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# Civil society and anti-corruption reform in Georgia: revisiting the rose revolution

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This article revisits the role of civil society in Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003 and its aftermath, with a particular focus on the dynamics of anti-corruption reform. While much of the existing scholarship frames the Rose Revolution within the paradigm of democratic transition and top-down institutional reform, this study highlights the underexplored contribution of civil society actors—organizations, activists, and experts—across three phases of political reconfiguration: before, during, and after the uprising. Drawing on secondary sources, media analysis, and in-depth interviews, the article argues that civil society was not merely a catalyst of mass mobilization but an active agent in shaping both the revolutionary process and subsequent policy outcomes. Prior to the revolution, civil society actors were key in reframing public discontent around issues of corruption. During the uprising, they forged alliances with reformist political forces and played a central role in election monitoring and protest coordination. After the regime change, civil society's influence evolved through the transfer of expertise, personnel, and policy agendas into state institutions. While this institutionalization came at the cost of watchdog independence, it also enabled the implementation of swift and effective reforms. The article contributes to broader debates on civil society's dual role as both a driver of democratic contestation and a partner in governance, particularly in post-revolutionary and transitional settings.

## KEYWORDS

civil society, rose revolution, anti-corruption reform, Georgia, political opportunity structures, democratization, contentious politics

## Introduction

Civil society in Georgia today operates under increasingly difficult conditions. Once celebrated for its vibrancy and active engagement in democratic transformation, the sector now faces mounting pressure from the authorities, who have introduced a series of restrictive laws and undertaken targeted actions against civil society organizations and individual activists. These developments have raised serious concerns about democratic backsliding and the marginalization of independent voices in public policymaking. Yet this challenging present also invites a closer look at the past—at moments when civil society in Georgia was not only tolerated by the political establishment but played a pivotal role in shaping the country's political trajectory. One such moment was the Rose Revolution of 2003, when civil society actors were instrumental in mobilizing public resistance to bad governance and democratic stagnation. This article revisits that critical juncture to examine how civil society contributed to the Rose Revolution and influenced one of its most consequential legacies: anti-corruption reform.

The Rose Revolution marked a peaceful transfer of power in Georgia. Following several days of mass protests triggered by the manipulated parliamentary elections of November 2003, President Eduard Shevardnadze resigned and withdrew from politics, clearing the way

for a new generation of politicians led by Mikheil Saakashvili, who subsequently became the country's next president. The newly installed government, seeking to distance itself sharply from the previous regime, launched an ambitious modernization agenda, introducing a broad spectrum of reforms primarily aimed at enhancing governance efficiency. Among these, anti-corruption policies have been widely acknowledged as one of the most notable and successful outcomes, resulting in more effective and transparent public service delivery for ordinary citizens.

Most existing analyses of the Rose Revolution and its aftermath are framed within the classical democratic transition paradigm—focusing on regime opening, democratic breakthrough, and subsequent consolidation (Carothers, 2002). Consequently, these studies emphasize the structural, macro-level causes of the uprising—namely, the failure of post-Soviet corrupt governance, electoral fraud, distrusted and aging leaders, and widespread socioeconomic grievances—and highlight large-scale political reconfigurations such as regime change, democratic breakthroughs, or the emergence and consolidation of hybrid or new authoritarian regimes (Wheatley, 2005; Tucker, 2007; Way, 2008; Beacháin and Polese, 2010; Mitchell, 2012; Hale, 2014). Post-revolutionary reforms that evolved in Georgia—such as reforms in governance (World Bank, 2012; Gvindadze, 2017), policing (Kakachia and O'Shea, 2012; Light, 2013), or the justice sector (Menabde, 2020; Lebanidze and Erkvania, 2021)—are likewise portrayed as top-down initiatives driven largely by the political will of the new ruling elite.

Such accounts, however, remain incomplete, as they tend to overlook micro-level dynamics, particularly the role played by pro-democratic actors within civil society. While civil society is often acknowledged as a key ally of political forces in the process of mass mobilization prior to popular uprisings, its contributions to shaping actual policy reforms, once the opposition has assumed power, remain underexplored. This omission results in an incomplete understanding of the link between grassroots mobilization during mass protest and the trajectory of institutional change in its aftermath. Even if one accepts a predominantly top-down account of policy reform, a more comprehensive picture requires examining the extent to which bottom-up demands are acknowledged, adapted, or sidelined by the new political leadership.

This article seeks to address this gap by highlighting the contributions of civil society actors—organizations, movements, activists, and independent experts—to anti-corruption reforms in Georgia. Anti-corruption is chosen as the focus due to its relative success compared to other reform areas: Georgia, once considered one of the most corrupt countries in the post-Soviet region, was later regarded as a model for anti-corruption success, particularly at the level of everyday, petty corruption. This article investigates the role played by civil society in this transformation. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: *To what extent, and through what mechanisms, did civil society actors influence anti-corruption reforms in Georgia following the Rose Revolution?*

The article argues that answering this question requires taking a broader perspective that considers civil society's evolving roles across three distinct phases: before, during, and after the uprising. Prior to the revolution, civil society actors played a key role in raising awareness about corruption as a core feature of post-Soviet governance in Georgia. In other words, they helped connect prevailing social grievances and widespread dissatisfaction with the issue of corruption.

