

**Neither Breakthrough nor Suppression: Explaining Stalemate in Georgia's 2024–2026
Protests**

Rusudan Kuntchulia

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Scott Radnitz
Laada Bilaniuk

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Rusudan Kuntchulia

University of Washington

Abstract

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Rusudan Kuntchulia

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Scott Radnitz

Jackson School of International Studies

Existing scholarship on post-Soviet anti-government protests often explains protest trajectories through the binary outcomes of success or failure but pays less attention to why some protests become prolonged instead of quickly succeeding or being suppressed. To address this gap, this thesis argues that such cases can be better understood through the concept of attritional stalemate. Focusing on one of the most recent cases of prolonged protest in the region, Georgia's 2024–2026 anti-government protests, in which neither the government nor protesters have been able to achieve a decisive outcome, the thesis explains how and why the Georgian protests evolved into a stalemate. Using process tracing as its primary methodology, the thesis analyzes the interaction among protest mobilization, opposition fragmentation, calibrated repression, security-elite cohesion, and international reaction throughout the two protest waves.

The study finds that Georgia's protest cycle evolved into an attritional stalemate because enabling and constraining factors on both sides interacted to prevent either breakthrough or

full suppression. Protesters sustained mobilization and international visibility, but opposition fragmentation limited their ability to convert pressure into a political breakthrough. At the same time, Georgian Dream used calibrated repression and maintained security-elite cohesion, constraining protest without fully eliminating it. Both the protest movement and the state were also able to impose costs on each other while also finding ways to offset those costs. The thesis, therefore, shows that protest stalemate should be understood not simply as a delayed failure but as a distinct analytical category of contentious politics.

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	6
LITERATURE REVIEW: EXPLAINING PROTEST OUTCOMES IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION..	9
CONCEPTUALIZING PROTEST STALEMATE.....	13
METHODOLOGY	17
EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: PATTERNS OF MOBILIZATION AND CONTAINMENT IN GEORGIA’S 2024-2026 ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS	19
<i>WAVE I: MISSED OPPORTUNITY (OCT-NOV 2024)</i>	19
<i>Opposition Fragmentation and Coordination Deficits</i>	20
<i>State Response: Emergence of Calibrated Repression</i>	22
<i>WAVE II: FROM GRASSROOTS PROTESTS TO STALEMATE (NOV 2024-MAR 2026)</i>	26
<i>Limits of Grassroots Mobilization</i>	27
<i>Costs of Protesting</i>	29
<i>Costs of Repression</i>	32
<i>Limits of Unity</i>	36
MUTUAL CONSTRAINTS: THE CONSOLIDATION OF STALEMATE.....	40
CONCLUSION.....	41
BIBLIOGRAPHY	46

Introduction

The post-Soviet space has witnessed repeated waves of mass protest aimed at challenging the government's rule or decisions. While not all managed to achieve their goals, the so-called “color revolutions” in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 generated optimism about the transformative potential of non-violent protest in the region. Yet subsequent developments across Eurasia revealed a different reality. After nearly a decade, democracy remained contested in the region, and even though some anti-government democratic protest movements again succeeded,¹ these were rather rare exceptions. A far larger number of anti-government protests failed as they could only attain small concessions from the government² or were violently suppressed by the regime.³

These events inspired an extensive scholarly literature seeking to explain how such protests could eventually either produce democratic breakthroughs or fail. In doing so, they explained the factors that helped or undermined both protesters and the regime's capacity to achieve success. However, while the binary outcome of success vs. failure, as well as checklists of certain factors, simplifies the understanding of regional protest dynamics, the picture is far more complicated. Table 1 compiles the anti-government protests in the region since the dissolution of the Soviet Union that are categorized as prolonged, i.e., lasting more than three months.⁴ The occurrence of prolonged protests in the region suggests that while they eventually come to a resolution, they enter a prolonged stalemate phase before this outcome is reached. This generates a puzzle: why do some protests remain unresolved for a long time instead of quickly succeeding or failing? In other words, how and why do protests enter

¹ Most notably in the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine (2013-2014), Velvet Revolution in Armenia (2018), Melon (2010) and October (2020) Revolutions in Kyrgyzstan.

² Moldova 2009, Armenia 2015, Georgia 2019, 2023-24.

³ Uzbekistan 2005, 2022; Russia 2011-13; Azerbaijan 2013, 2019; Belarus 2020, Russia 2021, Kazakhstan 2022.

⁴ This classification follows the Global Protest Tracker, a dataset provided by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

stalemate if outcomes are understood mainly through the presence or absence of certain factors?

Country	Protest	Outcome	Approx. Duration
Armenia	Anti-Kocharian protests (2003-2004)	Failed	14 months
Armenia	“March of Dignity” (2020-2021)	Failed	5 months and 2 weeks
Armenia	Peace plan protests (2020-2022)	Failed	6 months; 2 months; 2 months
Belarus	“Minsk Spring” (1996-1997)	Failed	13 months
Belarus	Anti-Lukashenko Protests (2011)	Failed	4 months
Belarus	Anti-Lukashenko Protests (2017)	Failed	8 months
Belarus	Russian Integration Protest (2019)	Failed	5 months
Belarus	“Slipper Uprising” (2020-2021)	Failed	11 months
Georgia	Anti-Saakashvili protest (2009)	Failed	3 months and 2 weeks
Georgia	Foreign agents bill protests (2023; 2024)	Failed	1 week; 4 months
Georgia	Local Election Protest (2021)	Failed	3 months
Georgia	2024 Elections & Pro-EU protests (2024-ongoing)	Ongoing	18 months
Moldova	“Anti-Russification” Protest (2002)	Partially successful / agreement	3 months and 3 weeks
Moldova	“Moldovan Maidan” / “Red Revolution” (2015-2016)	Partially successful / PM resignation	18 months
Moldova	Anti-Sandu protests (2022-2023)	Partially successful/ government resignation	12 months
Russia	“Snow Revolution” (2011-2013)	Failed	19 months
Russia	Anti-Corruption protests (2017-2018)	Failed	19 months
Russia	Khabarovsk Protest (2020)	Failed	5 months
Russia	Aleksei Navalny arrest protests (2021)	Failed	4 months
Russia	Protest by soldiers’ loved ones (2023-2024)	Failed	4 months
Ukraine	Euromaidan (2013-2014)	Succeeded	3 months and 2 weeks

Table 1. Long Protest Campaigns in Post-Soviet Countries (1991-2026)

Sources: Mass Mobilization Project,⁵ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Global Protest Tracker.⁶

⁵ Protests included in this table from the Mass Mobilization Protest Data (MMPD) dataset cover the period from 1991 to 2017. Durations refer to protest campaigns rather than individual protest events. Campaign dates were established using MMPD and cross-checked against secondary sources.

⁶ Protests included in this table from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s “Global Protest Tracker” dataset cover the period from 2017 to March 2026. Cases for which reliable campaign start and end

This thesis argues that the logic of prolonged protests can be understood through the concept of attritional stalemate: a configuration in which enabling and constraining factors on both the protest and state sides interact to counter one another and produce stalemate. Yet this stalemate remains dynamic and attritional because both sides continue to impose costs on one another over time, eventually pushing the confrontation toward a resolution.

This argument is examined through a case analysis of the 2024-2026 protest movement in Georgia, which has lasted for more than 513 days⁷ as of the time of writing this thesis and has not achieved its goals. At the same time, the government has been unable to fully suppress these protests. Therefore, the confrontation produced a prolonged stalemate in which, as of today, neither side can secure a decisive victory. While this thesis does not aim to speculate on how this protest will end, it analyzes why and how the Georgian protests entered a stalemate.

