



**Practising Citizenship in a Context of Democratic Backsliding:
Young People's Civic Engagement and Activism in Georgia**

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II. Abstract

Across many societies, democratic backsliding has narrowed civic spaces, raising questions about how citizenship is practised when formal democratic channels become fragile. In countries undergoing autocratisation, these questions are particularly important in relation to young people, who are often highly visible in protest movements. In Georgia, recent democratic decline has intensified public protest and placed young people at the centre of civic and political mobilisation. Yet, existing research has paid less attention to how young people themselves interpret their involvement and continue to engage despite repression, uncertainty, and high personal costs. This study examines how young people involved in protest and activism in Georgia understand participation, negotiate the identity of “activist,” and remain engaged over time. Guided by a qualitative, interpretivist, and social constructionist approach, the study draws on twelve semi-structured interviews with participants aged 19 to 29. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that the participants understood civic engagement as a moral practice connected to responsibility, integrity, and the need to respond to injustice. Their relationship to the identity of “activist” was ambivalent; while some embraced the label, others rejected it or preferred to just be called a “citizen”. Participants remained engaged by staying true to their values, relying on solidarity, setting boundaries, and preserving hope despite uncertain political outcomes. In a divided public, their efforts to inform others and challenge misinformation also became attempts to rebuild trust across social and political divisions. The thesis argues that civic engagement under democratic backsliding is political, moral, emotional, and relational, and that its endurance depends on more than confidence in immediate political change.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding; youth civic engagement; activism; citizenship-as-practice; Georgia

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1. Introduction

Across many societies, concerns about democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space have intensified debates about how citizenship is practised (Kalev et al., 2025). Over the past decade, a renewed wave of autocratisation has been characterised by the repression of civil society, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the erosion of fundamental democratic rights (Nord et al., 2026). These developments make it increasingly important to understand how people experience and resist democratic decline.

Young people have long played an important role in protests and movements. Youth participation has been central to the development of activism, making it difficult to understand social movements without recognising young people's contributions (Earl et al., 2017). Yet, while political and civic engagement have been studied in consolidated and "old democracies" (J. Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 283), there is limited research on post-Soviet or transitional contexts such as Georgia, especially from young people's lived experience.

In Georgia, these questions have become urgent, since the country has increasingly been described as undergoing democratic backsliding toward hybrid or more authoritarian rule (Nord et al., 2026). Democratic backsliding refers to the deliberate erosion of democratic institutions and norms, usually through gradual actions taken by political actors already in power (Bermeo, 2016). In the face of increasing political repression, young people have become one of the most visible groups in recent protest movements (Tsuladze, 2024). The current wave of protest began after the parliamentary elections of 26 October 2024 and intensified on 28 November, when the government announced that it would suspend European Union accession negotiations until 2028. For more than 500 days, protesters across Georgia have continued to mobilise, repeatedly returning to the streets demanding their rights despite sustained state pressure. This pressure includes mass arrests, heavy administrative fines, and significant physical and psychological strain among protesters (Amnesty International, 2026). Some models of participation explain why people mobilise, emphasising group identity, perceived injustice, and the belief that collective action can be effective (van Zomeren et al., 2008). These models, however, assume that civic engagement depends on a sense of efficacy and a belief that action will

make a difference. How engagement is sustained once this sense of efficacy weakens remains underexplored. Despite this pressure, protesters have continued to return to the streets. This persistence points to a gap in existing research: while much is known about the political causes and dynamics of mobilisation, less is known about how young people experience, interpret, and sustain their civic engagement under conditions of increased state pressure.

Addressing this requires a shift in how young people's civic engagement is understood. Following the theoretical shift proposed by Lawy and Biesta (2006a, 2006b), this study examines citizenship as something lived and practised across diverse spaces through young people's own experiences, instead of treating it as a formal status to be acquired or a subject taught at school. Democratic backsliding places this learning under pressure: as civic space narrows, the informal settings in which young people practise citizenship are constrained, and the personal costs of participation rise.

Drawing on twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews, it examines how participants construct meanings around citizenship, negotiate the identity of being an "activist," and sustain engagement despite its costs. While the study is situated within the wider context of protest and democratic backsliding, it focuses on the meanings young people construct through their own experiences. It is guided by the research question: *How do young people involved in protest and activism in Georgia make sense of and sustain their civic engagement in the context of democratic backsliding?*

Chapter 2 outlines the political context of democratic backsliding in Georgia. Chapter 3 provides further context on civic activism and mass protest, with particular attention to the role of young people. Chapter 4 discusses the theories and concepts that inform the study, focusing on citizenship, activist identity, and the sustaining of participation. Chapter 5 explains the methodology, including the research paradigm, research methods, and ethical and reflexive considerations. Chapter 6 presents the findings. Finally, Chapters 7 and 8 present the discussion and conclusion, drawing together the main findings of the thesis.

2. Background and Context

Democratic backsliding in Georgia

Over the past decade, Georgia has increasingly been described as a hybrid regime. Since 2012, the Georgian Dream (GD) party has maintained political dominance through repeated electoral victories, including its fourth consecutive win in October 2024 (P. Ekman, 2026; Gozalishvili & Moga, 2026). Scholars use different terms to describe this trajectory: Amoris (2025) refers to the consolidation of authoritarianism, and P. Ekman (2026) frames it as autocratisation and democratic backsliding. Despite different terms, they all point to a broader pattern of democratic decline (Gozalishvili & Moga, 2026; Torres-Adán & Buzogány, 2025).

This pattern of democratic backsliding is also reflected in international democracy assessments. The V-Dem Institute downgraded Georgia from an “electoral democracy” to an “electoral autocracy” (Nord et al., 2026, p. 44), identifying a reversal of democratic progress after 2016. V-Dem distinguishes electoral democracies from electoral autocracies by assessing whether multiparty elections meet established standards of freedom and fairness and whether basic freedoms, such as freedom of expression and association, are protected. Autocratisation refers to movement away from democratic standards, and when this process begins in an existing democracy, it is commonly described as “democratic backsliding”. The erosion of democracy in Georgia became especially visible during the 2024 elections, which were criticised for alleged irregularities, pressure on media and opposition actors, and claims of external influence (Mgaloblishvili, 2026).

Georgia’s democratic trajectory is closely connected to its geopolitical orientation. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country has been trying to find its place on the international stage. Euro-Atlantic integration has gradually become prominent in Georgian political discourse, presented both as a means of distancing the country from Russian influence and as a pathway for domestic reforms, especially after the 2003 Rose Revolution ¹(Coene, 2016; Tsuladze,

¹ The Rose Revolution refers to the series of mass protests in Georgia in November 2003, triggered by allegations of electoral fraud in the parliamentary elections. The protests were non-violent and led to the resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze, followed by Mikheil Saakashvili’s election as president in January 2004 (Fairbanks, 2004).

2023). Even in a highly unstable international situation, Georgian citizens have remained committed to the country's European Union integration, the support being highest among young people, opposition supporters, urban residents, and relatively highly educated citizens (Caucasus Research Resource Center [CRRC], 2021). As a result, the majority of the Georgian public viewed the signing of the EU Association Agreement in 2014 and receiving the EU candidate status in 2023 as a safeguard against Russian imperialism and advancement towards the "Long desired European Future" (Amoris, 2025, p. 2). However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a decisive moment in the Georgian political trajectory, characterised by growing Euroscepticism and a rhetorical divide between the government of Georgia and the EU (Tabatadze & Gigauri, 2025).

Democratic backsliding has also affected the conditions of civic participation. European Commission's 2025 Enlargement Package states: "The state of democracy in Georgia was marked by significant backsliding" (p. 4), highlighting the government's growing pressure on civil society, media, opposition figures, and protesters. This has weakened democratic civic participation and narrowed the space for fundamental freedoms. These dynamics were particularly visible during the 2024 protests, when thousands of people, including many young people, took to the streets in response to concerns over democratic decline, electoral legitimacy, and Georgia's geopolitical direction. The sense of democratic crisis was not limited to institutional assessments. It was also reflected in public opinion, with a majority of the population (72%) stating that Georgia is experiencing a political crisis (Institute of Social Studies and Analysis [ISSA], 2025).

The country report by Amnesty International (2026, p. 8) describes Georgia's current system as an "architecture of repression," in which disinformation, restrictive laws, police force, and the judiciary work together to silence criticism and reinforce the ruling party's power. The report argues that government-aligned narratives have framed critics, NGOs, and civil society actors as threats to the state, creating a "propaganda-to-punishment pipeline" (p. 12) through which public hostility is used to justify legal and physical repression, accompanied by restrictive legislation, as well as pressure on peaceful assembly and freedom of association. The report also highlights the role of law enforcement and the courts, pointing to disproportionate force against protesters, impunity for violence, unfair trials and heavy fines. These developments are central to understanding the everyday risks and costs faced by those who remain politically and civically active.

3. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on civic and political activism and mass protests in Georgia. It first situates recent mobilisation within the country's longer history of protest and examines the political and personal conditions under which participation takes place. It then focuses on the role of young people, considering their visibility, forms of participation, and representation within recent protest movements.

3.1 Mass protests as Civic and Political Activism in Georgia

Since independence, Georgia's political trajectory has been shaped by civic activism and protests. Because formal mechanisms of power transfer have often been fragile, street mobilisation as part of civic and political activism has served as a major way for citizens to challenge governments and demand political change (Tsuladze, 2025). At the same time, Georgia's participatory and inclusive civil society remains under development, which has made protest one of the most visible forms of political engagement, especially among young people (Skiert & Skiert-Andrzejuk, 2021). The dataset *Protests in Independent Georgia* (2025) documents media-covered protests between 1991 and 2024, identifying 384 protest events across a wide range of social and political issues. Most of these protests took the form of demonstrations, while strikes, hunger strikes, pickets, and marches were also present, though less frequent. In terms of themes, the largest share of protests concerned social issues and social justice, followed by politics and justice-related actions. Smaller but still significant shares focused on environmental issues, education, culture, queer rights and drug policy. Overall, the data show that protest in Georgia has long been a recurring and diverse form of civic and political engagement (Dzvelishvili et al., 2025).