During the revolution, civil society alliances with political opposition were instrumental in galvanizing public support for change, with corruption emerging as one of the central rallying issues. After the regime change, civil society actors capitalized on the political fluidity created by the uprising to push their reform agendas forward by supplying human resources to the new decision-making elites, transferring accumulated expertise, and continuing to mobilize public support. In this sense, civil society was not merely a passive beneficiary of elite-led reforms but functioned as an active agent in shaping the revolutionary moment and influencing its policy outcomes.

The analysis draws primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly literature and media archives, to reconstruct the key events and trace the role of civil society actors in the lead-up to and aftermath of the revolution. These findings are triangulated through in-depth interviews with civil society representatives, policymakers, and policy experts who were either directly involved in or closely observed the events under investigation.

The article is structured as follows: First, it reviews existing literature on the role of civil society in mass mobilization and institutional reform, with the aim of constructing a theoretical framework applicable to the Georgian case. This is followed by a brief discussion of the methodological approach, a presentation and analysis of the empirical findings, and, finally, a conclusion that reflects on the broader implications of the findings and outlines potential avenues for future research.

## Civil society in times of political reconfigurations and opportunities

In this section, we aim to review two strands of academic knowledge—one more normative, concerning the general role of civil society in democratization, and the other, more empirical, viewing politics as a form of contention shaped by political opportunity structures—and apply them to our case. Specifically, we seek to develop a theoretical framework for understanding when and how civil society can contribute to bottom-up policy change.

We begin with a working definition of civil society, understood as “the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. It is distinct from “society” in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable. Civil society is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state” (Diamond, 1994, p. 5).

Scholars have long cautioned against viewing civil society as inherently virtuous. It is a heterogeneous sphere, marked by competing agendas and varying degrees of autonomy, and frequently constrained by donor dependency or controlled by political or business elites (Glasius et al., 2004; Edwards, 2011). The presence of “uncivil” actors within civil society further complicates its democratic credentials, often resulting in inflated expectations and subsequent disillusionment (Kopecký and Mudde, 2003; Bob, 2011).

Despite these caveats, civil society remains widely regarded as essential to making democracy work. Its intermediary role—connecting grassroots activism and social capital with the institutional functioning of democracy—has been extensively emphasized (Putnam et al., 1994;

Carothers, 1999; Warren, 2011). The role of civil society in democratization processes is inherently complex as well. Vibrant civil society can promote democratization by reshaping the public sphere, fostering participation, checking entrenched power structures, monitoring state institutions, and supporting the institutionalization of democratic norms and practices (Diamond, 1994, 1999; Linz and Stepan, 1996).

However, in the past two decades, under the conditions of a global recession of liberal democracy, unequivocal expectations towards civil society have diminished, and there has been an increase in studies assessing the behavior of civil society in illiberal and authoritarian environments. In such contexts, civil society either ceases to exist or seeks ways of adaptation. Contemporary authoritarianism, moreover, not only resorts to repression and legal-institutional restrictions to control critical voices, but also effectively manages to coopt influential representatives of civil society into “organized civil society” (Toepler et al., 2020; Beimenbetov, 2021; Lorch, 2023). At the same time, the very fact that illiberal regimes, during the consolidation of authoritarianism, take civil society as one of their first targets indicates that the core characteristics of civil society (voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting, autonomous) are, at their foundation, inherently anti-authoritarian.

Theories of contentious politics offer a valuable lens for analyzing the conditions under which civil society can challenge authoritarian rule. Civil society influence tends to increase during periods of political reconfiguration, when systemic openings emerge and previously excluded actors are afforded new opportunities for impact. Scholars have conceptualized revolutions and protest movements as components of broader cycles of contention, structured by political opportunity, mobilizing structures, and collective framing. Civil society actors engage in what Tarrow (2011) terms “contentious performances,” seizing strategic openings in the political structure, forging alliances with other actors, and framing public discontent as political “claims” designed to mobilize mass collective action (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015).

Importantly, civil society actors are not solely “disruptive” forces. They also produce knowledge, norms, and concrete policy alternatives. Over time, activism can permeate formal institutions, shaping not only political agendas but also the content of public policy. This means that civil society’s influence may persist beyond moments of rupture, when it claims and creates space, especially as civic actors evolve into policy advisors, consultants, or technocratic experts; in other words, when civil society is invited into public sphere (Cornwall, 2004). Through various mechanisms—including agenda-setting, expert input, advocacy, norm diffusion, and policy monitoring—civil society may exert sustained influence over both policy design and delivery (Fung and Wright, 2001; Edwards, 2004).