The next section reviews the literature on protest outcomes in post-Soviet contexts and identifies a central limitation in this literature: its tendency to emphasize binary outcomes such as democratic breakthrough or suppression while giving less attention to prolonged episodes of unresolved contention. The second section develops the theoretical framework and conceptualizes attritional stalemate. The third section outlines the research design and methodology, explaining the case selection, primary method, and evidentiary base. The empirical sections then trace the evolution of Georgia's 2024-2026 protest wave, analyzing how mobilization, opposition fragmentation, calibrated repression, security-elite cohesion, and international reactions interacted over time and why they produced persistence without breakthrough or suppression. The conclusion summarizes the findings, discusses their

dates could not be established from the selected datasets and secondary sources were excluded from the analysis.

⁷ This number reflects continuous daily mobilization during the second wave of protests, which began on November 28; however, it was preceded by nearly a month of protests during the first wave.

implications for the study of protest dynamics in post-Soviet countries, and reflects on the broader relevance of protest stalemate as an analytical category.

Literature Review: Explaining Protest Outcomes in the Post-Soviet Region

Scholarship on anti-government protests in post-Soviet countries has primarily focused on extreme cases, either successful or attempted revolutions. In doing so, it largely analyzes why protests succeed or fail, but offers a limited explanation of a situation in which neither side prevails. Though it remains useful for identifying conditions that shape protest dynamics and may contribute to the emergence of stalemate in protest waves.

Early studies of the “color revolutions” in the region sought to identify the conditions under which some regimes in the former Soviet Union collapsed in the face of popular protest.

Analyzing the 2000s revolutions,⁸ Michael McFaul emphasizes structural preconditions and argues that successful revolutions that evolved from popular protests shared several defining features that enabled protesters’ victory and democratic breakthroughs. He develops the basic “checklist” for these protests that made success possible: (1) a semi-authoritarian rather than fully authoritarian regime; (2) an unpopular incumbent; (3) a united opposition; (4) the ability to demonstrate electoral fraud; (5) independent media capable of informing the public; (6) mass mobilization of protesters; and (7) splits within the regime’s coercive forces (McFaul 2005).

Expanded models often built on McFaul’s original seven-factor explanation but sometimes integrate additional contextual dynamics, such as the opposition’s organizational capacity, coordination, and effective framing (D’Anieri 2007), the role of “European identity” and

⁸ McFaul analyzes the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia, “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, and “Bulldozer Revolution” in Serbia.

civic nationalism in mobilizing society, the presence of a preceding political crisis that undermines regime legitimacy, a pro-democratic capital city, charismatic leadership, mobilized youth movements (Kuzio 2008), competition between elites and kinship based groups (Collins 2004, Radnitz 2010), and the role of external actors such as Russia or the European Union or the United States in supporting either side (Kuzio 2008, Polese 2011).

Highlighting that all of these “ingredients” may not be essential for breakthroughs, certain factors are sometimes considered more important than others. For example, opposition unity has been argued to be a “*conditio sine qua non*” for success, highlighting the understanding that fragmented oppositions struggle to maintain coherent messaging, to mobilize undecided citizens, and to present a credible alternative to incumbents. (McFaul 2005, Polese 2011, O Beacha’in, and A. Polese 2011). This is also supported by the fact that across all the successful revolutions in the region, opposition parties were able, at least temporarily, to rally behind a single leader or united opposition and coordinate strategies (McFaul 2005).

In addition, elite defection, especially a split between political authorities and security forces, which corresponds to McFaul’s seventh factor, is also identified as a central element affecting protest outcomes. Its presence may signal the regime’s inability to contain protests, while its absence may strengthen the regime’s capacity to withstand them (D’Anieri 2007). For example, a loyal and cohesive security apparatus is argued to have been one of the central reasons preventing the 2020 Belarusian protests from achieving success in ousting Lukashenko, while belated elite defection was an important factor in the fall of the Yanukovych regime during Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity (Apolte 2022; Way and Tolvin 2023).

Another significant precondition is the mobilization scale itself, corresponding to McFaul’s sixth element. Protest scholars usually apply threshold models of collective action to explain

both how protests grow and reach a critical, self-reinforcing momentum, or why they are sometimes prone to failure. These models assume that individuals decide whether to protest based on perceived costs and benefits: as protest size grows, the perceived likelihood of success rises, and the risk of repression declines, potentially generating a self-reinforcing “tipping point” (Granovetter, 1978; Opp, 2009). Governments, in turn, attempt to prevent participation from crossing this threshold, creating tension between protesters’ efforts and authorities’ response.

This perspective brings the state response into the analysis and reframes the problem: protest failure is not merely the absence of favorable conditions, such as opposition unity or elite defection, but also the product of effective regime action, including repression measures. As Mark Beissinger argues, the post-Soviet protests can be conceptualized as a modular phenomenon in which successful protest tactics can spread across borders, forming a recognizable model of protest-driven change (2007). However, the counteractions also spread as each new attempt confronts local realities, and regimes learn to anticipate and neutralize these tactics. The diffusion of protest models, therefore, operates in two directions. Just as opposition movements learn from past successes, regimes learn how to prevent them, and as a result, they often practice “pre-emptive authoritarianism” (Silitsky 2010, Weyland 2010, Finkel and Brudny 2012).

Some recent studies support this point. Lansky and Suthers (2019) show that Armenian protesters’ success in 2018 was aided by protester learning, as they drew lessons from Euromaidan and adopted spontaneous mobilization tactics to avoid repression. By contrast, the 2020 Belarus protests illustrate regime learning: the Lukashenko regime used repressive tactics, including selective persecution and open harassment of opposition activists and

supporters, that had long been practiced in Russia, including during the 2011-2012 protest wave (Gel'man 2016).

This insight is crucial for understanding contemporary protests in the region. Particularly, Georgian protesters have the example of their own 2003 revolution, as well as more recent protests (both successful and failed) elsewhere in the region, including Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, and Russia. This suggests that the ruling elite also operates with full knowledge of the 2003 Rose Revolution as well as other protests in the region and has had more than a decade⁹ to develop institutional and political defenses against similar challenges. The prolongation and uncertain outcome of the 2024-2026 protests may thus reflect not only mobilization constraints but also the effectiveness of authoritarian learning, and most importantly, the dynamic equilibrium between them.

It should be acknowledged that post-Soviet literature is not constrained solely by the factors discussed in this section. More recent scholarship adds further layers of analysis besides the traditional “color revolution” perspectives, often highlighting distinct features of protest waves that contributed to their success or failure. However, they are not universally applicable. For example, comparing the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and the 2020 Belarusian Protests, Way and Tolvin conclude that while a strong national identity helped Ukrainians, the lack of it contributed to the failure of the Belarusian protests (2023); In the same vein, utilizing social media as a mobilizing channel helped rally Euromaidan protests (M. Peydaei Niyari and S. Shokoohi, 2024), as well as Armenia’s protests in 2017, which ultimately evolved into the Velvet Revolution (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019). However, although present, both a strong national identity and the use of social media were not sufficient to lead the Russian “For Fair Elections Movement” toward victory in 2011-2012

⁹ Georgian Dream, the current ruling party has been in office since 2012.

(Dollbaum, 2020). Therefore, instead of serving as direct explanations for outcomes, including stalemate, such conditions can be analyzed as supporting rather than decisive factors.

Overall, the combined literature suggests several key propositions. First, mass mobilization is necessary but not sufficient for anti-government protests to achieve success in the post-Soviet region. Second, opposition unity and/or a single leader, along with organizational capacity, are critical to translating mobilization into political outcomes. Third, elite defections, particularly within security forces, can represent decisive turning points, whereas their cohesion can limit the political impact of protest. Finally, as much as protesters can adopt tactics used in the past or elsewhere, authoritarian regimes can also adapt and learn, developing strategies that neutralize these dynamics and sustain political equilibrium. This suggests that while the presence or absence of certain conditions is important for understanding protest outcomes, protest dynamics, including those that potentially produce a stalemate, should not be reduced to static checklists but instead incorporate the interaction between constraining factors on both the protesters' and the government's side. Taken together, this variation matters for the study of stalemate because unresolved protests may emerge not from the simple absence of success-producing conditions, but from the interaction of partially present and partially constrained factors. The following section develops a framework that conceptualizes protest stalemate.