Recent significant protests include the 2019 "Gavrilov Night"² protests against Russian influence and the subsequent "Shame Movement" demanding political accountability and electoral reform, as well as pro-Ukraine demonstrations (Davtyan, 2025; Tsuladze, 2025). This pattern of protests became especially visible in 2023, when the ruling GD party moved forward with a Law on

² The 2019 "Gavrilov Night" protests were triggered when Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian MP attending an Orthodox parliamentary conference in Tbilisi, addressed the session in Russian from the Georgian Parliament Speaker's chair. Given Georgia's history with Russia, this was widely perceived as politically provocative and sparked public outrage (Matthews, 2025).

Transparency of Foreign Influence³, often referred to as “foreign agent’s law” (Gozalishvili & Moga, 2026) or “Russian law” (Qeburia, 2024) by opponents. Although the government presented the bill as a transparency measure, some viewed it as an attempt to restrict civil society, triggering large-scale street protests. After strong criticism from international actors and wider society, the bill was withdrawn in 2023, but a revised version was adopted a year later, during which the government’s rhetoric also became increasingly Eurosceptic (Tabatadze & Gigauri, 2025). The bill, therefore, is considered a turning point for wider concerns about Georgia’s autocratisation and changing geopolitical orientation.

In November 2024, a second wave of protests erupted following parliamentary elections and the government’s decision to put all negotiations related to joining the European Union on hold until 2028. These demonstrations were also closely connected to wider concerns over democratic backsliding and Georgia’s geopolitical orientation. Public opinion data shows that 43% of respondents considered the elections unfair, while support for EU membership remained very high, at 83% (ISSA, 2025). Young people’s engagement in these protests should also be understood in relation to wider concerns about Georgia’s democratic and geopolitical direction. Focus group findings of students suggest that many students view the EU as a model of democratic stability, economic, social, cultural and scientific development (Gvalia, 2024). In contrast, young people perceive Russia negatively, as a threat to Georgia’s security, economy, culture, and especially its statehood (Gvalia, 2024; Shubladze et al., 2023).

The state response to the 2024 protests is central to understanding the costs of civic engagement in Georgia. By December 2024, more than 460 people had been arrested, around 430 faced administrative charges, and over 30 were subject to criminal prosecution (Amnesty International, 2024). The European Commission (2025, p. 6) mentioned that “the harsh and disproportionate sentences inflicted on protesters show that the judiciary system is used by the governing party to enforce a system of repression”. Human rights organisations have similarly described the police response to demonstrations as systemic and violent. They have also raised concerns that demonstrators have faced harsh fines and detention despite limited evidence of unlawful conduct, while court proceedings against protesters, including young people arrested during the demonstrations, have failed

³ The proposed legislation would have required media organisations, Non-Commercial and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as foreign influence (Tabatadze & Gigauri, 2025; Tsuladze et al., 2024).

to meet international fair-trial standards (Amnesty International, 2026). Despite the repression, public opinion polls show ongoing support for protests and the release of people detained during the protests (ISSA, 2025). These developments suggest that state repression has shaped the civic and political environment of protest and affected the participants in direct and personal ways.

Consequently, people have participated in these protests within an environment shaped by the risk of arrest, physical violence, financial penalties, and psychological pressure. Research conducted in October 2024 found that almost 80% of participating activists in the demonstrations showed moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression. This suggests a high degree of psychological strain among activists, likely shaped by the broader conditions of political tension and unrest (Chakhunashvili, 2025).

3.2 Young people in protests and activism

Young people have been particularly visible within Georgia's broader landscape of protest and civic mobilisation. Youth participation in Georgia's civic and political life has a long history and should not be understood only as a recent development. Student and youth activism has appeared across different political periods, from earlier forms of civic mobilisation during the First Republic, to student resistance and protests during the Soviet period. Following the restoration of independence, new movements formed, including Laboratory 1918, Auditoria 115, and May Student Movement⁴, which connected university-based activism with broader concerns about social inequality (Imerlishvili & Gelkhauri, 2025). This longer history is important for understanding the visibility of young people in Georgia's recent protest waves. At the same time, young people's participation has not always taken the form of clearly named movements. It has included large-scale demonstrations, digital and social media activism⁵, student mobilisations, strikes, and university sit-ins. During the 2024 protests, such activities have taken place at institutions across the country, including Ilia State University, Tbilisi State University, Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (Huppenberger, 2025).

⁴ Laboratory 1918, founded at Tbilisi State University in 2011, addressed problems in higher education and wider social inequalities. Auditoria 115 emerged in 2016 and later expanded its activism to workers' rights and environmental issues. The May Student Movement, founded in 2022, advocated for affordable housing and improved social conditions for students (Umbráško, 2024).

⁵ For example, Daitove, meaning "stay" or "keep" in Georgian, was an online group used to coordinate travel from the regions to Tbilisi during the 2024 protests and reportedly attracted more than 150,000 members (Weller, 2024).

Within the recent political developments in Georgia, young people have become particularly visible in mass protests. These mobilisations in media and academic literature are frequently described as “youth-led” or “Gen Z protests” (Jones, 2024; Samkharadze & Lebanidze, 2023; Tsuladze, 2023, 2024). While such labels can oversimplify the diversity of mass protest participants, they point to the visible and important role of young people. This visibility is also supported by Caucasus Barometer data, which show that both support and participation in protests in 2024 were highest among younger adults (Khoshtaria, 2024). According to Weller (2024), they were not only present at the demonstrations but also took an active role in organising them.

The visibility of young protesters has also been shaped by how they are represented by the government, the media, and the wider public. Tsuladze (2024) argues that Georgian youth has become a visible and challenging force in Georgia’s protests, and the government sees this mobilisation as difficult to control, trying to discredit and portray young people as manipulated by opposition parties. However, according to the author, these young protesters largely remain independent and self-organised, trying not to affiliate themselves with any political group. Tsuladze (2024) also observes that state repression has not necessarily discouraged mobilisation; in some cases, the use of force has strengthened solidarity and participants’ determination to continue.

The lived experience of young people involved in activism in Georgia remains underexplored, particularly in relation to the country’s most recent political developments. Existing research has mainly focused on macro-level political dynamics (Tsuladze, 2025; Weller, 2024), the formal aspects of civic engagement such as youth participating in local government or protest mobilisations (Weller, 2024). The literature that focuses on young people tends to treat them as a demographic category, with less attention to how they make sense of their own experiences (Tsuladze, 2024; Samkharadze & Lebanidze, 2023).

4. Theory and Concepts

This chapter brings together theoretical perspectives relevant to understanding young people's civic engagement. Research on citizenship, youth civic engagement, social movement, and social-psychological aspects of civic or political participation are often developed in parallel, with limited dialogue across these fields. By connecting these perspectives, the study focuses on the individual meanings and experiences that shape engagement. It examines how activism, participation, and citizenship overlap in practice, and how young people interpret and negotiate these meanings through their lived experiences. The chapter begins by outlining how citizenship is understood in this study, moving from citizenship as a formal legal status to citizenship as practice and civic action. It then turns to activist identity, focusing on the distinction between doing activism and identifying as an activist. The final section examines how civic engagement is sustained over time, with attention to political efficacy and personal costs involved.

4.1 Citizenship, Civic Engagement and Activism

From Status to Practice

Citizenship is usually described as membership recognised by a community, with a focus on the legal rights and responsibilities assigned by the state (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992). This understanding often emphasises formal political participation, such as voting, party membership, or legal rights. Such understanding can be limiting for the study of young people's civic engagement, as it risks positioning them as not-yet-citizens until they acquire full formal rights (Lawy & Biesta, 2006a). It may also be less useful for analysing civic engagement in contexts of democratic backsliding, where formal rights may exist on paper but feel threatened or weak in practice (Bermeo, 2016).

In response to this limitation, Lawy and Biesta (2006a) challenge the Marshallian model of Citizenship-as-status by proposing the Citizenship-as-practice approach. They reject the "deficit" view of young people as "citizens-in-the-making," emphasising that young people already participate in social and political life as citizens (Biesta et al., 2009, p. 7). This allows young people's everyday

actions and political engagement to be understood as meaningful forms of citizenship, not as preparation for citizenship in the future.

These perspectives support a broad, action-oriented understanding of civic engagement. Although civic engagement has been criticised as a “buzzword” (J. Ekman & Amnå, 2012), this study uses the concept to capture diverse forms of participation that young people engage in. According to Adler and Goggin (2005), civic engagement is understood as an active involvement in public and community life aimed at improving conditions or shaping collective futures. This definition is important for the study, because it includes formal and informal, individual and collective, social and political dimensions of engagement.

However, civic engagement understood only as ordinary participation in public or community life may not fully capture more disruptive or crisis-driven forms of action in difficult political contexts (Kennedy, 2021). This is where Isin and Nielsen's (2008) concept of acts of citizenship becomes useful, because it draws attention to moments in which individuals or groups challenge existing citizenship arrangements and claim rights that may not yet be fully recognised or protected. Isin (2012) distinguishes acts of citizenship from citizenship practices. While practices tend to be more routine and reproduce existing rights, acts of citizenship are disruptive and transformative, seeking to reshape dominant understandings of citizenship. Building on this, the concept of the “activist citizen” shifts attention from citizens who participate within existing rules to those who challenge and redefine these boundaries (Isin, 2009, p. 368).

This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding protest and activism as forms of civic action through which citizens contest existing political arrangements. J. Ekman and Amnå's (2012) typology of civic engagement is useful for locating such action more precisely. Their category of Manifest political participation includes Extra-parliamentary activism, both legal and illegal, as part of the civic engagement. The term is useful because it avoids the more commonly used label “unconventional participation,” which J. Ekman and Amnå (2012, p. 290) consider less appropriate as many protest-related activities have become normalised forms of civic and political engagement.

Taken together, these perspectives clarify how citizenship, civic engagement, protest, and activism are understood in this study, particularly because participants often used these terms interchangeably. Citizenship-as-practice provides the main lens for interpreting young people's actions

as expressions of citizenship, while the concepts of acts of citizenship and extra-parliamentary activism help locate protest within broader forms of civic and political engagement.

4.2 Activist identity

Doing Activism and Being an Activist

Activism has been widely examined within social movement literature, particularly in relation to mobilisation, collective action, and the social, cultural, and political consequences of protest. Earlier approaches focus on movement-level dynamics, resource mobilisation, political opportunities and organisation. New social movement perspectives shift attention toward the cultural and identity dimensions of action (Buechler, 1995). This opens space to examine activism at a more micro level, focusing on how individuals understand their involvement and how participation becomes connected to their sense of self.