The insights offered by contentious politics are particularly useful for understanding civil society’s role before, during, and after moments of mass mobilization and political upheaval—precisely the focus of this article. The Rose Revolution, often grouped among the “color revolutions” of the 2000s—beginning in Serbia (2000) and followed by Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005)—represents an emblematic case of popular mobilization against a hybrid regime. Scholars have emphasized the pivotal role of civil society actors—especially youth movements and watchdog NGOs—in articulating grievances and facilitating collective action during the Rose Revolution (Wheatley, 2005; Tucker, 2007; Beacháin and Polese, 2010). Furthermore, they highlight the strategic alliance between civil society

organizations and opposition forces as a key factor in its success (Wheatley, 2005; Nodia, 2005; Broers, 2005). These movements were unified by shared narratives of poor governance, democratic stagnation, and electoral fraud. However, most accounts stop short of tracing the trajectory of civil society actors beyond the revolutionary moment, thereby overlooking their potential to shape the post-revolution reform process.

Despite a robust literature on democratic transitions, few studies systematically connect mass mobilization with subsequent policy influence. Civil society is frequently conceptualized in bifurcated terms: either as a mobilizing force during contentious episodes or as a long-term actor in democratic consolidation. Yet the transitional phase—when political institutions are being reconfigured and new policy directions are taking shape—presents a particularly critical window in which civil society may shape substantive reforms.

This article seeks to fill that gap by examining the evolving role of civil society across three distinct stages: before, during, and after the Rose Revolution. Drawing on both democratic transition theory and the literature on contentious politics, we aim to show how civil society actors not only mobilized for political change but also contributed to shaping the outcomes of that change—particularly in the field of anti-corruption policy. In doing so, this article offers a more integrated account of how bottom-up societal pressure interacts with top-down elite reform in post-revolutionary contexts.

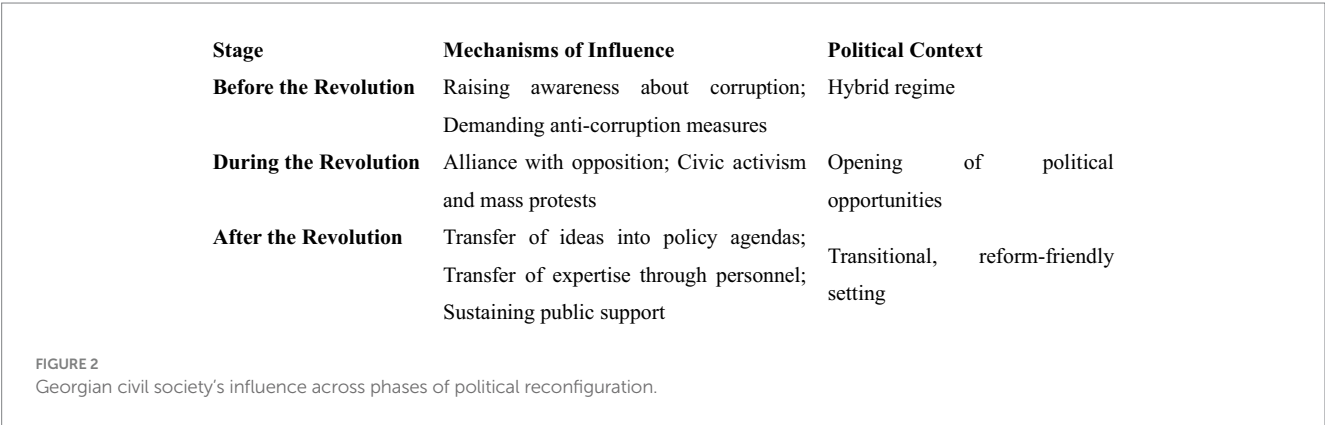
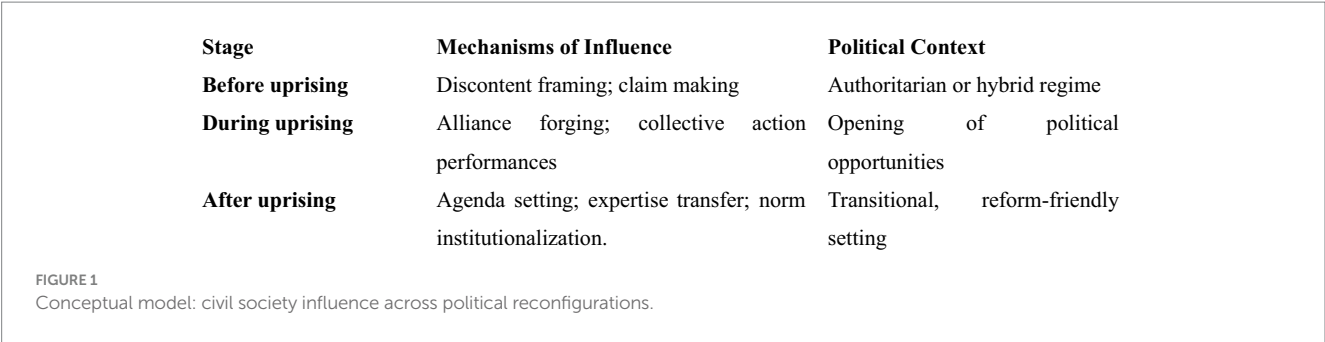
The conceptual model presented below in Figure 1 illustrates this argument, showing how civil society’s influence evolves across different phases of political reconfiguration—from contentious mobilization to institutional engagement.