Conceptualizing Protest Stalemate

While scholarship on post-Soviet anti-government protests provides valuable insights into binary outcomes of success or failure, it offers more limited analytical tools for explaining prolonged protest phases in which neither protesters nor the government prevails decisively. This thesis, therefore, adopts a process-centered framework that shifts the focus

from whether favorable conditions are statically present to how opposing actors constrain and exhaust one another over time.

To capture the peculiarities of such contention, this thesis introduces the concept of *attritional stalemate*, drawing on military studies of war of attrition. In military science, attrition refers to a form of struggle that emerges when decisive victory is not readily attainable, and conflict becomes prolonged, often generating a stalemate phase in which neither side can secure a decisive advantage. Yet, both persist in the expectation that the other will weaken first. Attrition is not simply the opposite of manoeuvre, but often coexists with it and may help create the conditions under which manoeuvre becomes possible (Svechin 1991; Kiszely 1998; Tuck 2022). More broadly, this perspective suggests that attrition is often less a matter of choice than of strategic reality, arising when geography, adaptation, and the limits of offensive success make prolonged contestation difficult to avoid (Tuck 2022; Fox 2025).

Adapted to the context of anti-government mobilization, this thesis conceptualizes attritional stalemate as an extended phase of unresolved contention, generated by mutually reinforcing constraints on both challengers and incumbents. It emerges not simply from the presence or absence of capacity, but from the interaction of competing forces that sustain a dynamic equilibrium between protest mobilization and regime control. This assumption follows the logic of the literature discussed in the previous section: if enabling factors are present, protests should theoretically succeed; if they are absent, they would be expected to end soon. However, since neither outcome occurs for a prolonged period, it points to a dynamic interaction between protesters and the government that allows contention to persist without producing a decisive outcome.

This prolonged phase is stalemate because neither side secures a decisive advantage, yet neither withdraws, as both persist in the expectation that time and accumulating costs may

weaken the other first or that a window of opportunity may emerge. It is also attritional, considering that both sides impose costs on each other and, as cases of prolonged anti-government protest show, such phases eventually end. This thesis is primarily focused on stalemate as a phase rather than on the outcome to which it may eventually lead.

The logic of attrition has already appeared in the protest literature. Yuen and Cheng (2017) show that regimes may respond to mass protest through the strategy of attrition. Analyzing the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, they argue that the government neither decisively repressed the protests at the outset nor offered meaningful concessions. Instead, it sought to wear protesters down over time while preserving elite cohesion, mobilizing countermovements, and using legal mechanisms to raise the costs of sustained mobilization. Their study, therefore, focuses primarily on regime strategy and shows that protest containment can occur through gradual exhaustion rather than immediate suppression. In doing so, however, they treat protesters and opposition less as strategic actors in interaction than as the targets of an attritional strategy pursued by the regime. Moreover, the case they analyzed lasted for 79 days (Hui 2015), a shorter period than the cases mentioned in this thesis, including the Georgian protests. Acknowledging these differences, in contrast to Yuen and Cheng's study, attritional stalemate in this paper should not be confused with a purely one-sided strategy of the regime to impose attrition, in which protesters are reduced largely to survival while authorities simply wait them out. Rather, the term is used here to describe a two-sided dynamic in which both challengers and incumbents retain some capacity to impose costs on one another, constrain the other's options, and shape the trajectory of contention, even if that capacity remains unevenly distributed and asymmetrical.

Correa (2025) brings protesters more directly into the analysis by modeling persistent protest as a dynamic process of buildup, peak, and decay. However, her study develops a formal,

game-theoretic model rather than an empirical account of a specific protest case. In this framework, the logic of the war of attrition applies most clearly to the post-peak decay stage, when citizens gradually drop out, and the government randomizes its timing of concessions. Correa's model is also intentionally abstract; it assumes a large, decentralized protest with no leaders or salient opposition actors. Although Correa notes that such features could be adapted later, the baseline model does not directly incorporate political mechanisms such as repression, elite cohesion, or opposition coordination, which are usually treated in the post-Soviet protest literature as central factors shaping protest outcomes. Therefore, her framework is useful for conceptualizing protest persistence over time, but it cannot fully explain the political and organizational dynamics that can produce stalemate in particular sociopolitical contexts, such as the post-Soviet region.

The following chapters show particularly how the stalemate emerged in Georgian protests through the interaction of opposition fragmentation, calibrated state repression, continued security-elite loyalty, fluctuations in mobilization, and international reaction. This particular focus does not imply that other structural factors identified in the literature review section are irrelevant. Rather, in the Georgian case, these factors constitute the broader context within which the stalemate unfolds, and where the majority of enabling conditions suggested by the post-Soviet protest literature are constant: Georgia is commonly characterized as a hybrid or competitive authoritarian regime rather than a consolidated democracy or autocracy (Meladze & Asaad, 2024); public dissatisfaction with the incumbent leadership has been visible, large-scale mobilization has occurred, and allegations of electoral irregularities have circulated widely (Chikhladze 2025). The media environment, while constrained and politically polarized, remains pluralistic and diverse enough to disseminate information about protest activities (Reporters Without Borders n.d.). Civic mobilization has also drawn upon pro-European identity narratives, particularly in the capital city of Tbilisi, and youth participation

has also been visible (Mühlfried 2025). The coexistence of these enabling conditions helps explain the persistence of mobilization; if they were not present, as the literature suggests, the protests would have been suppressed far more easily and much earlier. At the same time, if these conditions had been accompanied by sustained large-scale mobilization, strong opposition unity, and elite defection, the protests may have been more likely to succeed. This study, therefore, concentrates on the factors that varied and/or interacted across the protest cycle, shaping the phase of stalemate.

Methodology

This study addresses the broader puzzle of why and how protests enter a prolonged stalemate in which neither side can quickly or easily secure victory. The 2024-2026 protest wave in Georgia is an appropriate case for this analysis because it presents a theoretically relevant instance of prolonged anti-government contention in which neither breakthrough nor suppression occurred quickly, making it well-suited for tracing how interacting factors and actors produced stalemate over time. More specifically, this thesis asks: How have interactions among patterns of mobilization, opposition fragmentation, calibrated repression, security-elite cohesion, and international reaction sustained that stalemate since 2024?

Because this question seeks to explain an evolving political process within a single case, a qualitative design is particularly appropriate. The primary methodological approach is process tracing. This method is well-suited to identifying causal processes and examining how interactions unfold over time within a single case. Rather than assuming static relationships between variables, process tracing helps reconstruct sequences of events to identify how specific mechanisms produce observed outcomes (Collier 2011).

To ensure analytical clarity, each interacting factor proposed in the thesis is operationalized through observable indicators presented in the table below. These indicators guide data collection and analysis within the process-tracing framework.

	Indicators	Data Sources
Mobilization	Extensive media coverage and heightened responses from government and opposition actors. ¹⁰	Media coverage; Public statements;
Opposition Fragmentation	Competing protest messages, public criticism among opposition actors, failed coordination attempts.	Public statements; Media coverage; Protest Movement Facebook group “Daitove”.
Calibrated Repression	Selective arrests, varying intensity of policing, adoption of repressive laws.	Legislative Herald of Georgia; Parliament Hearings/Draft Laws; Court Hearings; Ministry of Internal Affairs Statements; reports by Ombudsman of Georgia reports; NGO reports; IO reports; Media coverage.
Security Elite Cohesion	Absence of defections, consistent institutional messaging.	Official Statements; Media coverage.
International Reaction	Diplomatic pressure, international Sanctions.	IO statements and reports/resolutions; foreign officials’ statements; NGO reports.

Table 2. Operationalization of Key Interacting Factors

The analysis triangulates these sources to reconstruct the sequence of events and assess how the identified factors interacted over time. Because the study relies primarily on public and documentary sources, including media coverage as a principal source for tracing events alongside official documents and reports, it does not claim to capture all private decision-making processes within the opposition or the government. Rather, it focuses on publicly observable patterns. Also, taking into account Georgia’s highly polarized media environment, media reporting is treated with caution and cross-checked against official documents, NGO

¹⁰ Because systematic data on protest participation are unavailable, the study identifies higher-mobilization episodes through these observable indicators.

reports, public statements, and international reporting wherever possible in order to strengthen source reliability and reduce bias.