Examining activism at the individual level therefore requires attention to identity and to how participation shapes a person's understanding of themselves. Identity is one of the central concepts across the social sciences, including psychology, sociology, and political science, making it difficult to situate it within a single theoretical lens (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In this study, identity is approached through its relation to citizenship and activism, where engagement can be understood as part of how individuals construct and realise their identities as citizens (Barnes et al., 2004). The distinction between doing activism and being an activist is therefore important for examining how political action becomes connected to self-understanding.

Social movement literature has often explained this connection through the concept of collective identity. Although the boundaries between social movements, protests, and protest groups are not always clearly defined, protest is commonly understood as a form of collective action that emerges in response to perceived injustice against a group with which individuals identify (Gillan, 2019; Klandermans et al., 2002). Through involvement in action, people can see themselves as part of a wider group or movement, and this sense of belonging can be strengthened through participation (Bobel, 2007). Social movement scholars have argued that activism can have lasting effects on personal identity, shaping how individuals understand both society and themselves (Laraña et al., 1994; Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

Collective identity therefore offers an important explanation of how participation and identity become connected. However, this perspective is more limited when people engage in activism without strongly identifying with a particular group. McDonald's (2002) critique is useful here, as he challenges the tendency to place collective identity at the centre of movement analysis. Instead, he argues for understanding mobilisation through the idea of a “public experience of self and the other” (p. 125). From this perspective, contemporary forms of mobilisation are not necessarily driven by a shared collective identity. They can also emerge through a common struggle over personal experience and the public recognition of that experience. This helps frame activism as something that may be rooted in personal meaning, values, and the need to respond to injustice, even when people do not strongly identify with a formal group or movement.

Gecas (2000, p. 94) also criticises approaches that focus too narrowly on role and group-based identities, arguing that this “neglects” other important sources of identification. Drawing on theories of the self, he highlights the importance of values and value systems in identity formation, including culture, morality, beliefs, and personal commitments. This perspective is useful for the present study because participants’ civic engagement cannot be understood only as identification with an activist group or movement. It also needs to be examined through the values, moral responsibilities, and commitments through which individuals make sense of who they are and how they should act.

While personal values and experiences are important sources of activist identity, they do not develop in isolation. A social constructionist approach adds a further dimension by explaining how identities are formed and reshaped through social interaction. Drawing on thinkers such as George Herbert Mead, social constructionists argue that people develop a sense of self by interpreting communication, social expectations, and the perspectives of others. Participation can therefore become a process of learning, as individuals reflect on themselves and their experiences, and decide how to act within society. Identity is therefore not stable and develops throughout life through continuous social experience. Over time, people accumulate different roles and self-understandings, which together shape their personal identity within a wider social world (Han & Dawson, 2025).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that activist identity is shaped through participation, personal values, reflection, and social interaction. The distinction between doing activism and being an activist therefore provides a useful lens for analysing how young people in Georgia make sense of their civic engagement and their own place within it.

4.3 Sustaining, costs & efficacy

Because activism can become closely connected to identity and personal values, understanding sustained civic engagement requires looking beyond political motivation and perceived effectiveness. Sustaining civic engagement and activism has long been a topic of discussion, especially in social movement studies, as it helps to better understand how people remain engaged over time and how continued commitment contributes to social and political change (Lauer & Sanderson, 2022).

One influential way of explaining participation is the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA; van Zomeren et al., 2008). This model examines civic participation through the interaction of group identity, perceived injustice, and collective efficacy. According to van Zomeren et al. (2008), individuals are more likely to engage in collective action when they identify with a group, experience injustice, and believe that their action can be effective. This highlights the importance of injustice and the belief that action can lead to desired outcomes or change.

The Social movement literature of Rational Action Theory provides a useful starting point for examining sustained civic engagement, because it highlights the tension between costs, benefits, and perceived efficacy. Edwards (2014) argues that individuals may analyse the costs and benefits of joining protests, seeking to minimise risk and maximise potential gains. From this perspective, participation should become more difficult to sustain when its costs increase and the likelihood of achieving change declines.

Olson's (1965) discussion of the collective action problem challenges the assumption that shared interests or foreseen contributions will automatically lead people to act together for collective goods. Similarly, Marwell and Oliver (1993) introduce the concept of efficacy to explain participation in terms of individuals' perceptions of how much their own contribution matters. However, these approaches leave an important question open: What happens when people continue to participate even when they no longer believe their actions will lead to visible outcomes? Moreover, if the benefits of a successful movement are shared widely, including with those who do not participate, it is not clear why only a few individuals would choose to pay these costs.

The costs involved in sustained participation are therefore central to understanding why engagement may become difficult to maintain. Burnout is especially relevant in this regard. There is no single, universally accepted definition of burnout. Building on Freudenberg's (1974) original formulation, burnout can be understood as something more long-term than temporary stress. Burnout

symptoms might include changes in health, concentration, and personality (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). Burnout can affect people engaged in many forms of paid or voluntary work. However, studies suggest that activists working on social justice and human rights issues may be particularly vulnerable to physical or emotional exhaustion (Chen & Gorski, 2015). This is crucial for activist studies, because it can result in a gradual erosion of the motivation and commitment that originally sustained their efforts toward social change (Lord et al., 2025).

However, humans do not always make choices based on calculations of costs and predictable outcomes, and there are other aspects to it, such as emotions and solidarity (Edwards, 2014). This does not make rational action approaches irrelevant, but it shows their limits. Until relatively recently, emotions were largely overlooked in academic analyses of politics, protest, and social movements. Over the past decades, social movement research has increasingly recognised emotions as central to both participation and the continued commitment of activists (Goodwin et al., 2001; Jasper, 2011).

Melucci's (1996) concept of metamorphosis is useful for understanding activism as a process of identity negotiation. It refers to the individual's capacity to move across different situational identities while maintaining a sense of personal continuity. Within this framework, reflexivity is especially important, as it moves beyond rational calculation and includes emotions, bodily sensations, and personal meanings.

Alongside emotions and reflexivity, another useful concept for understanding why civic engagement may persist under conditions of democratic decline is hope. Huber (2021) describes hope as an integral, but often underexplored dimension of democratic politics.

While Huber's (2021) discussion highlights the role of hope in sustaining democratic commitment, it does not address the question of how hope functions when democracy itself is backsliding. It also raises a further question: How do young people continue to engage when their actions feel morally necessary, but their political effectiveness remains uncertain?

Taken together, sustained civic engagement is shaped by several overlapping factors: collective identity, perceived injustice, efficacy, costs, emotions, solidarity, and hope. However, much of the literature either explains participation at the level of movements or focuses on the conditions under which individuals are likely to mobilise. Less attention is given to how individuals themselves make sense of continued engagement once participation becomes costly. This gap is especially important in

contexts of democratic backsliding, where civic engagement becomes increasingly risky, exhausting, and difficult to sustain.

5. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework of the study, covering the research questions and objectives, research paradigm, design and the methods applied. It also discusses participants and their recruitment, as well as the transcription tools and approaches used in the analysis. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the ethical dimensions of the research and acknowledging the limitations of the study.

5.1 Research Questions and Objectives

This study aims to understand how young people involved in protest and activism in Georgia experience and sustain their civic engagement under conditions of democratic backsliding. This study is guided by the following research question:

How do young people involved in protest and activism in Georgia make sense of and sustain their civic engagement in the context of democratic backsliding?

This is addressed through the following sub-questions:

- How do young people involved in protest and activism in Georgia experience civic engagement?
- How do they relate to the identity of “activist”?
- What costs do they associate with sustained civic engagement?
- How do they sustain civic engagement?

The objectives of the study are:

- To explore young people’s understandings of civic engagement in the context of democratic backsliding in Georgia.
- To examine how participants relate to and negotiate the identity of “activist.”
- To investigate the costs associated with sustained civic engagement.
- To analyse how young people sustain civic engagement.

5.2 Research Paradigm

According to Scott and Usher (1996), any claim about what exists in the world implies a position on how it can be known. While ontology determines the nature of the subject and the social world, epistemology examines the theory of knowing, the ways in which the knowledge is produced, the form it takes and who can be a “knower” (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 19). Since every methodological choice a researcher makes should be grounded in assumptions about the nature of reality and how it can be understood, it is necessary to discuss both the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the research.

The study adopts a relativist ontological position. According to Pfadenhauer and Knoblauch (2019), reality is shaped within individuals’ minds and socially produced through human interaction and engagement with the surrounding environment. Hence, truth cannot be discovered objectively. As humans interact with each other, they develop interrelated subjective understandings of the world, also shaped by broader sociocultural contexts. Therefore, reality is seen as multiple, fluid, and not fixed or universal, making it difficult to claim the presence of a single absolute truth. This study explores how young people involved in political activism construct their identities and make sense of their experiences.

In terms of epistemology, this research is informed by an interpretivist perspective (Cohen et al., 2018), focusing on understanding and interpreting social reality from the viewpoints of young people involved in activism in Georgia. Individuals develop an awareness of themselves and how their perspectives shape the environments they live in, as well as their interactions with the people and objects within those settings. Meaning is both shaped by and created through human behaviour, making interpretation essential for explaining social reality (Scott & Usher, 1996).

The study is further informed by a social constructionist perspective, which views meanings, identities, and understandings of citizenship as socially constructed through social interaction and interpretation (Cohen et al., 2018). This position aligns well with the reflexive thematic analysis used in this study, which similarly treats meaning as actively generated rather than discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Within this framework, knowledge is shaped by the relationship between researcher and participant and develops throughout the research process (Cohen et al., 2018). This makes my

positionality as a researcher and my relationship to the subject important methodological considerations, addressed in the reflexivity section of this chapter.

Consistent with these ontological and epistemological assumptions, the study adopts an open, exploratory approach, focusing on how participants construct, interpret, and make sense of their own experiences.

5.3 Qualitative Research Design

According to Hammersley (2012), qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that avoids strict boundaries and values the emergent process along the depth of understanding. Qualitative research allows the design to develop organically, shaped by the realities of the social world under investigation. The data gathered through this approach is largely unstructured and drawn from natural settings, preserving the authenticity of lived realities.