## Methodology

This article employs a qualitative single-case study design, centered on the Rose Revolution in Georgia. Specifically, it traces and interprets the role of civil society—including organizations, movements, and individual activists and experts—before, during, and after the revolution of November 2003. To provide empirical grounding, we reconstruct the sequence of events from January 2003 to December 2004, covering roughly 1 year before and after the revolution. While this timeframe defines our primary empirical scope, relevant developments outside this period are not excluded from the analysis.

We focus on anti-corruption reform, as Georgia’s achievements in this area are particularly noteworthy. We acknowledge that the government’s anti-corruption achievements were ambiguous due to shortcomings in addressing high-level corruption (Transparency International, 2018). However, the reduction of petty corruption—particularly bribery in public offices—significantly improved the quality of public services provided by the state and proved to be of considerable importance for ordinary citizens. According to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Georgia ranked 124<sup>th</sup> in 2003. By 2006, its position improved to 99<sup>th</sup>, and by 2012—the final year in office of the post-revolution government—it had climbed to 55<sup>th</sup> place (Transparency International, 2003, 2006, 2012).

Our empirical evidence is drawn from three main sources. First, we utilize secondary literature, including scholarly works and policy analyses on the Rose Revolution and subsequent reforms. Second, we examine media coverage from 2003 to 2004, primarily drawing on



the online news platform *Civil.ge*,<sup>1</sup> available in English, and the Georgian daily newspaper *24 Saati* (24 Hours),<sup>2</sup> available in Georgian. Third, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with key civil society actors, policymakers, and experts who were active during the relevant period and who either participated in or observed the unfolding events.

More than two decades have passed since the Rose Revolution, which inevitably complicates the precise reconstruction of events from that period. To address this limitation, the list of potential interviewees was compiled through purposive selection, drawing on secondary sources and applying snowball sampling among individuals who had been activists or experts at the time. Notably, given the fluid boundaries between civic activism and political engagement, several interviewees who initially operated within civil society later assumed policymaking roles, allowing them to offer insights from both perspectives. Prior to conducting the interviews, we reviewed the interviewees' own publications and media appearances, on the basis of which the questionnaire was prepared. The interview process was concluded once data saturation was reached and responses became repetitive. Finally, the analysis incorporated only those data that were corroborated across both media and secondary sources as well as the interviews. By triangulating all available sources, we trace the evolution of civil society's influence and assess its role in shaping anti-corruption reform in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution.

### Civil society in Georgia before, during, and after the rose revolution

In this section, we examine the role that various civil society actors played across three distinct phases of political contention in Georgia: before the popular uprising (i.e., prior to November 2003), during the uprising (i.e., mostly the events of November 2003), and after the uprising (i.e., the post-revolutionary period). Our findings are summarized in [Figure 2](#).

#### Civil society before the rose revolution

Georgia inherited a deeply entrenched tradition of authoritarianism from its Soviet past, having been part of the Soviet Union from 1922 until its collapse in 1991. The early years of independence were turbulent and marked by internal violence, with several civil conflicts tearing the country apart. From 1992 to 1994, Georgia experienced a severe economic downturn, with double-digit contractions. A degree of recovery began after 1995, following the adoption of the first post-independence constitution and a period of relative political stabilization ([World Bank, 2012](#); [Livny, 2016](#)).

However, this partial recovery produced a weak and corrupt state, widely viewed as incapable of stimulating the economy or delivering even basic public services such as electricity and water ([Coppeters and Legvold, 2005](#)). By 2003, Georgia ranked among the most corrupt countries both in the post-Soviet space and globally. Corruption had become systemic, affecting all areas of public life—government administration, law enforcement, the judiciary, education, and healthcare ([Dadalaui, 2007](#)). This pervasive dysfunctionality, coupled with the state's failure to meet basic needs, became a key driver of public frustration and ultimately helped to catalyze the revolution ([World Bank, 2012](#)). Many observers argue that the mass mobilization

1 <https://civil.ge/archive>  
2 <https://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/37014>

of the early 2000s, culminating in the Rose Revolution, was driven more by unmet social needs than by political grievances (Wheatley, 2005). The revolution has frequently been described as an “anti-corruption revolution” (Dadalaui, 2007; Kukhianidze, 2010).

Despite internal instability, the broader international environment in the late 1990s was generally favorable to democratic transition. From the mid-1990s onward, several Western governments and international organizations introduced democracy assistance programs (Mitchell, 2008). Georgia was categorized by Freedom House as a “semi-free” country, with a modest degree of civil and political liberties (Freedom House, 2025). This relatively permissive environment allowed for expressions of dissent and fostered the growth of civil society.