Empirical Analysis: Patterns of Mobilization and Containment in Georgia's 2024-2026 Anti-Government Protests

Because this thesis adopts a process-centered perspective, the analysis is organized chronologically and thematically. The protest cycle is divided into two phases corresponding to the two major protest waves. The following sections trace the development of the protest cycle and examine how patterns of mobilization, opposition fragmentation, state repression, security-elite loyalty, and international reaction interacted over time.

Wave I: Missed Opportunity (Oct-Nov 2024)

The parliamentary elections of October 26, 2024, constituted a critical juncture in Georgia's protest cycle. Exit polls broadcast by opposition-aligned media suggested an opposition victory, generating expectations of political turnover. When the Central Election Commission subsequently announced that the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) had secured a majority (CEC 2024), opposition leaders declared the results falsified. The combination of perceived electoral fraud, visible mobilization, and international attention created a plausible escalation window. Under classical color revolution frameworks, such moments often generate decisive rupture, yet no breakthrough occurred. On the one hand, the post-election period revealed the movement's limited capacity to convert public anger into sustained and coordinated pressure, which was further constrained by repression. Yet repression also contributed to the emergence of a low-scale but persistent pattern of mobilization.

Opposition Fragmentation and Coordination Deficits

The problems with opposition unity were visible even in the pre-election period. While all the opposition parties were loud advocates of voting against the GD, they struggled to coordinate their actions or offer a centralized, unified opposition coalition on the ballot (RFE/RL 2023). Media coverage even highlighted disagreements over the Georgian Charter proposed by President Salome Zourabichvili, who lacked executive power in the Georgian political system, yet used her symbolic authority to oppose GD and sought to unite the opposition around the elections. Her charter essentially assumed that GD would not be able to gain enough votes to secure a majority in the parliament and thus outlined a plan for managing the transition period (Presidency of Georgia 2024). Some parties, including For Georgia, led by former GD member and former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, initially hesitated to sign it. Although Gakharia later changed his decision and thereby the Charter came to include almost all opposition parties (ForGeo 2024), pre-election campaign practices remained inconsistent with the Charter's commitments, and opposition leaders could not refrain from mutual public criticism (BM 2024). Under such conditions, the opposition's primary immediate point of agreement after the elections became the non-recognition of the results. However, no leader emerged from within the opposition itself, while President Zourabichvili functioned more as an external focal point than as the head of a coordinated opposition structure.

Amid such fragmentation, the first wave of protest revealed a lack of planning and organization on the part of opposition forces. The October 26-28 period offered a particularly important opportunity for escalation: exit-poll optimism, allegations of fraud, and close public attention created conditions conducive to sustained large-scale mobilization. However, the opposition could not initially agree on a single plan, and while some leaders

called for rallies, others announced that they would wait for final results before deciding on a broader strategy (JamNews 2024). As a result, the first demonstration on October 28, organized primarily at the president's initiative, ended without a concrete action plan or strategy for future protests. It took several days for the opposition to agree on its next steps, and only a week later did it announce another large protest. This time, the opposition presented three broad directions: exposing election misconduct, seeking international non-recognition of the results, and holding daily rallies until the GD regime's defeat. Yet this program still lacked concrete milestones, a timeline, or coordination mechanisms (RFE/RL 2024).

In the following days, mobilization persisted but became increasingly decentralized. Demonstrations were held in different locations and were sometimes initiated by separate coalitions marching from different starting points. At times, these groups merged and were guided by the political opposition, but student and civil society groups also began organizing protests independently, producing "dual-track" protests (Publika 2024). Additionally, in the Facebook group "Daitove," which became the main coordinating platform for mobilization, protesters increasingly expressed frustration with opposition efforts and blamed political leaders for inaction (Daitove n.d.). This dissatisfaction reflected broader trends of low trust in political parties and political nihilism among segments of the electorate (CRRC 2024).¹¹ As a result, crowd sizes declined by mid-November compared to the immediate post-election period, and the momentum of the initial mobilization was not fully realized.

This sequence is analytically significant. During a high-opportunity moment, full opposition unity was not achieved, and symbolic unity under President Zourabichvili did not translate

¹¹ According to Caucasus Barometer survey, a plurality of the Georgian population said that no party was close to their views (31%), while each individual opposition party was viewed as close by only 1-2 percent of respondents. In addition, a plurality distrusted political parties (46%).

into strategic coherence. The absence of a clear escalation roadmap weakened the movement's momentum before repression had significantly intensified. Rather than consolidating pressure on the government, the movement had already begun to drift by mid-November. This observation is consistent with a strand of scholarship on post-Soviet protests that highlights the so-called "ingredients" for successful breakthrough. The first wave of protests in Georgia was unable to achieve a breakthrough because critical factors such as opposition unity and elite defection did not coincide with large-scale mobilization. As mobilization began to decline, the protest wave became increasingly unlikely to succeed quickly, yet it also did not disappear. Instead, it showed signs of entering a stalled phase, in which protesters retained some capacity to mobilize while lacking the coordination and leverage needed for a breakthrough. Instead of adopting a strategy of ignoring the protests and waiting them out, the state chose repressive measures. While these measures increased the costs of participation, they also contributed to the prolongation of contention.

State Response: Emergence of Calibrated Repression

At first glance, the introduction of repressive measures by the government does not seem to have been a perceptive strategy, since events had already demonstrated movement drift by that time. The regime could instead have relied on a passive attrition strategy as discussed by Yuen and Cheng (2017), whereby protesters could enter the "survival regime" and protests could end peacefully, especially considering that by that time, the international community remained more restrained in its statements: Instead of abruptly blaming GD for rigging elections, statements made by the EU officials, as well as the resolutions and preliminary evaluations published by the OSCE and EU institutions were mostly focused on the need to investigate possible election misconduct (OSCE/ODIHR 2024, European Parliament 2024). Thus, costs had not yet been imposed by the international community.

However, repression still became visible in the second half of November, particularly on November 19, after members of the opposition parties Coalition for Change and the Unity-National Movement marched together to Tbilisi State University's (TSU) campus, where their leaders Nika Gvaramia and Giorgi Vashadze announced an overnight protest and set up tents with a small group of protesters. (RFE/RL 2024). Even though the demonstration was peaceful and met freedom-of-assembly standards, riot police moved from the TSU building toward the protesters, dispersed the crowd, confiscated the tents, and began detaining protesters on nearby streets, ultimately arresting sixteen demonstrators (Public Defender of Georgia 2024). Among them was 21-year-old Mate Devidze, who was initially detained on administrative charges. When he was about to leave detention on November 21, he was instead charged with criminal offenses and accused of assaulting a police officer. He was later sentenced to four years and six months in prison (Indigo 2025). This was among the earliest examples of a tactic that later became more common: the initial administrative detention of protesters followed by criminal prosecution carrying longer prison sentences.

These repressive tactics were calibrated in the sense that they increased participation costs without immediately resorting to the most extreme forms of violence that could provoke a broader backlash. In doing so, they avoided the fate of Euromaidan and the Velvet Revolution, where the use of lethal force was the major turning point for protesters and increased mobilization, and therefore, the chance for a breakthrough. Instead, they more closely resembled the tactics used in the 2011-2013 Russian protests, which involved many arrests and some injuries, especially during the Bolotnaya clashes, but are generally not recorded as having used lethal methods (Sennikov 2017).