To understand the world as constructed and experienced by the participants, this study adopts a qualitative research approach. Hammersley (2012) characterises qualitative inquiry through several defining dimensions that are particularly relevant to this study. Instead of testing pre-established hypotheses, the research design evolves alongside the data and prioritises the authentic voices of the participants. The choice of the research design was also shaped by epistemological, political, and practical considerations, which Braun and Clarke (2013) identify as the three key drivers of methodological decision-making. A study concerned with the civic lives of young people in activism called for methods that prioritise participants' own voices. In practice, qualitative interviews allowed for the depth and flexibility that the complexity of the experiences required.

5.4 Positionality and Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves acknowledging the researcher's role, recognising that we are never fully separate from the social worlds we investigate. Reflexivity therefore requires ongoing critical engagement with one's own position; making that position explicit is an important aspect of methodological transparency and accountability (Cohen et al., 2018). This section outlines my relationship to the research topic and considers the way my background, experiences, and assumptions may have shaped the research process.

My positionality in this study is shaped by my dual role as insider and outsider. As an insider, I am familiar with the country's political landscape, history, and civic culture, and have participated in

various protests over the years. At the same time, my current position as a student living and studying abroad means that I experience events in Georgia from a distance.

During the interview process, my shared background with participants created a sense of understanding and trust. Participants often spoke openly about their experiences, motivations, and frustrations, without needing to explain the political and cultural contexts in detail.

Part of my motivation for undertaking this research was observing recent developments in Georgia from a distance and trying to remain closely connected to the country. My academic background in psychology also informed how I approached the topic. It made me particularly attentive to participants' experiences, identities, motivations, and accounts of burnout, influencing both the questions that interested me and the aspects of the data that stood out during analysis.

This dual positionality presented challenges that I had to navigate carefully throughout the research process. Many of the stories shared during interviews were concentrated on the 2024 protest wave, while I was studying abroad. As a result, my understanding of many of these events had been shaped through news coverage and conversations within my personal networks. I recognise that this might influence how I interpret and make sense of the data. Engaging with the stories of civic struggle and political hardship in a context that is personally meaningful to me was at times emotionally demanding.

To address these challenges, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice throughout the research, specifically keeping a reflection journal, regularly questioning my interpretations, returning to the data, and remaining attentive to the boundaries between my own and participants' voices in the study. As Hammersley (2012) suggests, subjectivity, when critically examined, can enrich the research without compromising the integrity and validity.

5.5 Research Methods

Semi-structured interviews

I conducted 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in Georgian. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

Interviews were selected as the method for my study because of the topic of the study. As Braun and Clarke (2013) note, when participants have a genuine personal stake in the subject, interviews

allow them to speak in depth about their understandings and perceptions. Given that all 12 participants had direct, personal experiences of civic engagement in Georgia during a period of political crisis, interviews were the most appropriate means of collecting rich, detailed responses.

Interviews were conducted and recorded online via Microsoft Teams for both practical and ethical reasons. Virtual interviews allowed participants to engage from a location of their choosing, which can be specifically useful when discussing sensitive topics (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Given the political sensitivity of the research, this format offered more comfort and privacy than face-to-face meetings in public spaces. In addition, participants were geographically dispersed and often had demanding schedules, making virtual interviews a more feasible option. However, online data collection also raises concerns regarding confidentiality and data security, as virtual interviews may be less secure than face-to-face interactions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The measures taken to address these concerns are discussed in the ethical considerations section of the thesis.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide⁶, with key themes and topics identified in advance, but maintaining flexibility throughout the interview process. This allowed conversations to develop naturally and created space for participants to reflect on their experiences in depth. However, the flexibility of this approach also presents some limitations. As Cohen et al. (2018) note, the flow of the conversation can result in some topics receiving more attention than others, and participants may respond to slightly different prompts due to variations in the wording and sequencing of questions.

An interview guide was designed to open the conversations across the following thematic areas: participants' background and current context, the origins and the key turning points of their civic engagement, their current forms of participation, their activist identity, the motivations, costs and challenges of sustained engagement, and broader hopes and expectations. These themes provided direction and a flexible framework. I adapted follow-up questions according to participants' responses, and the sequence of topics varied depending on how each conversation developed.

As Microsoft Teams did not offer an automatic transcription function in Georgian at the time of data collection, I manually transcribed all 12 interviews from the original recordings. This process of

⁶ See the Annex I.

hand transcription also served as an early stage of familiarisation with the data even before beginning the formal data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5.6 Participants and Sampling

Access was a key consideration in designing the sampling strategy for this study, given that participants were being asked to speak openly about their activism in a sensitive context.

Participant recruitment began through my personal networks and social media platforms. Initial participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in civic engagement and activism in Georgia. Unlike probability sampling, which aims for statistical representativeness, purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of participants that are specifically useful for gaining insights into the study (Clark et al., 2021). I extended the sample using a snowball method, in which additional participants are recruited through the social connections of initial participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This strategy was selected because, as Cohen et al. (2018) argue, it is particularly useful when a research topic is sensitive or when participants are hard to access. For this reason, snowball sampling is frequently paired with other purposive techniques (Clark et al., 2021).

Although recruitment initially targeted individuals who identified as activists, several participants recruited through snowball sampling did not attach themselves to that exact label, despite being referred by previous participants. Instead, some of them described themselves using terms such as “citizen”, “active citizen” or as individuals “involved in activism”. This variation in self-identification reflected the broader range of civic engagement represented within the sample. Participants’ civic practices and level of engagement varied, ranging from digital content creation and filmmaking to NGO work and educational initiatives. Nevertheless, all participants had a history of active involvement in street protests and demonstrations in Georgia with varying degrees of involvement, from organisational roles to protest participation.

This sampling strategy also presented some limitations. Because recruitment began through personal networks and social media, the sample reflected my initial points of contact and the social circles connected to them, causing the participants to be from similar social or professional circles (Cohen et al., 2018). As a result, the participants were concentrated mainly in Tbilisi and might not fully illustrate the diversity of experiences and perspectives, acknowledged as a limitation in the final part of the chapter.

The study involved twelve participants, nine women and three men. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that for a small qualitative project using interviews and thematic analysis, a sample of between six and ten participants is generally sufficient, while a medium-sized project typically involves ten to twenty interviews. The decision to recruit 12 participants was therefore guided by practical considerations, the scope of the study, the time available, and the depth of data generated per participant. While a relatively small sample, it included participants with diverse experiences, identities, motivations, and challenges, providing the depth to address the research questions and develop the thematic analysis.

The target population for this study was young people, defined in accordance with the Georgian National Youth Policy as individuals aged between 14 and 29 (Government of Georgia, 2014). However, because of the sensitivity of the topic and ethical considerations, the study included only participants aged 18 and above. The final sample ranged in age from 19 to 29 years, with an average age of approximately 25 years.

5.7 Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, ethical responsibility requires continuous sensitivity to the context, participants, and the implications of the study. Ethics are therefore inseparable from the researcher's reflexive awareness throughout the research process. Research may be considered sensitive because of the context of the study, its implications for participants and others involved, and the potential for emotional or reputational harm. Given the political context in which this research was conducted, this study could be considered sensitive, which informed the design and the procedures adopted throughout the research process (Cohen et al., 2018).

Prior to each interview, all participants were provided information outlining the purpose of the study, potential topics to be discussed, how the data would be used and stored, who would have access to it, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequences. To protect participants' identities, all names in this thesis are replaced with pseudonyms. Identifying details were removed or modified where necessary, including references to specific workplaces, locations, people and personal relationships that could make participants recognisable.

All interviews were conducted using a Microsoft Teams student account provided by the University of Glasgow. The recordings and transcripts were stored securely in the same cloud account, and access was restricted to the researcher. Given the sensitivity of the data and the political context,

the risks associated with online data storage were also considered, and the recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected device and folder. The digital tools used in the translation process were intended only to check the phrasing of short segments. Full transcripts and identifying information were not entered into these tools.

The emotional dimensions of the research also required careful consideration. Participants were asked to speak about experiences that were in many cases personal or stressful, including police violence, financial hardship, and mental health struggles. The interviews were conducted with care to ensure participants felt comfortable, were not pressured to share more than they wished, and were reminded of their right to pause or stop at any point.

5.8 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) to identify, analyse, and report patterns and meanings within qualitative datasets. Braun and Clarke first set out their approach to Thematic Analysis (TA) in 2006. It was further developed in response to the way thematic analysis was often applied as a procedural, step-by-step technique, placing greater emphasis on researcher reflexivity, subjectivity, and theoretical engagement throughout the analytical process (Pearson et al., 2025).

I selected RTA for the study because of its theoretical flexibility and compatibility with the interpretivist orientation of this study (Pearson et al., 2025). This flexibility, combined with its capacity to produce rich data, made it particularly well suited to the goals of this study.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Familiarisation with the data began during transcription, as manually transcribing the interviews provided an early opportunity to engage with the data. I then systematically reviewed each transcript, generating initial codes for segments of data, producing approximately 230 initial codes across the dataset.

The next stage involved editing the codes, exploring relationships between them, and identifying broader patterns of shared meaning. I moved between individual extracts, codes, and the dataset as a whole, grouping related codes and developing candidate themes. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they captured patterns across the data while remaining distinct from one another. The final stages involved defining and naming themes, considering the research questions, and interpreting them in relation to the wider theoretical literature.

Throughout the analytic process, I maintained a reflexive journal to document ideas, doubts, decisions, and reflections on how my assumptions and experiences might shape interpretation. Reflexivity was therefore treated as an ongoing component of analysis.

I used NVivo 14 to code and manage the data across all interviews. Qualitative data analysis software can offer practical benefits in terms of data organisation, but also carries risks, including the potential to distance the researcher from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To mitigate this, more creative work of theme development and identifying meaningful associations and patterns across the dataset was conducted independently of the software by hand (Saldaña, 2025).

I approached coding with an open lens instead of limiting coding to predefined concepts and coded the data comprehensively. This approach fits with what Braun and Clarke (2013) described as complete coding. Most of the codes were data-derived and semantic, rather than latent at the initial stage. More selectivity was introduced at a later stage of the analytical process, during the development and review of themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), themes are not hidden within the data waiting to be discovered; they are generated by the researcher through a process of interpretation informed by theory, analytical judgement, and engagement with the data. Consistent with their understanding of RTA, I did not approach analysis as a process of applying procedures mechanically or seeking a single “correct” interpretation of the data. Instead, I aimed to engage thoughtfully and reflexively with both the data and the analytic process.

