



From Policy Objects to Political Actors: Youth Mobilization, Student Resistance, and Higher Education Reforms in Georgia (2013-2026)

Mariami Gulordava

Tbilisi State University, Georgia

Abstract

This study examines higher education reforms in Georgia under Georgian Dream governance (2013-2026), tracing how restructuring transformed students from policy recipients into political actors. Drawing on documentary, discourse, and policy analysis, expert interviews, and 2 student focus groups, it examines the chronology and contested implementation of reforms. The trajectory unfolds across two phases. The first, beginning in 2013, was marked by large-scale student mobilization following the withdrawal of authorization from the Agricultural University of Georgia. Mobilization contributed to the restoration of its authorization within fourteen days, demonstrating student activism's capacity to influence policy outcomes. The second phase, spanning 2024-2026, involved restructuring, including reducing bachelor's programs from 240 to 180 ECTS, discontinuing Minor qualifications, restructuring curricula, and changing enrollment quotas and funding mechanisms. Limited stakeholder involvement indicates increasingly centralized governance. Student mobilization continued to shape reform. Collective action contributed to abandoning the "One City-One Faculty" framework, suspending the proposed merger of Tbilisi State University and Georgian Technical University in February 2026, and preserving optional twelfth-grade schooling, with implications for access to European higher education. Activism transcended institutions, developing into cross-university and intergenerational coalitions and drawing on transnational repertoires of youth mobilization. The study argues that these reforms pose challenges to educational accessibility, European academic mobility, research capacity, and labor market equality. Weakening higher education as a mechanism of social mobility may deepen socioeconomic inequalities and constrain youth prospects. Ultimately, the Georgian case demonstrates that sustained contestation can reposition young people from passive recipients of educational policy to actors capable of influencing reform.

Keywords: academic freedom; authoritarian governance; educational inequality; youth activism; youth agency