During this period, civil society in Georgia developed primarily through the formation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), heavily supported by international donors. This trend has been described as the “NGO-ization” of civil society (Nodia, 2005; Broers, 2005; Paturyan, 2022). NGOs operated with relative freedom, partly because the state lacked the institutional capacity to regulate or suppress them. As a result, numerous NGOs were established—predominantly in the capital, Tbilisi—though their regional presence remained limited (Broers, 2005). Public awareness of NGO activities was also low; a 2003 survey indicated that only 9 percent of the regional population considered themselves adequately informed about NGO work. Nonetheless, several organizations stood out for their visibility and influence. The Liberty Institute (recognized by 55.6% of respondents) and the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (16.8%) were the most prominent and would go on to play pivotal roles during the Rose Revolution (Civil.ge, 2003a).

In the early 1990s, NGOs in Georgia generally maintained a deliberate distance from the state and formal politics—a legacy of the Soviet period, which fostered deep mistrust of state institutions (Nodia, 2005). However, NGOs benefited from donor support, modern management practices, and attraction of well-educated professionals. These advantages often made them more competent and credible than the corrupt and under-resourced state institutions or political parties (Kukhianidze, 2010; Duda, 2010).

NGOs increasingly focused on exposing and documenting corruption, as well as informing the public about the issue. For example, in 2003, a coalition of NGOs was formed to monitor corruption not only in Tbilisi but also in the regions (Civil.ge, 2003b). Civil society actors also became trusted contributors to independent media outlets, offering expert commentary and analysis (Nodia, 2005). Through these efforts, civil society helped translate widespread public frustration into concrete political demands—most notably, the demand for anti-corruption reform.

By the late 1990s, the political context began to shift. Some NGOs started engaging directly with political actors. This shift was driven by two main factors: the declining popularity of President Eduard Shevardnadze and the ruling party, Citizens’ Union of Georgia (CUG), and the emergence of a reformist wing within the party, led by younger politicians such as Zurab Zhvania and Mikheil Saakashvili. These reformers recognized the credibility and expertise that civil society had built and began inviting NGO leaders into political discussions and spaces (Nodia, 2005).

Between 2001 and 2002, these reformist factions broke away from the CUG to establish Georgia’s first viable post-independence opposition parties: Saakashvili’s National Movement (NM) and Zhvania’s United Democrats (UD). Both parties actively courted civil

society actors, recognizing their legitimacy and technical knowledge (Broers, 2005). These political forces would later become the main drivers of the Rose Revolution and the foundation of the future ruling party, the United National Movement (UNM) in the aftermath. Even before the revolution, the NM demonstrated its growing strength by securing a significant victory in the 2002 municipal elections in Tbilisi (*Ibid.*). Although largely symbolic—since real power in municipalities remained with executive officials appointed by the president (Wheatley, 2005)—this victory marked a shift in the political balance and signaled growing public support for reformist forces.

Within this context, civil society began to assume a more active policy role, especially in the area of anti-corruption activities. In 2001, under both domestic and international pressure, the government established the Anti-Corruption Coordinating Council. Several civil society representatives joined the council, which initially operated with some effectiveness and exposed cases of high-level corruption. However, despite the dismissal of several implicated officials, the government failed to take more systemic action, revealing a lack of political will (World Bank, 2012). In response, civil society representatives withdrew from the council (Civil.ge, 2003c) and began cooperating more directly with the opposition.

During this pre-revolution phase, civil society assumed a dual role. First, it undertook awareness-raising and public mobilization by informing the public, exposing and documenting corruption, and channeling public discontent into specific political demands. Second, it began supplying policymakers—initially within the ruling government and later within the opposition—with alternative policy ideas. As trust in the authorities eroded, civil society actors increasingly aligned with the opposition, contributing with policy expertise, communication strategies, and public outreach efforts. These contributions proved instrumental in shaping the opposition’s campaign and the mass mobilization that followed. This was a pivotal moment when a significant portion of civil society forged lasting alliances with oppositional political parties.

## Civil society during the rose revolution

The Rose Revolution unfolded through a series of events, beginning with a highly charged election campaign in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections on November 2, 2003, and culminating in mass protests that followed the announcement of official results. These events ultimately led to the resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze and a de facto regime change on November 23.

The pre-election campaign was particularly intense. Civil society played a crucial bridging role between the opposition and the wider public. A coalition of approximately 200 organizations was formed. However, contemporary observers suggest that around 30 NGOs were actively implementing projects during this period, while many others were small regional groups or even individual activists (Jawad, 2005; Interview 8, 2024). The main driving forces of this coalition were Tbilisi-based organizations such as the Liberty Institute, the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA), and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED). These groups worked closely with the main opposition parties—particularly the National Movement (NM) and the United Democrats (UD)—to craft political messaging and campaign across the country (Interview 8, 2024). They helped frame the protest narrative around the need to fight corruption and mobilized public support leading up to election day. Civil society thus played a critical role in channeling widespread

discontent—rooted in systemic corruption and socioeconomic hardship—towards a specific political target: the discredited government.