5.9 Limitations

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged, as they shape the scope and nature of the claims that can be made from the findings.

The study aimed to understand how a particular group of young people made sense of their experiences in a specific political context. The findings are therefore not generalisable to the wider population, as twelve purposively selected participants cannot be taken as representative of all young Georgians or even the ones participating in activism. Nevertheless, the findings may offer theoretical insights that are relevant to similar contexts.

The sampling approach introduces further constraints. Snowball sampling can be influenced by volunteer bias, as individuals who are more willing to participate are often overrepresented in the sample (Heckathorn, 2002). In this case, the participants were those who actively volunteered their

time to take part in interviews. In addition, recruitment through personal networks and participant referrals increased the likelihood that participants shared similar social and professional backgrounds. While this sampling approach facilitated access to a difficult-to-reach population, it may have limited the diversity of perspectives represented in the study.

Another limitation concerns the gender balance of the participant sample. Of the twelve participants interviewed, nine were women, and three were men. A more gender-balanced sample could have provided a wider range of perspectives. Future research could therefore seek to include a more balanced participant group to examine whether and how experiences of protest, activist identity, and sustained engagement differ across gender.

The timing of the research also shaped the findings. The interviews were conducted at a single point in time during an ongoing and rapidly changing political crisis. Participants' civic identities, motivations, and levels of engagement are dynamic, and the political situation in Georgia has continued to develop since the interviews took place, so participants' positions might have shifted.

Finally, all interviews were conducted in Georgian and translated by the researcher with the support of digital tools. Although I am a native Georgian speaker, translation involves interpretive decisions, nuances of meaning, tone, and culturally specific language that do not always transfer between languages (Cohen et al., 2018). Ultimately, all the translations presented are an additional interpretive layer and must be acknowledged as a limitation. To ensure accuracy, I compared translations produced by different translation programmes and manually edited them to better reflect the participants' intended meaning.

6. Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the main findings of the research. Through RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), three main themes and several subthemes were identified. While each theme addresses a different aspect of participants' experiences, they are interconnected - how participants understood civic engagement shaped the ways they spoke about activism, their identities, and the challenges of remaining engaged.

6.1 Theme 1 - Civic Engagement as a Moral Practice

Citizenship as a practice

Across the interviews, participants frequently discussed what it means to be a citizen and to engage in civic life. They talked about it primarily as something expressed through action, as a way of responding to the social and political realities around them. As Alex, 20, describes it:

You cannot be a citizen and sit in silence; you must do the research and be interested in what's happening around you... You are not a citizen when the election results are manipulated, and you do not speak up.

This understanding positions citizenship as an action and an active choice that requires individuals to remain informed, engage critically with political developments, and respond when they perceive injustice. Participants specified what this practice looks like in the Georgian context and described a wide range of activities, including speaking about social and political issues, researching and questioning information, staying informed, encouraging others to take action, expressing opinions through media, art or academia, boycotting state institutions, and joining movements or protests. Despite this wide range of understanding, almost everyone framed citizenship as something that is practised and done. While some forms of engagement described by participants resemble citizenship practices described by Lawy and Biesta (2006a), some of them read as acts of citizenship (Isin & Nielsen, 2008), as they are not simply routine expressions of citizenship rights.

Protests and demonstrations were consistently identified as among its most important forms, a way to express their views and make their voices heard. Participants' emphasis on demonstrations

supports J. Ekman and Amnå's (2012) argument that protest should not be treated as “unconventional.” In their accounts, protest appears as a normalised and necessary form of civic participation.

For many participants, citizenship was also closely linked to informing others and challenging what they perceived as misinformation and state propaganda. Several described Georgian society as polarised, divided into different information worlds, or “bubbles”, where the bridge to the other part of society is “broken”. In this context, many considered it as their civic responsibility to make information accessible and discuss the political issues with others. As Lile, 22, stated:

I believe that those who already have more information and knowledge in the political field need to provide information to those who do not. The largest part of our country is poor, working-class people living in regions and suburbs.... Those people will be the ones who bring change, whose votes will bring it. The only thing we can do is speak for them until they dare to join us.

For Lile, civic engagement was not only direct political participation but also a responsibility to inform and encourage others to become engaged. Importantly, these efforts were not limited to formal political spaces. In her view, these interactions should take place in everyday informal settings, such as “bars and birthdays,” which she describes as opportunities for civic engagement.

Taken together, participants understood citizenship as an ongoing practice of engagement and communication. Importantly, this practice was not experienced as optional but as something participants felt they should do, or even could not avoid doing, because of their values and responsibilities.

Duty, responsibility, and integrity

While participants described citizenship as action or practice, they also framed it through a strong sense of obligation expressed in different ways, such as duty, moral responsibility, integrity, or the need to remain true to oneself. As a result, disengagement was sometimes described not as a choice but as something morally difficult and, for some participants, almost impossible. Civic engagement was often discussed as something participants felt obliged to do because of their values, principles, and sense of responsibility towards society:

You shouldn't live only for yourself. You are a good citizen when you plant a tree whose shade you will never sit under.

(George, 27)

His understanding of citizenship goes beyond immediate acts like voting or protesting, but rather as doing things for the benefit of others. Several participants talked about their civic engagement and being a citizen in terms of contributing to the future society, even when the benefits might not be personally experienced. George's example also complicates rational action approaches to collective action. While Olson's (1965) collective action problem highlights the difficulty of explaining why individuals bear the costs of action when benefits are shared collectively, participants often framed civic engagement precisely through this willingness to contribute to a future they might not personally benefit from. Their participation is therefore not easily explained by cost-benefit calculation but is shaped by moral responsibility and a responsibility to future society. For George, this responsibility is difficult to ignore, explaining that "you cannot stay at home; everything bothers you so much that you have to go out there to protest."

The findings suggest that participation or activism cannot be understood only through group belonging or social roles and is also shaped by values, moral commitments, and belief systems (Gecas, 2000). Many participants explicitly connected civic engagement to morality and personal principles. They described attending demonstrations, speaking out, or remaining politically involved because not acting would conflict with their sense of self. Interestingly, this obligation was often described as coming from within, from an internal sense of responsibility that would not allow them to remain passive:

I cannot morally allow myself to give up, no – myself won't allow me to give up.

(Nutsa, 27)

I can't just stop. My inner "I" won't let me... I can't allow myself to run away from this. If you just escape from these problems, this problem will remain.

(Tamar, 28)

Across the interviews, participants would return to the idea of remaining true to themselves. Liza, 28, for example, stated that "my silence will not let me rest", suggesting that inaction produced a form of moral discomfort. Civic engagement was therefore also directed towards maintaining coherence between one's values and one's actions.

Several participants argued that social and political problems would persist unless ordinary citizens took responsibility and acted, emphasising the importance of individual responsibility. As Dachi, 20, pointed out repeatedly: “you have to be the one who will fight and cause change - no one will do it for you”. Another participant similarly reflected:

Despite the difficult situation that exists and has existed, deep down in our hearts we all have hope that we can change it...I, for example, have reduced it all to individual responsibility.

(Sophie, 28)

For some participants, this sense of responsibility was also mediated through professional identities. Several participants who were teachers, historians, and artists connected civic engagement to the ethical demands of their profession. They felt a need to align their actions with the values they taught in the classroom. Liza, 28, viewed her identity as a teacher as inseparable from her civic life. She described teaching not as a career but as a moral commitment that requires consistency between words and actions:

I believe that I cannot do my job if I am not truthful and sincere. Then I am lying and just talk pathetically about patriotism and Ilia Chavchavadze and other figures from our history and literature. If I do not act in accordance with what I tell my students, I think I will not be a good example. A person should act in accordance with what they say.

Nia, 28, also a teacher, expressed a similar view of maintaining personal and professional integrity:

One of the motivations for me is my profession, because I always want what I teach to be consistent with words and actions... I don't want to talk about what a good citizen might be in the future tense. I want to be a motivation for students as I am.

A similar connection between professional identity and civic engagement appeared among participants working in art and history. Anastasia, 28, described a responsibility connected to witnessing and documenting historical events, even when she doubted their effectiveness:

Even though I can't change anything, it's still important, even from a historian's perspective, to be there and see what's happening. Even if it means being true to myself.

Likewise, Natia, 29, described art and filmmaking as a form of civic participation. She felt responsible for documenting political events and preserving collective memory, arguing that society often develops a form of “collective amnesia” in which political decisions and past events are forgotten.

Although participants often spoke about civic engagement as a duty and responsibility, this does not mean that they viewed this responsibility as unlimited. One participant talked about the need for “people who will sacrifice everything”. Meanwhile, others reflected on the need to establish boundaries and recognised that there were limits to what they were willing or able to do. While remaining engaged was important, some rejected the expectation of becoming a “hero” or risking imprisonment, severe harm, or death. For Natia, 29, civic responsibility came with the decisions about how much one could sacrifice and when. As she explained:

There are moments when it’s worth taking that risk. Two years ago, in December, we all took that risk, knowing that we might be arrested, because it felt like something could come out of it.

Taken together, civic engagement for the participants was closely tied to personal integrity, moral responsibility, and a desire to remain faithful to one’s values. Participants often described engagement as something they felt morally obliged to pursue.

6.2 Theme 2 - Negotiating Activist Identity

Who is an activist?

While some participants connected civic engagement to professional identity and their values, as discussed above, their relationship to the specific label ‘activist’ remained more uncertain. The literature suggests that participation in collective action can shape personal and collective identity (van Zomeren et al., 2008), but the interviews show that this relationship is not straightforward. Participants largely agreed on the importance of civic engagement and their responsibility to act, although they were less certain about how to describe themselves, revealing an ongoing process of negotiating their identities.

Research shows that people who participate in social movements do not always identify themselves as “activists” (Bobel, 2007). Although all participants were recruited through their involvement in activism, their relationship to the identity of “activist” was ambivalent. Some participants felt fully defined by it; others denied and distanced themselves from it despite being involved in protests and

civic or political initiatives. As a result, the question of who could be considered an activist became a recurring reflection throughout the interviews.

