some considered to be politically motivated,¹⁵ and the political opposition cited claims of election fraud during 2003’s Rose Revolution¹⁶ and the 2020 protests.¹⁷

Under a system seen as offering little other means of effective political expression, protest serves as an outlet for these frustrations. Around half of Georgians disapprove of the way the government is running the country; 34% believe that the government acts in the country’s best interest; 23% believe that the opposition acts in the country’s best interest; 56% believe that no political party represents their interests.¹⁸ This topic deserves

further research (especially in English-language scholarship), but it can be gleaned from existing studies and recent and historical events that a significant proportion of Georgians see demonstrations as a viable form of political expression, and possibly as more likely to get results than working through elected representatives – including opposition leaders.

This was not always the case. In past large scale protests, the established political opposition played major roles in organizing and motivating the body of protesters. This can be seen in the role of opposition members of parliament in the Rose Revolution,¹⁹ the protests of 2009,²⁰ and so on.

The actual purposes and intents of popular demonstrations appear not to have changed over the course of the 21st century. The people still march for closer ties with Europe and the West, divestment from Russia, and an end to corruption and authoritarian tendencies in the government, to name just a few issues. What has changed is the steady decline of a political opposition capable of driving popular sentiment. With opposition politicians apparently no longer able to mobilize large-scale protests, mass action has continued, but with the people serving as the motivating force.

What is clear from recent mass protests is that these demonstrations are expressions of popular will against a government that is perceived as either sluggish or unwilling to enact policies according to that will. Georgians are not hopeful that things will improve in the years to come. A majority believe that economic decline and increased Russian influence are likely in the near future, and many also expect Russian military action and a decrease in relations with the EU.²¹ Where many Georgians consider elections to have failed to enact the policies they want, protests are a clear avenue to directly enforcing popular will on an unresponsive government.

The Georgian Orthodox Church and Nativism

Individuals associated with the Georgian Orthodox Church often work as a force against liberal demonstrations. Nativist activists appear to disrupt ongoing protests that they see as opposed to their agenda, and are backed by the Church's institutional legitimacy. An example of this strategy is a 2013 event in which Orthodox priests violently interrupted a pro-LGBT rally. Not long after, the Church proclaimed May 17, the day of the rally, to be "Defense of the Family Day"²² in a clear rebuke of the pro-LGBT demonstrators (since 2005, that day has been celebrated as the "International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia"). The

Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church has described homosexuality as “an anomaly and a disease.”²³

The Church’s approach to demonstrations is defined by its service to overarching ideological goals. Religious leaders have taken positions on several secular and political topics, ranging from LGBT rights to the EU and NATO. Patriarch Ilia II vocally criticized the Saakashvili administration for its handling of the 2008 war,²⁴ and many priests openly urged voters to elect the Georgian Dream coalition in the 2012 parliamentary elections.²⁵

The Church is an enormously popular institution in Georgia,²⁶ and religious leaders are apparently capable of conjuring very real support for political and social issues, and can even motivate violence in their followers. They accomplish this by appealing to a synthesis of two aspects of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The first is its monopoly on spiritual issues among the faithful. The second is its platform as a popular and officially recognized institution, through which it transforms those spiritual issues into political ones. The moral authority of the Church, articulated by the Patriarch and the priests, turns support for an issue into action- action that can and has turned violent.

The Church is not the only institution to express illiberal ideologies. In reaction to Georgia’s pro-Western orientation, nativist political movements have risen to advocate against a turn towards liberal internationalism and away from what they consider to be Georgia’s traditional values. This stance on social issues (though the Church’s position on Western institutions is less clear-cut) has put these groups into alignment with Orthodox Church leaders with the same beliefs. The political movement-turned-party Georgian March especially has been known to use violent tactics at demonstrations against LGBT rights, political opponents, and ethnic minorities.²⁷ Overall, certain organizations with nativist ideologies have expressed a willingness to use violence as a protest tool. It has proven effective in demonstrations and the disruption of events they perceive as anti-Georgian.

Protest Tactics

Despite the apparent shift in recent years from being called and encouraged by political leaders to a more self-motivating model, the actual way in which Georgians protest seems to have changed little, and there are certain methods that have been used continuously. Public spaces and

government buildings are used for gathering during large-scale protests – in 2003, their numbers bolstered by protesters arriving from western Georgia, 100,000 assembled in Tbilisi’s Freedom Square;²⁸ in 2009, 50,000 protested in the Boris Paichadze Dinamo Arena;²⁹ in 2011, protesters gathered again in Freedom Square and marched to the Georgian Public Broadcaster;³⁰ in 2023, thousands of demonstrators picketed on Rustaveli Avenue and attempted to push into the parliament building.³¹ As previously mentioned, pro-Western symbolism is often used in protests in the form of flags and signs. Tents may be used to physically block public spaces (particularly Rustaveli Avenue) and continue protests overnight,³² despite such obstruction being illegal under Georgian law.³³ What emerges from this is a pattern of visibility – these popular demonstrators want to be seen. Occupying public spaces and the areas outside government buildings (or in some cases inside those buildings as well³⁴), especially in large numbers, makes them impossible to be ignored by either the government or other Georgians. The more obvious the protest is, the more difficult it is for lawmakers to go about business as usual.