Perhaps the most prominent civic actor during this period was *Kmara!* (“Enough!”), a youth movement that represented a new hybrid form of civic activism—neither a traditional NGO nor a political party. Originating from a student initiative at Tbilisi State University (TSU), the movement sought initially to democratize university governance and increase student participation in decision-making. At the time, TSU was Georgia’s most prestigious higher education institution, with a student population of over 20,000. Corruption at TSU was pervasive, reportedly affecting everything from admissions to regular examinations (Nikolayenko, 2017). While many students came from elite families and were far from underdogs, some began to view the university’s dysfunction as a microcosm of the broader systemic corruption in Georgian society. A small group of these students organized to challenge entrenched practices and generational hierarchies—even at the cost of confronting their own families (Interview 1, 2024; Interview 7, 2024).

Although initially small, *Kmara!* quickly gained momentum. By the time of the elections, it had mobilized between 400 and 500 volunteers and expanded its presence beyond Tbilisi (Nikolayenko, 2017; Duda, 2010; Interview 1, 2024; Interview 5, 2024; Interview 7, 2024). The movement was particularly effective at converting public grievances into political demands through creative and often humorous performances. These included street installations where citizens were invited to “flush away” photos of political leaders using symbolic toilets, and neighborhood soccer tournaments that doubled as platforms for anti-corruption messaging. *Kmara!* also used graffiti and slogans in public spaces to spread its message. The authorities initially underestimated the group, labeling its members as a “gang of radical youngsters.” Apart from a few isolated incidents of violence, state responses to the movement were neither systematic nor severe (Duda, 2010; Nikolayenko, 2017; Interview 1, 2024; Interview 5, 2024; Interview 7, 2024).

Other civil society and media actors also came under pressure during this period. Since 2001, the independent broadcaster *Rustavi 2* had been subjected to repeated inspections and harassment from state agencies. However, attempts to shut it down provoked public backlash, and the station remained operational (Nikolayenko, 2017). The government also floated proposals to amend legislation in ways that would restrict media freedom and increase state control over NGO funding (Broers, 2005; Duda, 2010). President Shevardnadze personally accused NGOs of using foreign aid to wage an “information war” against his regime (Jawad, 2005). Despite these threats, no repressive laws were ultimately passed, and state actions remained sporadic.

*Kmara!* benefited significantly from informal support networks involving established NGOs such as the Liberty Institute, GYLA, ISFED, the Association for Law and Public Education (ALPE), and the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF). These organizations provided technical assistance, advice, office space, and connections to the media and opposition parties (Interview 1, 2024; Interview 7, 2024; Interview 8, 2024). OSGF also acted as the movement’s primary donor. While rumors circulated about large-scale funding, the actual support was modest and activity-related. Students often covered expenses for campaign materials out of their own pockets (Kandelaki, 2006; Nikolayenko, 2017; Interview 1, 2024; Interview 7, 2024).

Importantly, with OSGF’s facilitation, delegations of Georgian civil society actors visited Serbia and Slovakia to learn from local experiences of nonviolent protest and political mobilization. Serbian activists, particularly those involved in the 2000 Bulldozer Revolution, provided training in grassroots organizing, symbolic protest, and nonviolent tactics. These international exchanges were instrumental in shaping *Kmara!*’s strategies and operational logic (Kandelaki, 2006; Duda, 2010; Nikolayenko, 2017; Interview 1, 2024; Interview 5, 2024; Interview 7, 2024).

Civil society again played a vital role during the election and its immediate aftermath. Organizations conducted parallel vote tabulation and documented electoral fraud—evidence that gave the opposition grounds to reject the official results (Wheatley, 2005). After the Central Election Commission announced the ruling Citizens’ Union of Georgia (CUG) as the winner, an *ad hoc* platform—the “Committee for Civil Disobedience”—was established, bringing together opposition leaders and civil society activists (Asanishvili, 2003). The Committee coordinated the twenty-day-long mass protests in front of Parliament, organized regional mobilization, designed communication strategies, and issued calls for strikes, blockades, and non-cooperation with state institutions. The reputational capital that civil society had accumulated during prior awareness campaigns contributed significantly to the legitimacy of these protests in the eyes of both the domestic public and the international community. In this sense, as Nodia (2005a) has argued, the Rose Revolution was indeed a “revolution of civil society,” driven by the mobilization of non-state actors and civic energy.

Yet, civil society’s success was made possible by a convergence of structural conditions. The revolution benefited from political opportunity structures—an incapacitated state, a weakened ruling elite fractured by defections from reformist insiders, and a civil society strengthened by international support and increasingly aligned with opposition forces (Mitchell, 2008).

The most tangible example of this alliance between civil society and opposition parties was the drafting of the “Enough! 10 Steps to Political Freedom” document in October 2003. Developed by 15 leading Georgian NGOs, the document outlined a comprehensive reform agenda, covering areas such as social policy, security, and foreign affairs (Paichadze, 2003). It proposed reforms including the introduction of jury trials, the exclusion of Soviet-era officials from high office, the transformation of state television into a public broadcaster, and the financial and administrative autonomy of universities and schools. In the area of anti-corruption, it advocated for legislation enabling the confiscation of unjustified assets and income from public officials (Khutsishvili, 2008). Civil society organizations presented the document at public forums across the country, where it gained broad support, including from regional NGOs (Interview 5, 2024; Interview 8, 2024). Both major opposition parties endorsed the document as a basis for their political platforms (Interview 8, 2024). This alignment raised expectations that civil society would continue to shape the reform agenda after the revolution.