The concepts of citizenship, civic engagement, civic responsibility, and activism were frequently used interchangeably by participants. Many moved between these terms when describing their experiences, suggesting that the boundaries between them were often blurred and flexible. Participants often described the term “activist” as complicated to define and even more difficult to claim. For some, the label was even a source of discomfort:

I’m a little uncomfortable with the word “Activist”; I don’t know if I would call myself an activist, but I’m involved in activism. When you think about these topics so much, and these things are always going through your head, you’re probably a little bit of an activist.

(Mariam, 19)

For some, activism included everyday situations and speaking up, while others reserved the label for people who sacrifice their lives for political or social causes. Natia, 29, for example, argued that activism should be understood almost as a profession and therefore rejected the label for herself:

I don’t call myself an activist because I don’t think I am one, and I don’t want to be one. In my ideal life, I wouldn’t be going to protests at all. But it’s very difficult not to be interested in politics when you live in Georgia... I don’t want that label attached to me, but I am an active citizen. I can’t help being active, because it is difficult to come to terms with injustice.

Natia’s example illustrates how some participants could separate civic engagement from being an activist. Although she participates in different forms of engagement and puts a lot of time and effort into them, she did not view activism as an identity or characteristic of who she is. Yet she engages in all of these activities because of the sense of injustice and the obligation she cannot ignore.

Questions of legitimacy and worthiness also shaped how participants related to the activist label. Several expressed doubts about whether they had done enough to claim it, often comparing themselves to others who had made greater sacrifices or been more repressed by the state. Mariam, 19, challenged this understanding by emphasising commitment, effort, and sustained engagement essential for claiming her identity as an activist:

So someone might look at me and say that I'm not an activist, but I define it more by how much time, energy and effort I've put into all this. And not by how much they actually endured.

These findings complicate approaches that place collective identity at the centre of activism (McDonald, 2002). Participants' engagement was not always based on identifying with an activist group or movement. In some cases, it came from personal experience, moral discomfort, and the public expression of injustice.

“Who am I without this?”

While some participants questioned whether they could claim the activist label, others described activism as becoming inseparable from their identity. Especially for participants who had been protesting for months and years, being an activist became an inseparable part of their sense of self:

These protests and rallies have become such an essential part of my daily life that I can't live without this. If I don't participate in protests, I will feel worse mentally. I tried to let go for 2-3 days, but I couldn't pull myself together; I got up again and went to Rustaveli Avenue⁷ [to protest].

(Dachi, 20)

Another participant similarly reflected that constant engagement had become such a central idea of their self-understanding that it was difficult to imagine who they would be outside that role. Although they eventually stepped away from protests and took a pause, doing so triggered a prolonged period of self-reflection and what they described as an “identity crisis”:

I was afraid at some point that if I left the protests, who would I be? It played such a big role in shaping my character and my personality. I can't imagine myself without this. I used to tell my friends that I was afraid that if I left, who would I be? What kind of person would I be? What do I love? What am I? To introduce myself to someone without all this? You become attached to this - to always be in a fight; part of your identity is to always fight. Of course, the reason to fight never runs out.

⁷Rustaveli Avenue is the central avenue in Tbilisi, named after the medieval Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli. As the location of parliament and many major demonstrations, it has become one of the main symbolic spaces of political protest in Georgia (Chapple, 2024).

The participant does not describe activism only as protest attendance or civic participation, but as a constant state of “fight.” It was experienced as an ongoing emotional and moral orientation toward injustice, where being active meant remaining in struggle.

Taken together, the findings reveal a distinction between being an activist and doing activism (Bobel, 2007). Many participants engaged in activities commonly associated with activism, yet hesitated to define themselves; others viewed activism as inseparable from who they were. Participants continually reflected on and negotiated the relationship between what they did and how they understood themselves (King, 2004).

While for some participants activism became inseparable from who they were, others described the need to actively loosen this relationship. Several participants described how they distanced their sense of self from doing activism. They critically reflected on activism becoming the most dominant aspect of their identity. For Anastasia, 28, activism had been part of her identity from an early age, shaped by family and school influences. This created a sense of obligation to remain constantly engaged. However, when “life became difficult” and she had to follow the protests from abroad, this relationship became emotionally overwhelming and led her to reconsider the place activism occupied in her life. She described learning through therapy to accept that being an activist did not always have to be the most important part of who she was:

I learned through therapy that if I have formed the idea that I am an activist, it is not necessary that this should be the most important thing about me. I must allow myself to be "me" in some moments as usual, who has some abilities, who cannot be the "father of the nation", but will be a good student at that moment... and it is okay.

As a result, the activist identity was something she had to actively manage, and that management was part of how Anastasia, 28, would sustain engagement without being consumed by it. Some participants did this alone, some with the help of friends and family, some needed psychological help from professional therapists.

In this sense, the findings align with approaches that treat identity as constructed through practice and reflection, requiring continuous awareness and effort. This is not only about managing conflicting ideas, but also about dealing with emotional tensions. In this sense, activist identity involves emotional work as well as intellectual or political work (King, 2005).

6.3 Theme 3 - Sustaining Civic Engagement

The previous two themes showed that participants understood civic engagement as a moral practice and negotiated their activist identity in complex ways. This third theme examines what happens when this engagement had to be sustained over time. The findings show that civic engagement involved learning how to remain engaged when action became costly.

The Costs of Civic Engagement

Engagement, especially prolonged street protests, is not always a simple choice and carries high emotional, physical, material, and social costs that participants described in detail. The following theme therefore examines the pressure that makes continued engagement difficult, as well as the ways through which participants continue to engage.

Emotional Costs

The most consistently discussed consequence of civic engagement was emotional and psychological. This is significant because emotions play a central role in both motivating participation and sustaining activist commitment over time (Goodwin et al., 2001). Participants described a wide range of emotions, including anger, frustration, anxiety, fear, disappointment, and helplessness, which one participant summarised as “terrible emotions.”

Burnout appeared repeatedly in participants’ experiences, often expressed in physical or emotional fatigue that affected their everyday lives and wellbeing. For example, Dachi, 20, recalled a period when he could not get out of bed because he “had no strength left”, while Nutsa, 27, described withdrawing from social life completely and “shutting [herself] away at home.” Similarly, Nia, 28, spoke about avoiding contact with others, particularly those who reminded her of protests, and losing interest in both personal and professional relationships. While burnout was not measured clinically in this study, the concept is useful for understanding how sustained engagement can gradually affect people’s capacity to continue being active.

Some participants described physical fatigue. For Nia, 28, emotional and physical exhaustion were difficult to separate:

I was clearly exhausted both emotionally and physically. It was a combination of the two. Whenever I didn’t have work to do, I could spend the entire day just lying down.

Participants frequently connected the burnout to the duration of the protests and the gradual decline in participation. Large demonstrations initially provided energy and motivation for them, but over time became a source of discouragement. For some, seeing fewer people intensified feelings of fatigue and isolation. This shows how emotional exhaustion was shaped not only by individual participation but also by collective dynamics of demonstrations:

At some point, you simply become exhausted. You keep showing up, and you realise that things are not improving; they are only getting worse... The smaller demonstrations are just sad....The government's strategy was to exhaust us, and they succeeded.

(Natia, 29)

Alongside exhaustion, many participants described living with persistent anxiety, fear, and stress. For some, these feelings became a chronic feature of everyday life, "feeling anxious and worried all the time" (Dachi, 20). Others linked anxiety to specific experiences or triggers, including police violence, arrests, and surveillance, describing it as a "nightmare" and "terror". Importantly, several spoke about a fear in broader terms extended beyond protest spaces in everyday life:

You feel these restrictions at every step, as if someone is watching you, seeing you, knowing what you do and what you think. And because of that, you might be punished, you might have to live in constant fear of expressing your own opinion.

(Liza, 28)

Liza's experience suggests that the cost of engagement was not expressed only in moments of direct confrontation with the police or the state, but fear became part of everyday life. For some participants, these experiences resulted in more severe forms of psychological distress:

It had a significant emotional impact and caused a great deal of stress. The first time I found myself at the centre of a police crackdown... when we got home, I experienced a panic attack for the first time in my life. I genuinely thought I was dying. I kept thinking, 'What's going on with me?'

(George, 27)

Another participant even used the language of trauma to make sense of their experiences and the political developments they witnessed:

The adoption of the ‘Russian law’ was a really big trauma for me. The ‘Russian law’ was the first sign for me that the situation we are living in today was about to begin. But when they brought it back and finally passed it, I remember feeling as if my heart sank.

(Nutsa, 27)

The event was traumatic for the participant largely because of what it symbolised. The adoption of the “Russian law” was interpreted as evidence of a broader political trajectory, giving the event strong emotional significance. She described this reaction in physical terms, saying that her “heart sank”. Similarly, Mariam, 19, recalled the announcement that EU accession negotiations would be suspended as an intensely distressing moment. She said that her “blood pressure spiked”, illustrating how political developments were experienced through both emotional and bodily responses (Melucci, 1996). Another participant reflected that the prolonged protests, together with the “deep frustration and disappointment” felt by her generation, had made them feel as though they had aged.

Another source of emotional strain was a sense of powerlessness. Several participants reflected on the limits of individual and collective action, recognising that some political consequences remained beyond their control. One participant drew the parallel with Belarusian activists, reflecting on how people can spend years resisting political developments, but be collectively labelled according to the actions of the state:

No matter how much you struggle, you might still be labelled as ‘pro-Russian’ simply because of the direction your country takes.

(Natia, 29)

While participants often emphasised individual responsibility and the importance of taking action, they were also confronted with the limits of what their actions could achieve. The emotional difficulty of sustaining engagement frequently was tied to having to hold these two realities simultaneously.

Feelings of powerlessness sometimes developed into broader experiences of loss of purpose. Alex, 20, described a period in which “nihilism” had “caught” him, although he felt he had eventually managed to move beyond it. For Tamar, 28, however, these feelings persisted:

I feel a sense of helplessness. This feeling no longer motivates me to act... I’m tired, I’m very stressed about all this, and I don’t have a vision for the future - I feel very lost at this particular

moment... I no longer feel that I am fulfilling my mission. The worldview and sense of purpose that once guided my life have, somehow, slipped away.