In such conditions, the state's calibrated response appeared aimed at preventing renewed escalation. Although the scale of mobilization had already begun to decline, the joint march

organized by opposition leaders suggested that the movement could acquire clearer political leadership and potentially generate broader participation. At the same time, the use of tents indicated that even a reduced protest could become more durable, making it clear that waiting out the protests might take longer than the state had expected. Additionally, election-related procedures were still ongoing, and further institutional confirmation of the results could have triggered a renewal of large-scale mobilization; moreover, official election observation reports, including the OSCE report, were still pending, and their findings had the potential to revive election-related grievances. Repression, therefore, served to increase the costs of sustained mobilization and to eliminate the emergence of both forms of opposition unity as well as more durable forms of protest. As such, the decision to employ repressive tactics when the scale of protest was already smaller shows that the regime intended to suppress the protest rather than accommodate it and wait it out gradually.

This strategy was partly successful, as the clashes between security forces and protesters contributed to a temporary retreat by opposition leaders. One of the leaders of the Coalition for Change, Zurab Japaridze, even told the crowd after the arrests that the opposition had decided to suspend the protest temporarily to develop a new plan (RFE/RL 2024). Yet the inability to produce such a plan quickly deepened frustration among protesters who already distrusted political parties, a sentiment frequently expressed in the Facebook group “Daitove.”

However, these repressive measures did not eliminate mobilization entirely. Instead, they altered its form and tactics and added new motives for protest. Student groups attempted to sustain mobilization by occupying spaces inside the first building of Tbilisi State University (TSU). They demanded the resignation of the rector, who had allowed security forces to enter the campus, as well as the release of detained protesters. While smaller in scale, opposition

protests demanding new elections continued outside the university, where demonstrators again set up tents and attempted to maintain a permanent presence (RFE/RL 2024). In this context, the protests became increasingly socially mobilized rather than politically directed. Opposition parties followed rather than led the crowd, attempting to maintain visibility wherever protesters gathered. Later, opposition parties attempted to lead and revive the protests. On November 23, they moved the rally from TSU's first building to Heroes' Square and promised to present an action plan for the coming days. However, the opposition's strategy remained unclear (RFE/RL 2024).

Overall, by late November, the protest movement still demonstrated mobilizational capacity, but also clear structural limitations. Protesters reacted strongly to election-related stimuli, yet mobilization was not sustainable in the absence of a coherent strategy, even before the government resorted to repression and especially after it did so, since repression also created the need to offset the rising costs of participation. Thus, the initial post-election escalation window was not fully utilized.

It is important to note that although repression can sometimes trigger security-elite defection, it did not occur during the first wave of protests after the 2024 elections in Georgia. Although some lower-ranking employees resigned and distanced themselves from the government, there was no broader pattern of defection among senior security officials. Among high-ranking figures, only Irakli Shaishmelashvili, the then Head of the Operational Planning Division of the Special Tasks Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, resigned during the December protests and made a public anti-government statement (RFE/RL 2024). His resignation, however, remained an isolated case rather than evidence of wider fragmentation within the security apparatus. Thus, despite state repression, elite cohesion remained largely intact, signaling regime stability.

The first wave, therefore, produced neither full demobilization nor a breakthrough. Instead, it revealed the basic structure of the emerging protest trend: protesters retained the capacity to mobilize, but opposition fragmentation limited strategic escalation; the regime used calibrated repression to raise participation costs, but avoided levels of violence that might trigger wider backlash or elite defection. At the same time, while international actors questioned or criticized the process, they did not yet impose strong enough costs to alter the regime's calculations. While this could have led to the gradual decline and resolution of the protest wave, the state itself revived protest capacity through the November 28 announcement about postponing Georgia's EU accession process.

Wave II: From Grassroots Protests to Stalemate (Nov 2024-Mar 2026)

The second wave of protests followed Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's briefing on November 28, 2024, in which he announced that, although Georgia had received EU candidate status earlier that year, the issue of opening accession negotiations with the European Union would not be placed on the agenda until the end of 2028. The government also declared that it would refuse budgetary grants from the European Union (Government of Georgia 2024). Many interpreted Kobakhidze's statement as a rejection of the country's pro-Western course, especially given that the Constitution of Georgia requires state institutions to take all necessary measures to ensure Georgia's integration into the European Union (Matsne n.d.). As a result, a few hours after this announcement, citizens began gathering in front of the Georgian Dream office in Tbilisi to protest this decision.

As such, through this statement, the government itself stimulated a new wave of protests marked by an even higher peak of mobilization. This wave proved longer and more dynamic, characterized by continuous action and counteraction from both protesters and the state. Over

time, these interactions contributed to the emergence of a dynamic equilibrium, an attritional stalemate in which both sides retained the capacity to withstand pressure and to impose costs.

Limits of Grassroots Mobilization

The protests that followed the November 28 statement in 2024 were largely self-organized. Instead of waiting for political actors to guide them, demonstrators spontaneously gathered in front of the Georgian Dream office and then moved toward the parliament building. Large-scale mobilization quickly blocked Tbilisi's central Rustaveli Avenue (IPN 2024). That same evening, people gathered in other major cities to protest the PM's statement. Throughout the following months, protest rallies continued daily on Tbilisi's Rustaveli Avenue, which was repeatedly closed to traffic (Forbes Georgia 2024).

On November 30, the protest reached its largest scale. While different sources counted the density of mobilization differently, the number of people participating in the protest was estimated in the range of 102000-183000 (On.ge 2024). According to the "3.5% rule", when the mobilization at its peak is around 3.5% of the population, it is more likely to achieve success (Chenoweth 2020). However, while the mobilization on November 30 was closer to that number,¹² the success wasn't achieved. This once again highlights that the mobilization in the post-Soviet context is not decisive in protests and can be undermined if not supported by other contributing factors.

One factor that undermined mobilization capacity was the absence of formal organizational structures, which meant that protest dynamics were often shaped through improvised practices rather than coordinated strategy. Demonstrations had no central stage, and

¹² According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, Georgia's population in 2024 was 3,694.6 thousand (approximately 3.69 million people).

politicians with weakened public standing often stood among ordinary participants rather than directing the crowd. Protesters projected messages and images onto the parliament building using laser lights, sometimes triggering chanting or whistling from the crowd (Geo Protests n.d.).

Grassroots mobilization allowed protesters to avoid affiliation with opposition parties, as many participants posting in Facebook groups used for coordination did not want to be associated with them (Daitove n.d.). At the same time, however, protesters appeared to recognize the importance of visible leadership for increasing legitimacy. As such, they sometimes requested President Salome Zourabichvili's presence at demonstrations (IPN 2024). Her appearance generated enthusiasm among some participants, suggesting that she functioned as a symbolic figure within the movement.

However, Zourabichvili's direct influence on mobilization remained limited and temporary. Her visibility was strongest during the first days of the protest wave. Later, she focused more on drawing international attention to developments in Georgia than on directly guiding protest activities, including through meetings with European colleagues and addressing the European Parliament (Tabula 2024). This potentially increased pressure on the regime by involving international actors in the process, but left the movement without clear leadership capacity.

These observations and the sequence of events suggest several points. First, citizens mobilized spontaneously after Kobakhidze's statement rather than in response to calls from political actors. This indicates that the November 28 announcement, combined with existing anger over the contested elections, produced a stronger mobilizing effect. In this sense, European integration did not replace electoral grievances but intensified them by giving the protest wave a broader emotional and political frame. Second, because the second wave of

protests began as a reaction to the prime minister's controversial statement, it shows that even when protests appear to decline or enter a stalemate phase, certain stimuli can trigger renewed mobilization. Stalemate, therefore, does not necessarily mean that protests are moving toward defeat; a new "window of opportunity" may emerge even within stalled protest cycles. Third, while Zourabichvili emerged as a symbolic figure, opposition parties continued to suffer from low trust and limited capacity to coordinate the movement, which constrained the chances of a breakthrough. Fourth, the constraints were not one-sided. Just as the protest movement limited its own mobilizing capacity through the absence of unified opposition guidance, the state also unintentionally strengthened protest mobilization through the prime minister's statement, which created a new window of opportunity.