Nativist groups are often better organized, and leaders are able to mobilize their followers to demonstrate, and typically use demonstrations against other Georgians, including in the form of counterprotests, rather than against the government. Additionally, the use or threat of violence to intimidate is a tactic that nativist groups are apparently willing to employ. The events of May 17, 2013 are indicative of nativists’ willingness and ability to express their political will through violent counterprotest. Patriarch Ilia II had already condemned the demonstration in the days leading up to it, emphasizing the Church’s stance on the issue of LGBT rights, and the counterprotest was aligned with this position. On the day of the event, protesters were attacked using rocks, eggs, and other improvised weapons in an effort to end the demonstration early by force. Pro-LGBT protesters were forced to stop their demonstration and escape on buses.³⁵ In the above example, nativist demonstrators were organized by political actors (Orthodox priests) and motivated by the ideology and authority of those actors to disrupt an ongoing protest using both violence and sheer force of numbers. Nativist demonstrations have also, on other occasions, used threats as a tool in service to their ideological aims.^{36,37} Like their liberal counterparts, they apparently have a similar goal of visibility, which some nativist groups use in conjunction with violent tactics to intimidate political opponents.

The Case of Pride Day 2023

These demonstrations are not relics of the past, and the national debate between liberalism and nativism continues to have real and serious effects on Georgian society. We can take the Pride Day protests of July 8, 2023 as a case study, in an effort to reinforce the point that these demonstrations are ongoing.

A Pride Festival was organized for July 8 by the NGO Tbilisi Pride,³⁸ and already in the preceding week conservative and nativist groups were calling for its disruption.^{39, 40} Perhaps foremost among these groups was the Conservative Movement party, with figures linked with it taking on a leadership role in the protests against the Festival. Individuals associated with the Conservative Movement are known to have ties to other nativist groups, including Georgian March and the Alt-info media organization. Furthermore, in a policy shift from previous years, the government had not assured that it would take steps to ensure that the event could continue safely.⁴¹

The 2000-person-strong counter-demonstration to Tbilisi Pride was well-coordinated. Upon their arrival, the police assigned to protect the event's participants evacuated Pride demonstrators, leaving anti-LGBT protesters to vandalize and destroy the Festival's symbols that remained on the site.⁴² As leaders declared "The victory is sealed,"⁴³ the government response was muted – representatives largely defended the police presence as sufficient, while condemning the day's violence.⁴⁴ In spite of the weak police response and thinly-veiled threats of violence towards the pro-LGBT demonstrators (a leader in the counter-demonstrations was quoted as saying, "Whatever resistance we meet on the ground, we will respond accordingly."⁴⁵), no injuries were reported.⁴⁶ For their own part, Pride organizers accused police of collaborating with the nativist protesters, pointing out that police opted to evacuate pro-LGBT demonstrators rather than repel counter-demonstrators.⁴⁷

While not directly targeting corruption, Russia, or other objects of large-scale liberal protests, Tbilisi Pride is associated with the larger international Pride movement, seeking to legitimize the identities of LGBT people within Georgian society. Like other demonstrations, Pride Parades generally try to make themselves visible and hard to ignore in order to better spread their message. In the days leading up to the event, it received support from

international organizations that liberal protests in Georgia traditionally align with, including the Human Rights Council of Europe.⁴⁸ Representatives of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the US – among others – expressed disappointment in the violent actions of counter-demonstrators and the ineffective police response. Tbilisi Pride was held in 2023 at Lisi Lake, relatively far from the city center. This reduced the event’s visibility to the public, but was seen as necessary due to disruptions by nativist groups in preceding years.

Characteristic of nativist demonstrations, the anti-Pride protesters aimed for and achieved visibility. What was intended to be a demonstration to celebrate the LGBT community was overshadowed by a swift and violent response by nativist counter-demonstrators. Visibility in this case came from the destruction of symbols, forcing media to focus not on Pride, but instead on the nativist ideologues demonstrating against it. Aside from the violence itself being effective in ending the Parade, the very threat of violence also served to reduce the visibility. The fact that nativist counter-demonstrators had disrupted Pride events in the past forced pro-LGBT organizers to relocate to Lisi Lake, farther from Tbilisi’s more densely populated areas. These demonstrators are able to stifle their targets’ messaging without even needing to take action. Nativist protesters planned and executed a demonstration that easily overcame police countermeasures and destroyed an important symbol of LGBT acceptance.

Conclusions

There are two key facts to be drawn from observing recent Georgian political demonstrations. The first is that a significant portion of the population remains staunchly for integration with the West and divestment from Russia, and it views large-scale protest as a valid means of expressing this ideology. The second is that, for reasons that go beyond the scope of this article, the government is perceived as unresponsive to its people’s desires. Despite commitments to joining the EU, it has been slow in making the reforms necessary for membership. Furthermore, it seems either content to allow violent demonstrations to occur, or unable to prevent them. As an example, the small number of insufficiently equipped police dispatched to protect pro-LGBT protesters in 2013 was not enough to prevent a counterprotest from becoming violent.⁴⁹ There is a disconnect between official policy and the desires of the Georgian population. To

reconcile this contradiction, liberals and nationalists alike resort to mass public demonstrations to make their voices heard.

There is a sharp divide between pro-Western and nationalist demonstrations, both in terms of motivating factors and tactics. Political leaders – opposition and government alike – are apparently no longer capable of organizing and mobilizing mass protests for liberal change. Instead, in recent events, large-scale liberal protests tend to have a more spontaneous character. They are reactive, rather than proactive, taking the form of a popular response to government actions that the people feel are not in their interests. Nationalist protests, meanwhile, are generally better organized and less spontaneous than their popular counterparts, and tend to be motivated by political leaders and ideology. Demonstrations associated with the Georgian Orthodox Church are inherently granted a level of legitimacy, given the Church's role in Georgian society.

As long as sources of discontent are left unaddressed, protests and counterprotests are likely to continue or possibly intensify, especially if the number of people who do not feel represented by their elected officials further increases. The fact that some large-scale protests have resulted in significant changes in the past is undoubtedly not lost on protesters. There is no indication for the foreseeable future that Georgians are likely to stop using mass demonstration, along with tactics like picketing, obstruction of public space, or even in some cases violence, as a tool to express popular desire for change.

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