Overall, participants described civic engagement as emotionally demanding. Sustaining participation required participants to navigate exhaustion, fear, frustration, uncertainty, and disappointment over time. For some, these emotions became part of everyday life, shaping their well-being, relationships, and outlook on the future.

Physical Costs

Participants also described lasting health effects from exposure to crowd-control measures used during demonstrations, including tear gas, water cannons, pepper spray, and rubber bullets. Nia, 28, recalled developing skin problems and rashes after repeated exposure to tear gas and pepper spray, with symptoms continuing after the demonstrations had ended.

For some participants, the physical costs of civic engagement also included direct encounters with the police, getting injured or detained. One participant described being imprisoned for several days on two separate occasions because they participated in protest activities. Physical harm therefore formed part of the broader burden of sustained engagement and shaped how participants understood the limits and risks of continuing. This connects to social movement literature on the costs of collective action, where participation requires individuals to bear risks that may be immediate and personal, even when the benefits are collective (Edwards, 2014; Olson, 1965).

Material, financial and social costs

For some participants, the costs of participating often extended into their professional and personal lives. Several participants described losing jobs, sources of income, or professional opportunities as a result of democratic backsliding, such as withdrawal of international or NGO organisations from the country:

This process made me lose a lot of things personally. First of all, my job, which I love very much. Then, the places I used to go, the places I studied for, and what I was very proud of.

(Nutsa, 27)

Financial costs were also linked to the increasing use of administrative fines and legal proceedings against protesters. Many participants had received fines ranging from 5,000 to 10,000

Georgian Lari (GEL) ⁸for their involvement in demonstrations, a substantial financial burden. As Liza, 28, noted, a 5,000 GEL fine was equivalent to almost five months of her salary. Participants also discussed the stress associated with these penalties alongside their financial consequences. As Nia, 28, explained:

My case is still ongoing, and psychologically it is not easy to live with a 10,000 GEL debt to the state. It's hard when you work, and your salary is paid into your bank account.

For some participants, civic engagement came at the cost of important personal relationships. Several described conflicts with family members, the loss of friendships, and growing distance from people with different political views. Activism could therefore disrupt existing social ties, particularly when former friends or acquaintances were perceived as belonging to “the other side” of the political divide. As a result, activism often reshaped participants’ social worlds (Vestergren et al., 2017).

These experiences demonstrate that civic engagement is embedded within wider social and economic realities. The consequences of participation were often reflected in their professional lives, financial circumstances, and personal relationships, blurring the boundary between civic engagement and everyday life. As a result, the costs of engagement were not experienced as isolated events, but as ongoing challenges that shaped how participants navigated their daily lives.

Learning how to continue

Even when participants stopped going to protests, they described this as a “pause” or a “break”. Sustaining engagement did not usually depend on optimism or expected outcomes. It also involved developing ways to manage burnout, finding strength in solidarity, redefining what meaningful engagement looks like, and holding on to hope.

Setting boundaries

Despite the costs described above, participants reflected on the strategies they used to sustain the engagement and protect their well-being over time. These included asking for support from family and friends, developing routines, putting some boundaries on their civic engagement and investing more time in hobbies and self-care. For Lile, 22, caring for oneself is necessary to continue caring for others. Alongside developing new routines and interests, she emphasised the importance of taking

⁸ 5000 GEL=1656.4 EUR; 10000 GEL= 3312.83 EUR on 08 Jul 2026

breaks and limiting constant exposure to political information: “Sometimes you have to take a break, you don’t have to be informed about everything all the time”. Pausing was therefore not understood as abandoning the responsibility, but as part of long-term civic engagement. Several participants also spoke about the importance of creating some distance from political developments to maintain a perspective, as Nutsa, 27, explains, she tries to look at the process from a distance because “when you stand too close to a mountain, you can’t see the peak”. This perspective allows her to reflect on setbacks within a longer political process, manage frustration and help sustain her engagement over time.

Redefining success

Research on activism often uses the idea of efficacy to explain why people act or participate. In this perspective, individuals are more likely to become involved when they believe that collective action can produce change. Collective efficacy has therefore been used to explain participation in different activist settings (Barr & Drury, 2009). This makes participants’ frustration especially important, because many described moments when the link between participation and visible change became uncertain. For some, one of the most difficult aspects of engagement was the feeling that personal sacrifices did not necessarily lead to success. This gap between effort, cost, and outcome became a major source of frustration, as Natia, 29, reflected:

At the beginning of the struggle, everyone was full of enthusiasm. People were saying that we could move mountains. When that didn’t happen, and the protest failed, that was difficult to come to terms with.

Some participants described ongoing internal struggles and doubts, about coming to terms with the situation or “adapting” to the environment:

That scares me, because I sometimes wonder whether I am entering a phase of acceptance and simply getting used to it. But the fact that I still talk about these issues means that I have not accepted it.

(Liza, 28)

In response to this uncertainty, several participants started to redefine their expectations and find meanings in smaller actions:

Activism in my case does not stem from how effective it will be...but at least the fact that history will remember that I came here, took a picture and this picture is saved in my phone.... Even that, I want it to have some meaning for me, at least.

(Anastasia, 28)

For Tamar, 28, this commitment was expressed through the idea of rebellion as an ongoing moral position. She cites Camus' philosophy to reflect on her "absolute mission", stating "I rebel therefore we exist". Although she was taking a break from activism, she still understood herself as ready to act when necessary.

Solidarity

For participants who remained actively involved in street demonstrations, solidarity was a key sustaining mechanism. Even though there were some internal conflicts between protesters or more general disconnection and polarisation described, continuing protesting was often expressed as a way of not abandoning others, especially those who had been arrested. Political prisoners were mentioned by nearly all participants and often functioned as a reminder of why they continued to engage:

You're a political prisoner, and one day you realise that the people who once promised to stand by you and support you no matter what have suddenly disappeared.

(Mariam, 19)

For some, continuing to attend protests was a way of ensuring that those detained were not forgotten. As Nutsa, 27, explained:

If [prisoner name removed] is sitting in jail innocently and carrying all this with dignity, I too can carry this burden every day.

Solidarity was also closely related to empathy for others and responsibility to stand with those who had already paid a high price.

Hope without optimism

Many participants expressed some forms of hope even when they did not believe in immediate outcomes. Participants located hope in collective resilience, historical memory, geopolitical change, and the possibility that ordinary people would act together again when necessary. For some, hope was

externalised and referred to possible political changes in Russia, the Russia-Ukraine war, or wider geopolitical shifts that might change the geopolitical situation. For others, hope was based in Georgian history and in a narrative of survival, endurance, and resistance:

They are not just names and surnames of heroes; they are not figures we should remember only on birthdays or commemorations. Some things do not disappear. That is what I place my hope in - in people

(Liza, 28)

Here, hope was attached less to a clear political strategy than to historical continuity and the belief that collective memory can sustain resistance across time:

We are resilient people, enduring, and there is more at stake for us. For some, the issue may simply be economic well-being or privileges. Here, people have more to lose and are fighting consciously for bigger goals...when the moment comes, you know that countless people like you will come out again.

(Lile, 22)

Similarly, some participants returned to the language of duty as a reason to remain involved even when they doubted the effectiveness of their actions:

I no longer go to the rallies with that belief that we will win. I think it's more my duty to be there. I no longer have that belief that my presence there will change anything.

(Liza, 28)

Others find hope in the broader sense of justice and the belief that “authoritarian regimes do not last forever”:

The truth is on our side. Therefore, I believe that justice will eventually prevail. I do not know when, but I believe it will.

(Nutsa, 27)

The participants sustained civic engagement through a combination of hope, solidarity, redefined expectations and meanings of success. Sustaining civic engagement therefore involved learning how to

live with uncertainty while preserving the values and relationships that made continued participation possible.

7. Discussion

This study aimed to understand how young people involved in protest and activism in Georgia make sense of and sustain their civic engagement in the context of democratic backsliding. The findings suggest that civic engagement was experienced as a moral, relational, and identity-forming practice through which participants attempted to remain responsible, faithful to their values, and connected to others under conditions of state repression. First, participants described citizenship and civic engagement as a moral practice, connected to responsibility, integrity, and the need to act in response to injustice. Second, they continuously negotiated what it meant to be an activist. Third, they developed ways of continuing despite significant emotional, physical, financial, and social costs. This included managing burnout, relying on solidarity, redefining success, and holding on to hope in conditions of uncertainty.

Most participants continued to act while doubting that their action would produce visible political change; even if they did not actively go to protests in the moment of the study, they framed this as a “pause” and not a complete withdrawal from the process. Efficacy may therefore help explain the early stages of mass mobilisation, when large crowds created a sense that change was possible (van Zomeren et al., 2008), but it offers a less complete explanation once that momentum had weakened. This does not mean that efficacy was irrelevant to participants. Although it still mattered, at later stages participants described civic engagement as something they felt obliged to do because of their values and moral responsibilities, and as something they could not avoid doing without losing their sense of self.

These findings complicate efficacy-based understandings of participation by showing that success was not always defined through immediate or visible political outcomes. Participants reflected on the meaning of success and reshaped it. This supports Cocking and Drury's (2004) argument that success is not a fixed category, but can be defined differently by activists and reshaped through participation itself.

Involvement in protest did not automatically produce a fixed activist self-understanding. All participants were active in some form of civic or political engagement; still, many were ambivalent

about the label “activist”. This suggests that the boundary between “activists” and “non-activists” is less clear than it may seem. Participation alone did not determine identity; it was more than just showing up to protests. The participants interpreted their involvement through their emotions, values, relationships, and the political context in which they acted. In this sense, emotional, relational and contextual dimensions of protests and activism were important to take into account (Chatterton, 2006).

This finding complicates approaches that place collective identity at the centre of mobilisation. Participants did not always describe their civic engagement through identification with a movement, organisation, or activist group. In some cases, they acted because they felt injustice personally, because silence produced moral discomfort, or because they felt solidarity for others. McDonald's (2002) critique of collective identity allows activism to be understood through public experiences of self and injustice. This connects to Gecas's (2000) argument about the role of identity in protests that cannot be reduced to social roles or group membership; it is also shaped by values, moral commitments, and belief systems. The participants recognised the psychological, physical, economic and social costs of their actions, but many of them chose to continue. This does not mean that collective identity is irrelevant. Movements are collective processes, but they are lived and maintained through individual participants who interpret their involvement and attach meaning to their actions.