At the same time, mobilization did not exert pressure only through numbers in the streets. The continued presence of protesters, the nightly closure of Rustaveli Avenue, and the visibility of the demonstrations in domestic and international media helped keep the issue on the public agenda and invited sustained international attention. In this sense, even decentralized protest retained an attritional quality: it signaled unresolved contention and prevented full normalization of the political situation.

Costs of Protesting

Unlike the first wave, the second wave was met with immediate and harsher, yet again calibrated repression. The authorities relied on a combination of police force, legal restrictions, and administrative sanctions. Rather than fully suppressing protest, these measures allowed limited mobilization to continue.

The first clashes between police and protesters occurred on November 28 itself when demonstrators removed iron barricades near the parliament building. In response, the

Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that the rally had exceeded the norms established by the Law on Assembly and Manifestation and confirmed that special means had been used (MIA 2024). In the following days, protests continued, and so did the use of force. Tear gas, pepper spray, and water cannons were used against demonstrators who gathered each evening again on Rustaveli Avenue. Injured protesters were taken to clinics, while many demonstrators were detained. Protesters reported that special forces used violence during arrests, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed that some demonstrators had insulted officers and thrown objects (Social Justice Center 2025). According to NGO reports, around 400 people were arrested during the first week of protests beginning on November 28 (IPN 2024), and more than 30 participants later ended up in prison, including well-known actors and journalists. Civil society organizations and independent media outlets referred to them as “prisoners of conscience” (TI Georgia 2024, Indigo 2025).

This dynamic was further compounded by repression targeting civil servants who publicly expressed anti-government views. These measures primarily affected around 500 public-sector employees who had signed a collective statement distancing themselves from the government’s November 28 announcement, reaffirming their commitment to Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic path, and condemning the disproportionate dispersal of peaceful protesters (TI Georgia 2025). Reports of dismissals suggested that the government sought to raise the costs of dissent not only for street protesters but also for state employees.

This response produced two simultaneous effects. On the one hand, arrests and the use of force raised the risks associated with participation and contributed to the gradual decline of large-scale demonstrations. On the other hand, repression could not eliminate mobilization altogether, as it generated new grievances and new reasons for continued mobilization.

Protesters increasingly demanded not only new elections, but also the release of detained

demonstrators. This added a new layer to the protest agenda and helped sustain contention even as participation became riskier.

Protesters also began organizing thematic marches led by specific regions, professions, or civic groups, and relied on symbolic tactics such as human chains. In this way, they managed to maintain a daily and continuous form of protest. This not only created discomfort for the ruling authorities but also produced a spatial and temporal presence that served several functions: offering psychological support to imprisoned protesters, reinforcing the moral legitimacy of the movement, and maintaining international visibility (Japaridze 2025).

In response to the continuing protest movement, the Georgian Dream government introduced a series of legislative amendments that significantly tightened regulations on demonstrations and increased administrative penalties for protest-related activities. The changes included higher fines for blocking roads and other protest-related offenses, restrictions on the use of face coverings and pyrotechnics during demonstrations, and broader powers for law enforcement. These legal measures were accompanied by investigations against activists, including creators and leaders of the Facebook group “Daitove,” which had helped protesters coordinate grassroots mobilization (GHN.ge 2025). These “calibrated” measures again aimed to raise the costs of participation in protests and deter continued mobilization through legal and financial pressure rather than outright banning demonstrations.

However, protesters managed to find ways to offset the increased costs of participation. They established or began using existing solidarity funds through which supporters donated money to cover protest-related needs (BM.ge 2024). These funds varied in form: some were institutional, while others were created by former politicians, public figures, or celebrities. Despite these differences, they were united by a broadly pro-protest and anti-government orientation. The funds financed the medical expenses of injured protesters, temporary salary

costs of dismissed officials, payment of fines, and financial assistance to the families of arrested protesters (Prosperity Georgia 2025).

This again was followed by two-sided dynamics: On March 17, at the request of the prosecutor's office, the Tbilisi City Court seized the accounts of these foundations as well as NGOs that covered the fines and/or provided assistance to protest participants (Prosecutor of Georgia 2025). Although this represented a major setback for protesters' mobilization capacity, they adapted by using personal accounts to continue fundraising. A British bank account was also established to support the Georgian protests, placing some financial resources beyond the reach of Georgian authorities. In addition, political parties and NGOs offered free legal assistance to detained protesters and other victims of repression (JAMNews 2025).

However, this dynamic became increasingly asymmetric after the state again initiated new repressive laws that restricted general funding mechanisms for NGO (which in Georgia were largely funded by international grants). Consequently, the maneuvering space of not only foundations but also other civil society organizations was restricted (GYLA 2025). While they were still able to provide some free assistance, their capacity to offset the costs of protesting remained limited. This was reflected in declining mobilization capacity and the decreasing number of people on Rustaveli Avenue.

Costs of Repression

Protest capacity included not only neutralizing the repression, but also gaining international attention to impose costs on the government. Shortly after the crackdown, Georgian NGO's and civil society organizations addressed international organizations, including the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, OSCE (ODIHR), and the UN special institutions,

drawing attention to the deteriorating human rights situation amid protests in Georgia and calling for an international response (Social Justice Center 2024).¹³ At the same time, Salome Zourabichvili and opposition parties also pursued an international agenda, actively meeting with foreign officials and representatives of international organizations to discuss the grave situation in Georgia and seek support.

International actors began imposing sanctions on senior Georgian officials as early as December 2024. The United Kingdom sanctioned several Ministry of Internal Affairs officials linked to violence against journalists and peaceful demonstrators¹⁴ (UK Government 2024). The United States placed Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri and other officials under Global Magnitsky sanctions (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2024)¹⁵. The United States also sanctioned oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder and honorary chairman of Georgian Dream (US Embassy in Georgia 2024).

In the months that followed, sanctions broadened as European countries that usually lobby Georgia's EU integration, including Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and the Czech Republic, imposed entry bans and other restrictions on officials, members of parliament, and judges associated with the protest crackdown and democratic backsliding. Moreover, on May 6, 2025, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the MEGOBARI Act with bipartisan support, creating an additional basis for sanctions (US Congress 2025).¹⁶ Overall, more than 230 individuals had been sanctioned by Western states by March 2026, including government

¹³ UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression; UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

¹⁴ Sanctioned individuals included Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri, Tbilisi Police Department Director Sulkhan Tamazashvili, and Special Tasks Department Head Zviad Kharazishvili

¹⁵ The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, enacted in 2016, enables the U.S. government to impose sanctions on individuals and entities worldwide that are responsible for serious human rights abuses and corruption, including through asset freezes and travel bans.

¹⁶ Although the bill still required Senate approval.

officials, law enforcement and security figures, judges, propagandists, and pro-government businessmen (TI Georgia 2026). This wave of international condemnation of the events in Georgia has not subsided throughout the second wave of protests, as the organizations and diplomatic missions have periodically released statements to emphasize non-recognition of the current government as well as to call for the release of protesters detained during the protests (EEAS 2025).

These sanctions and international reaction, in general, did not impose immediate material costs on the ruling elite. However, they signaled international condemnation, damaged the government's legitimacy abroad, reinforced the opposition's claim that Georgian Dream was internationally isolated, and signaled to still-mobilized protesters that their presence in the streets mattered, especially in the moments when Western politicians and diplomats joined them in Tbilisi.¹⁷

Recognizing that these reputational and political costs could weaken its legitimacy among loyal voters and elites, the regime adopted a counter-framing strategy. This strategy involved portraying sanctioned individuals as patriots and promoting conspiracy narratives about the "Deep State" and the "Global War Party," framing Western criticism as part of an anti-Georgian plot against the country and its patriotic figures (GD 2025). Rather than investigating allegations of excessive force, the regime publicly rewarded officials involved in the protest crackdown, thereby reinforcing institutional loyalty. Mikheil Kavelashvili,¹⁸ newly elected president by the Georgian Dream parliament, even awarded the Order of Honor to several high-ranking Ministry of Internal Affairs officials who had been accused by

¹⁷ For example, in December 2024, European Parliament members Rasa Juknevičienė, Michał Szczerba, Tobias Kremer, and Sergey Lagodinsky joined anti-government protests in Tbilisi. In October 2025, Finland's Foreign Minister and OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Elina Valtonen, also joined protesters in Tbilisi.