## Civil society after the rose revolution

In the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, civil society in Georgia entered a new and complex phase. On one hand, many NGOs and civic leaders saw the revolution as a culmination of their decade-long efforts in civic education, anti-corruption advocacy, and democratic

capacity-building. On the other hand, the post-revolution period introduced significant challenges, particularly regarding civil society's autonomy and its evolving relationship with the state.

As noted earlier, most scholarly and analytical accounts focus on the role of civil society prior to the Rose Revolution, often neglecting its contribution to the reforms that followed the regime change. While secondary sources offer limited information about post-revolution developments, combining them with insights from interviews and media sources allows us to reconstruct the general picture.

Immediately after the revolution, the “Committee for Civil Disobedience” reconvened and issued a public appeal to the new authorities under the slogan: “Enough basking in victory.” The statement urged the incoming leadership to initiate systemic reforms, rather than merely replace individuals. Civil society representatives agreed to revert to their traditional watchdog role to prevent the misuse of power by the new administration (Jaiani, 2003).

However, this marked the last consolidated action of civil society in a unified form. Soon afterward, the sector effectively split into two distinct camps. One group—primarily centered around the Liberty Institute—celebrated the Rose Revolution as an ultimate victory. The youth movement *Kmara!* was effectively disbanded. It continued its mobilization briefly, helping to secure the resignation of the rector of Tbilisi State University and participating in protests against the authoritarian regional leader in Adjara. However, in both cases, the movement positioned itself in support of the new authorities and soon ceased its activities. Some of *Kmara!*'s members subsequently joined government institutions (Interview 1, 2024; Interview 5, 2024; Interview 7, 2024).

A number of prominent NGO leaders also entered government ranks. Former civil society figures assumed key positions, including ministerial posts in education and justice, the mayorship of Tbilisi, and seats in the national parliament (Broers, 2005). This process cannot be characterized as a simple co-optation of civil society actors by political elite, since the civic space remained largely conducive to civil society activity. On the contrary, many representatives believed that entering the state apparatus would allow them to implement necessary reforms and “control power from within” (Interview 3, 2024; Interview 8, 2024).

The second camp within civil society held a different view. This group considered the alliance with political parties as a temporary strategic move that had fulfilled its purpose. These actors believed civil society should return to its bottom-up orientation, representing the interests of diverse social groups and maintaining critical distance from political authorities. They resumed oversight work and began criticizing the government, including its anti-corruption policies. Some would later join the newly forming political opposition (Interview 2, 2024; Interview 8, 2024).

The migration of many civil society figures into government blurred the boundary between state and civil society. This brain drain, in itself, weakened the capacities of civil society. Moreover, most former civil society representatives who transitioned into political office readily adapted to their new roles, leaving the expectation that they would “control power from within” largely unfulfilled. Among those who remained outside the political sphere, some—at least temporarily—refrained from openly criticizing the authorities out of deference to their former colleagues. Taken together, these developments substantially eroded the traditional watchdog function of civil society (Broers, 2005; Wheatley, 2010; Stefes and Paturyan,

2021). Western donors also redirected significant portions of their funding from NGOs to state institutions, viewing the newly elected government as the primary vehicle for reform (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009; Interview 8, 2024). Overall, these dynamics contributed to the strengthening of the state institutions but simultaneously established a new imbalance between state and society, which not only stalled the country's democratic transition but also fostered the emergence of new authoritarian tendencies (Jawad, 2005; Cheterian, 2008).

However, the incorporation of civil society expertise into the state apparatus also produced notable benefits. Years of accumulated experience in public policy, reform design, and project implementation within the civic sector were transferred into the government. Former civil society actors, now serving in public office, played a central role in drafting anti-corruption strategies and legislation. Key reforms included the removal of redundant regulations, restructuring of administrative agencies, and the introduction of mechanisms requiring public officials to disclose their assets—all measures rooted in ideas previously developed within the civil society sphere. These individuals also introduced new management practices and policy innovations shaped by their NGO background. Their familiarity with international standards and prior engagement with donors meant they were often better equipped to communicate effectively with international advisors and partners. This shift enabled them to move beyond merely critiquing policy “from the outside” and to assume responsibility for shaping and implementing reforms “from within” (Interview 3, 2024; Interview 6, 2024).

Naturally, the transition from activism to governance altered the perspectives of many former civil society actors. They often became less responsive to critiques from their former colleagues who remained in the civic sector. Still, as one interviewee observed, “based on the Georgian experience, the most effective path [of reforms] has been when ideas followed individuals into government, where they initiated change from within” (Interview 2, 2024).

The weakening of civil society in the early post-revolution years was also, paradoxically, a consequence of the government's rapid reform momentum. The dramatic improvements in state capacity left critical civil society actors without sufficient institutional foundation or visibility (Interview 2, 2024; Interview 3, 2024). Although some of the anti-corruption measures—such as the arrest of former officials and the use of opaque financial settlements with them—were problematic from a rule-of-law perspective, they were widely supported by the public (Dadala, 2007; Kukhianidze, 2010). Even critical-minded civil society actors acknowledged that, despite their flaws, these measures were effective in eradicating petty corruption and thus served a broader public good (Interview 2, 2024; Interview 4, 2024; Interview 8, 2024).