The results also show that sustaining participation in a context of democratic backsliding and state repression requires considerable emotional labour and reflexivity (King, 2004, 2005). Participants described exhaustion, anxiety, fear, disappointment, helplessness, and, in some cases, experiences that they understood as traumatic. These costs were transferred into everyday life, shaping their relationships, work, and physical and mental health. This matters because democratic backsliding and the repression from the state raise the price of remaining active and engaged. In this sense, the findings show that sustaining activism under backsliding is also a matter of coping with burnout and other emotional, physical, social or financial consequences. Sustaining activism therefore involved learning how to persist despite the difficult conditions that made engagement difficult.

Emotions were an overarching theme in the study. Participants expressed their feelings of anger, frustration, anxiety, fear, stress, disappointment, helplessness, powerlessness, exhaustion, sadness, hopelessness, distress, and guilt. These emotions matter because they connected political events to personal experience: they shaped how injustice was felt, how responsibility was understood, and how participants remained attached to civic and political struggles over time.

Whereas social-movement theories have asked which emotions encourage or prevent participation, this study points to the need to examine the emotional practices, spaces, and forms of reflection that support long-term resistance. Brown and Pickerill (2009) discuss how emotions shape the sustainability of activism. They argue that activism can be sustained by creating spaces where emotions are acknowledged and critically reflected upon. Melucci (1989, 1996) also argues that reflexivity becomes important because modern social life requires individuals to make constant choices under uncertainty, which makes identity something that must be continually negotiated. In this process, relationships with oneself and with others involve both emotional commitment and self-reflection. To create meaning from these relationships, individuals need to interpret their inner experiences, including sensations, perceptions, and feelings, and use them to guide action.

King (2005) distinguishes between cognitive management and emotional reflexivity. Traditional understandings of “emotion work” often emphasise controlling, suppressing, or outwardly adjusting emotions to meet social expectations. Emotional reflexivity, however, involves engaging more critically with emotions themselves. It means questioning why certain feelings arise and using those emotions as a basis for reflection, allowing individuals to work toward greater alignment between what they feel, how they understand those feelings, and how they act.

Hope was one of the forces through which participants sustained civic engagement in difficult conditions. Based on Kant’s moral psychology, Huber (2021) introduces the concept of a “demoralisation principle” (p. 727), suggesting that humans cannot indefinitely sustain their commitment to action when their efforts repeatedly fail. As a result, they may become unable or find it difficult to continue acting in morally right ways. In this case, hope serves as a defence against despair, helping to protect what Kant describes as “moral resolve” (Rel 6:5, as cited in Huber, 2021). Hope, then, does not require certainty of success or simple optimism. Its political significance lies in sustaining the possibility of action when outcomes remain uncertain. The findings of this study support Huber’s (2021) argument that democratic hopelessness is a real political threat to protest. As formal democratic channels become more fragile and protest outcomes remain uncertain, hope cannot be treated as a stable or self-sustaining resource. He argues that when social division becomes so deep that citizens struggle to trust one another or regard each other as democratic partners, hope becomes harder to sustain. Several participants described this kind of division, speaking of a society split into “bubbles” and of a “broken” bridge between its parts. In that context, the effort the participants put into informing others and reaching across these divides can be seen as an attempt to keep the conditions for

hope open. Continuing to talk to people and inform them about the injustice and social problems can be seen as a way of resisting the hopelessness that deep polarisation of society produces.

Study Implications

This study contributes by examining the lived and personal side of civic engagement in the context of autocratisation and democratic backsliding. Research on protest in Georgia often focuses on political developments, mobilisation, or the broader struggle over democracy and geopolitics. This study adds a different perspective by showing how these processes are experienced by young people who remain involved in civic and political action. Democratic backsliding weakens institutions and narrows civic space, but it also enters everyday life, shaping how people understand activism, citizenship, responsibility, identity, and solidarity.

Conceptually, the study contributes to Citizenship-as-practice approaches by showing how citizenship becomes morally and emotionally charged in a context of democratic decline. Participants practised citizenship through protest, communication, teaching, documentation, and everyday conversations, but they also had to manage the high costs of this practice. This suggests that citizenship practice takes place across everyday and informal spaces, including workplaces, protests, streets, social media, and simple conversations. In a context where formal democratic channels appear fragile, these spaces become especially important.

At the same time, the prominence of emotional labour points to an aspect of civic life that formal curricula rarely address. If sustained engagement depends on setting boundaries, relying on solidarity, and reflecting critically on one's emotions, then support for young people's civic lives should also include relational and emotional forms of knowledge. It supports Lawy and Biesta's (2006b) argument that teaching citizenship is not only the job of schools and teachers; the wider community and society also play an important role, and there is a need for spaces where the emotional costs of participation can be recognised and discussed. For researchers, this means studying citizenship learning across both formal and informal settings, while taking into account young people's own interpretations. Whether and how such capacities can be deliberately supported, in schools, in universities, or in civil society organisations, is an open question that this study cannot resolve.

Future research could build on these findings in several ways. Longitudinal and biographical studies could examine how young people's civic identities and engagement change over time, especially throughout the protest dynamics. Comparative research could explore whether similar

patterns appear in other post-Soviet or hybrid political contexts. Further research could also examine young people who do not participate in protests, to better understand how disengagement, hopelessness, and burnout are experienced. Finally, participatory or ethnographic research could offer deeper insight into the everyday spaces where civic engagement is sustained.

8. Conclusion

This study shows that under democratic backsliding, civic engagement is not sustained by political efficacy alone. When visible change feels uncertain, participation can remain meaningful because it is tied to moral responsibility, personal integrity, and relationships with others. For the young people in this study, practising citizenship meant more than taking part in protests. It meant refusing silence, remaining consistent with their values, and finding ways to continue without allowing activism to consume every part of their lives.

Seen together, the findings also challenge a simple division between activists and non-activists. Participants did not need to accept the identity of “activist” to practise citizenship in active and meaningful ways. Nor did sustaining engagement always mean remaining constantly present. Pausing, setting boundaries, relying on solidarity, and redefining what counted as meaningful action were not signs of withdrawal; they were part of making continued engagement possible.

This matters for how youth civic engagement is understood and supported. Attention should extend beyond whether young people participate and whether they believe their actions will succeed. Formal and informal learning spaces should recognise that civic engagement is emotional and relational as well as political, giving young people room to reflect on fear, exhaustion, responsibility, solidarity, and hope.

The findings also suggest that democratic hope depends on more than confidence in institutions or the expectation of political success. Participants often described Georgian society as divided into separate “bubbles,” with trust and communication between citizens becoming increasingly fragile. Their efforts to inform others, challenge misinformation, and create conversation can therefore be understood as attempts to repair these connections. In this sense, civic engagement was not only directed at political change. It was also a way of keeping open the possibility that citizens could still understand one another and act together. The study is based on twelve participants, mainly connected to Tbilisi, and captures their experiences at one moment in an ongoing political crisis. It therefore cannot represent all young people in Georgia. Biographical research, and research involving young people outside protest

networks and beyond the capital could show how civic identities and forms of engagement change over time.

What this study does show is that democratic backsliding is lived not only through weakened institutions, but through the everyday choices people make about whether and how to remain involved. When political outcomes are uncertain, citizenship can persist as a practice of responsibility, solidarity, and refusing to become indifferent.

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Annex I – Interview Guide

Introduction and consent

Thank you for taking part in this interview. My name is Magda, and I'm a master's student on the Erasmus Mundus programme in education policy (GLOBED). As I mentioned, my research looks at young people's participation in social and political life and civic activism in Georgia. I'm interested in your own experience and perspective; there are no right or wrong answers, so please feel free to speak about whatever feels important to you. Participation is voluntary; you can decline any question or stop at any point.

Before we begin, I'll ask your permission to record. You're welcome to keep your camera on or off, whichever is more comfortable. The recordings and transcripts will be stored securely and used only for research purposes, and everything you share will be treated confidentially. Your name and any identifying details will be anonymised. I'd also gently ask that you avoid sharing anything you wouldn't feel comfortable discussing in an academic context, even though your identity is protected.

Background

1. Could you tell me a little about yourself - your age, what you're currently doing, and anything you feel is important about who you are?
2. From the social or political issues around you, which feels most important to you at the moment?

Activist identity

3. Would you say you're currently an activist, or that you've been one?

Probe: Why, or why not? Has that sense changed over time?

4. Can you recall a moment or experience when social or civic issues first became important to you - when you started thinking about what was happening in your community or country?

Probe: Were there particular turning points or events that shaped your decision to get involved?

5. What forms has your involvement taken? Could you walk me through the different kinds of activities - protests, demonstrations, online, organising, creative or professional work?

The political context

6. How would you describe the current political situation and the state of democracy in Georgia?
7. How does this environment shape the way you think about activism and citizenship?

Probe: does it push you toward action, or hold you back? How?

Hope, motivation, and efficacy

8. When you first became involved, what was your main motivation, and what did you hope for? What did an ideal outcome look like? How far have those hopes played out, and has that changed over time?
9. Do you feel your actions can genuinely have influence? Why, or why not? Are there limits to what young people can achieve through engagement here?
10. What gives you the strength to keep going and what has made it harder?

Consequences and costs

11. Thinking about what you've been involved in, what results did it have - for you personally, and more widely? How do you judge what the protests did or didn't achieve?
12. What has been emotionally hardest in this process?

Probe: Have you experienced burnout, exhaustion, or disappointment? How did those feelings affect your involvement?

13. Have you ever stopped, reduced, or increased your involvement? What did that depend on?

Lessons learned

14. Looking back, what has this experience taught you, or shown you about yourself?

Closing

15. Is there anything we haven't discussed that feels important for you to share?

Annex II - Participant Table⁹

Pseudonym	Gender	Age
Alex	Male	20
Anastasia	Female	28
Dachi	Male	20
George	Male	27
Lile	Female	22
Mariam	Female	19
Natia	Female	29
Nia	Female	28
Liza	Female	28
Nutsa	Female	27
Sophie	Female	28
Tamar	Female	28

⁹ All participant names are pseudonyms, and some identifying details have been modified to protect anonymity.