¹⁸ After Zourabichvili's term officially ended in December 2025, Georgian Dream-backed Mikheil Kavelashvili assumed the presidency, aligning the office with the ruling party's position.

protesters of using brutal force during demonstrations (President of Georgia 2025). At the same time, no law enforcement officers were punished for abuses against demonstrators. These demonstrate that while security institutions remained cohesive, the absence of security-elite defection was not merely passive loyalty; it was actively reinforced through public rewards and institutional protection. While at the institutional level, the abolition of the Special Investigation Service in June 2025 (MATSNE 2025), previously responsible for investigating crimes committed by representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, further reduced oversight over law enforcement agencies managing the protests.

While Georgian Dream continued to protect its loyal officials, opposition parties kept cooperating with international organizations to increase pressure on the government. In January 2026, at the request of opposition parties, twenty-four Western OSCE participating states invoked the Moscow Mechanism¹⁹ to investigate developments in Georgia concerning human rights and fundamental freedoms amid the protests and broader democratic backsliding. The resulting report, published in March 2026, documented detailed cases of human rights violations, including repressive measures against protesters (OSCE/ODIHR 2026). This again increased reputational and political costs for the government.

Overall, the costs of repression became an important part of the stalemate dynamic. Protesters, civil society actors, opposition parties, and Zourabichvili were able to internationalize the crackdown and transform domestic repression into reputational and political costs for the regime. However, these costs did not become strong enough to force concessions, produce accountability, or trigger security-elite defection. Instead, Georgian Dream responded by protecting loyal officials, counter-framing Western pressure as hostile

¹⁹ The OSCE Moscow Mechanism is a human rights monitoring procedure that allows participating states to establish independent expert missions to investigate serious concerns related to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights without the consent of the targeted state, if enough participating states support it.

interference, and reinforcing institutional cohesion. Thus, international pressure constrained the regime but did not decisively weaken it, while repression constrained the protest movement but did not eliminate it. This interaction helped sustain an attritional stalemate rather than resolve the confrontation.

Limits of Unity

In response to solidified international support for the movement, which could potentially reinvigorate the protests, the Government further constrained the already limited possibility that opposition actors could convert this moment into coordinated leadership. Beginning in May 2025, several opposition leaders were arrested. Officially, these arrests were justified by their refusal to appear before a temporary investigative commission examining the activities of the former United National Movement government (RFE/RL 2025). In practice, however, these arrests further reduced the capacity of opposition actors to organize and guide protest activity.

However, the opposition was already constrained from within. The divisions among opposition forces became particularly evident when parties Lelo and Gakharia for Georgia decided to participate in the 2025 local elections,²⁰ while several other parties chose to boycott them (ITV 2025; IPN 2025). At the time, Lelo's leaders were imprisoned, but a month before the elections, on September 5, newly elected Georgian Dream-backed President Mikheil Kavelashvili pardoned them, explicitly citing their participation in the elections as the reason (Publika 2025). This further reinforced suspicions among other opposition actors that Lelo had broken with the common anti-Georgian Dream position. As a result, the

²⁰ The elections ultimately resulted in a decisive victory for Georgian Dream and its mayoral candidates across the country.

boycott-versus-participation divide revived and deepened divisions that had already existed before the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Despite this fragmentation, some opposition leaders attempted to use this political moment of the local elections to trigger a breakthrough through renewed large-scale protest mobilization. A protest rally was announced for October 4 at the initiative of United National Movement leader Levan Khabeishvili. He was joined by other opposition figures, including leaders of the National Movement and Strategy Agmashenebeli.²¹ These leaders argued that the ongoing protests on Rustaveli Avenue had become routine and that new action was necessary. They announced a “peaceful revolution” on October 4 (TV Pirveli 2025). However, this plan had two major limitations: the initiators failed to publicly explain how the government would be removed in a single day or what concrete steps would produce that outcome, and their proposal was not supported by other opposition parties, which refused to participate in organizing the rally (GPB 2025).

The state response further contributed to the failure of this “revolution” by targeting its leaders. Several weeks before the announced “revolution,” Khabeishvili was arrested. According to the Prosecutor’s Office, he was accused of publicly offering a bribe after encouraging security-elite defection by promising \$200,000 to law enforcement officers who refused to carry out their duties. He was later sentenced to prison for “publicly promising monetary sums to officials as bribes” (Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia 2025). Despite these developments, a large number of protesters gathered on Rustaveli Avenue on October 4. Yet opposition fragmentation and the absence of clear leadership once again prevented a political breakthrough.

²¹ Khabeishvili was also joined by civil activist and opera singer Paata Burchuladze.

Mistrust toward political leaders also played an important role. Many protesters who gathered on Rustaveli Avenue did not follow instructions from the stage to march toward the presidential palace. As a result, only part of the crowd moved toward the Palace, where clashes with police later occurred. Many participants later stated that they did not understand why the march had been announced or what concrete plan the organizers had (Geo Protests n.d.). The state responded quickly: The organizers of the rally were arrested on the same night, and in the following days, an additional 45 participants were detained and placed in pretrial custody (MIA Georgia 2025).

Disunity continued in the following months, particularly after Salome Zourabichvili gradually lost the informal leadership role she had played during the first wave. Although she continued to claim political legitimacy after Georgian Dream's disputed presidential transition, her initiatives to form a political alternative and a technical government in November 2025 were not received enthusiastically by opposition parties. Her initiatives to form a political alternative and a technical government in November 2025 were not received enthusiastically by opposition parties. While some leaders avoided direct statements, Gakharia's party openly rejected the proposal and refused to participate (Resonance Daily 2025). These disagreements were widely covered in the media, making divisions within the opposition visible to the broader public and signaling that the opposition was not ready to unite and to lead the protests.

Since November 2025, although the number of people in the streets was no longer large enough to block major roads consistently, smaller groups continued to protest daily, giving the protest cycle a continuous form, with higher mobilization occurring mainly on weekends and symbolic dates, such as November 28, the anniversary of the second protest wave's beginning, New Year's Eve, and Georgia's Independence Day on May 26. Public attention

increasingly shifted toward the court hearings of protesters detained earlier in the cycle.

Protesters also continued to demand the release of detained and imprisoned activists, new elections, and renewed progress toward EU accession. However, they also incorporated new grievances into the protest agenda, including government policies on education and social issues, as well as rising prices (Daitove 2026).

Amid this decline in mobilization, only in March 2026 did nine opposition parties announce an agreement to form an alliance and coordinate their efforts in an attempt to revive the protest movement. However, this unity has remained limited. The alliance excluded influential parties such as Gakharia for Georgia and Lelo, and it also did not include cooperation with Salome Zourabichvili, who had earlier been viewed by some protesters as a potential leader (RFE/RL 2026). Overall, no genuinely new tactic has emerged since the announcement of this alliance, from opposition parties, protesters, or the government.

Although it is difficult to assess what the partially united opposition may contribute to protest capacity, its emergence only after the period of large-scale mobilization had passed has so far limited its ability to reshape the trajectory of contention. The broader pattern, therefore, persisted: moments of opposition coordination and moments of strongest street mobilization did not coincide. This suggests that the protest movement's limits were produced not only by government actions, but also by internal weaknesses within the opposition and the protest movement itself. Therefore, even though protest capacity and state control continued to constrain each other, this dynamic became more asymmetrical in the later stage of the protest wave, as factors that could have enabled a protest breakthrough remained only partially present while the state increasingly dominated.