## Summing UP – from claim making to policy making

As demonstrated, civil society in Georgia performed distinct roles at different stages of the Rose Revolution, each corresponding to a specific mechanism of political influence.

- In the first stage, civil society focused on public awareness-raising, articulating social discontent into political claims and directing those claims at the authorities.

- In the second stage, recognizing the authorities' unwillingness to respond and identifying political opportunities—namely, the rise of two opposition parties formed by defectors from the ruling elite and the approaching national elections—civil society forged alliances with political parties. These alliances redirected political claims into mass electoral mobilization and, when the elections were rigged, into widespread public protest that ultimately triggered regime change.
- In the final stage, civil society split into two camps. One group integrated with the new authorities, as its members joined the government either as political leaders or senior public officials. This enabled them to translate their policy ideas into reform agendas and to implement them directly. They believed this insider position allowed for more effective reform oversight and execution. The other group reverted to a traditional watchdog role, seeking to maintain independence from the state and provide external accountability.

Figure 2 below summarizes the evolving role of Georgian civil society as it moved from mobilization to institutional engagement across the phases of political reconfiguration.

## Conclusion

The Rose Revolution marked a macro-level reconfiguration of Georgia's political landscape, creating new openings for a range of actors. This transformation was made possible, in part, by a semi-open political environment that allowed limited contention. It was further facilitated by a weak and ineffective state—unable to provide basic services and hesitant to use repression in defense of its own interests. As momentum was built, key actors began to reorganize, culminating in a rupture within the ruling elite as reformist figures broke away to form new political movements.

Civil society emerged as a critical autonomous actor in this process. Bolstered by sustained international support, it had developed institutional capacity, attracted educated professionals, and accumulated valuable policy expertise. Civil society actors formed strategic alliances with newly established political forces, jointly mounting a robust challenge to the incumbent regime.

The rigged national elections of 2003 served as the immediate catalyst that transformed this evolving configuration into full-scale regime change. Civil society stood as a reliable partner to the opposition—contributing to policy framing, communication strategies, and, crucially, the documentation of electoral fraud. This provided both the moral and legal foundation for the mass protests that ensued.

Following the revolution, however, civil society's public role diminished. The post-revolution government rapidly consolidated control and succeeded in building relatively functional state institutions, as reflected in improved governance metrics (Livny, 2016). Reforms across multiple sectors were widely acknowledged as effective. From the perspective of citizens, corruption—especially petty corruption—was dramatically reduced: by 2010, only 2 percent of Georgians reported paying a bribe within the previous 12 months (World Bank, 2012, p. 7). These outcomes were largely achieved through top-down, often uncompromising policies. As the World

Bank observed: “Rather than spending precious time strategizing, worrying about sequencing, or consulting on action plans, the government launched a rapid and direct assault on corruption in a broad array of public services. It acted quickly to keep vested interests at bay” (World Bank, 2012, p. 10).

Yet, the contributions of civil society to these achievements merit greater recognition. Even prior to the Rose Revolution, civil society actors played a pivotal role in raising awareness about corruption and articulating public grievances as demands for accountability. These efforts generated sustained public pressure for reform, enabling the incoming government to act decisively and with broad societal support. Without this backing, it would have been far more difficult to marginalize entrenched interests.

Moreover, many civil society representatives who joined the new administration carried with them policy ideas shaped through years of civic advocacy. While these ideas were adapted to the exigencies of governance, their institutional transfer represents one of the clearest routes by which bottom-up visions entered the machinery of the state.

Although civil society later became fragmented and critical of certain reform methods, particularly the coercive or extralegal tactics employed in the fight against corruption, this critique did not amount to a rejection of the reform agenda itself. On the contrary, most civil society actors continued to support the broader goals of state transformation, even as they contested specific practices.

The case of Georgia's Rose Revolution thus illustrates how political opportunity structures can facilitate meaningful bottom-up participation in state reform. Today, more than two decades later, Georgia once again faces a moment of political reconfiguration. Unlike in 2003, however, the current ruling elite is consolidated, well-resourced, and increasingly willing to use state coercion to suppress political dissent and civic activism. In light of these developments, political actors and civil society alike would benefit from revisiting the lessons of the early 2000s. Renewed alliances, revised strategies, and reinvigorated public engagement, particularly in the areas of civic awareness and mobilization, are urgently needed. While the current government may surpass its pre-Rose Revolution predecessor in service delivery, corruption remains a persistent issue—insufficiently communicated to the public and inadequately addressed in political discourse.

Future research should explore how civil society can recalibrate its strategies under authoritarian-leaning regimes—especially how it can reopen or create new political opportunities through transnational networks, digital mobilization, and grassroots organizing in increasingly constrained environments.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving humans in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Participants provided their written informed consent.

## Author contributions

DA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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