Mutual Constraints: The Consolidation of Stalemate

Taken together, the two protest waves demonstrate how Georgia's 2024-2026 protest cycle gradually evolved into a stalemate through mutually limiting dynamics. On the one hand, protesters preserved their ability to mobilize throughout the cycle. Large-scale demonstrations were repeatedly organized in response to new political stimuli, while decentralized civic networks allowed protesters to maintain daily mobilization even after the peak of participation had passed. Protesters also adapted to the increasing costs of participation by developing solidarity funds, relying on symbolic forms of protest, and internationalizing repression through cooperation with NGOs, opposition parties, and international actors (Prosperity Georgia 2025, RFE/RL 2025). In this sense, the protest movement proved to be much more resilient than a simple "failed protest" framework suggests.

At the same time, however, the movement's ability to transform persistence into political breakthroughs remained limited. The fragmentation of the opposition repeatedly undermined attempts to transform moments of large-scale mobilization into coordinated political pressure. The absence of unified leadership, disagreements over electoral participation, mutual distrust among opposition actors, and weak coordination between the political elite and ordinary protesters prevented the emergence of a coherent escalation strategy (Geo Protests, n.d.). Even when there were attempts to revive the protest movement through renewed mobilization or opposition alliances, these efforts either came too late or lacked sufficient coordination to fundamentally shift the balance between protesters and the regime. As a result, the resilience of the protest did not become decisive leverage.

The state also ran into its own limitations. Georgian Dream maintained institutional control, kept the security elite cohesive, and used calibrated repression to increase the costs of protest

participation without provoking the mass backlash or elite resignations that had helped drive past successful revolutions in the region. However, these tactics did not completely quell or exhaust mobilization. Instead, arrests, police violence, and restrictive legislation often led to new grievances and renewed protest demands, while also attracting ongoing international criticism and reputational costs (OSCE/ODIHR 2026).

Overall, the protest stalemate did not arise solely from the absence or presence of specific factors. Rather, it resulted from the interplay of changing timing, as well as capabilities on both sides. Only security-elite loyalty remained more or less static, while mobilization, opposition coordination, repression, and international pressure varied throughout the protest cycle; However, none became sufficiently powerful or aligned to resolve the confrontation. This led to an uneven but sustainable stalemate: the protesters were able to prevent full normalization, while the regime was able to prevent a breakthrough. While costs and constraining factors may differ across protest scenarios and contexts, the Georgian case demonstrates that the dynamic relationship between protest and state capacities, as well as the equilibrium of mutually imposed costs, can keep protest unresolved and stalled while retaining its attritional character.

Conclusion

Existing scholarship on post-Soviet anti-government protest movements has largely focused on binary outcomes: successful democratic breakthroughs or failed protest attempts suppressed by authoritarian regimes. However, it does not systematically theorize protest duration or explain why some protest movements persist without producing a decisive outcome for a prolonged period of time. To address this gap, this thesis introduced the concept of attritional stalemate in protest, where neither the protest nor the state side can

achieve a decisive outcome, while both continue to impose costs on each other. The study applied this concept to the 2024-2026 anti-government protest movement in Georgia and sought to explain why and how it evolved into a prolonged phase of unresolved contention, rather than producing either quick regime change or complete protest suppression.

This study developed a process-centered framework focused on five interacting factors: mobilization, opposition fragmentation, calibrated repression, security-elite cohesion, and international reaction. Tracing two waves of protest since the 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia, this thesis reconstructed events and argued that rather than operating independently, these factors largely varied and interacted across the protest cycle in ways that generated mutually reinforcing constraints on both protesters and the government.

The empirical analysis shows, first, that mobilization remained substantial and persistent, especially during the second protest wave; however, its scale varied. Protesters were able to sustain daily demonstrations, preserve the visibility of contention, and keep the crisis on both the domestic and international agenda. Yet this mobilizational capacity did not translate into coordinated political pressure strong enough to produce a breakthrough. Opposition fragmentation and the absence of durable leadership repeatedly limited the movement's ability to convert mass participation into a coherent strategy of escalation. Although opposition actors occasionally attempted to present a united front, their cooperation remained fragile, partial, and inconsistent, while public distrust toward political parties reinforced the decentralized and largely leaderless character of the protest movement.

Second, the government relied on calibrated repression. Rather than fully prohibiting demonstrations or relying solely on indiscriminate violence, the authorities selectively raised the costs of participation through arrests, criminal prosecutions, administrative sanctions, and legal restrictions. This approach constrained mobilization while avoiding the kind of

overwhelming repression that might have triggered broader backlash, expanded participation, or encouraged splits within the ruling elite. Repression, therefore, did not eliminate protest but reshaped its scale, rhythm, and forms.

Third, security institutions remained cohesive throughout the protest cycle. In contrast to cases in which splits within coercive institutions become decisive turning points, no meaningful defection emerged from the Georgian security apparatus. On the contrary, institutional loyalty was publicly reinforced through rewards, official rhetoric, and the absence of accountability for abuses against demonstrators. This cohesion signaled regime durability and reduced expectations that protest pressure alone could produce rapid political change.

Fourth, international support towards protesters formed part of the same process. Sustained protest, repeated repression, and the visibility of the crisis generated continuing international scrutiny, diplomatic criticism, and sanctions against senior Georgian officials. These reactions did not decisively alter the domestic balance of power or force major concessions. However, they did raise reputational and diplomatic costs for the regime and provided symbolic encouragement to protesters. In this sense, even when mobilization was no longer consistently large-scale, the continued presence of protest still imposed costs on the authorities and helped prevent full normalization of the political situation.

Taken together, these findings show that the Georgian protest cycle developed into an attritional stalemate: an extended condition of unresolved contention in which neither side secured a decisive advantage, yet neither withdrew. Protesters retained enough mobilizational capacity to keep contention alive, impose political and reputational costs, and sustain uncertainty about the durability of the status quo. Meanwhile, opposition fragmentation, calibrated repression, and security-elite cohesion repeatedly prevented that pressure from

being converted into regime change. The government, in turn, was able to contain and reshape the protest without extinguishing it altogether.

At the same time, both the protest and state sides also occasionally weakened their own capacities. On the protest side, the conditions most likely to produce a political breakthrough never fully coincided across protest cycles. When large-scale mobilization was present, it was accompanied by the absence of unified political leadership. When signs of greater opposition coordination or symbolic leadership emerged, mobilization had already diminished, while the other constraints remained in place. The non-coincidence of these conditions helps explain why the Georgian protest movement could not produce a breakthrough moment as described in traditional color revolution literature. On the state side, the state's repressive measures, while calibrated, still added new grievances to existing ones, helping keep protests persistent by creating new demands and reasons to mobilize. Similarly, the prime minister's statement created a window of opportunity for protesters, as it became the immediate trigger for the second wave.

A central finding of this thesis is that a prolonged protest stalemate is produced through mutual attrition. When enabling conditions are not fully aligned, protest does not automatically move toward failure. Instead, as the Georgian case shows, protesters and the government may continue to impose costs on each other over time without either side gaining a decisive advantage. Protesters absorbed repression through solidarity funds, tactical adaptation, and international advocacy, while the government absorbed reputational pressure through counter-framing, institutional protection of loyal officials, and continued coercive control. Attrition therefore operated as a two-sided process: each side imposed costs on the other, but each also found ways to withstand pressure. Over time, this process may exhaust capacities unevenly and eventually move the confrontation toward either breakthrough or

demobilization. However, this thesis does not seek to explain how stalemates end; rather, it explains how they emerge and persist.

This thesis also acknowledges that it is limited by its focus on a single ongoing case and by its reliance primarily on publicly available sources, which makes it difficult to fully assess internal decision-making within the government, the opposition, and the protest movement. Future research could explore the motivations of actors involved in the protests and examine their perceptions during stalemate; it could also examine whether similar patterns emerge in other cases where protest movements endure without either overthrowing incumbents or being fully suppressed.

Despite this limitation, the findings of this thesis contribute to the broader literature on contentious politics in the post-Soviet region by showing that protest trajectories should not be reduced to a binary distinction between success and failure. Conceptualizing stalemate in this way expands existing frameworks for analyzing anti-government protest in post-Soviet countries and, potentially, beyond the region.

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