



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Georgian students protest against prisoner abuse 2012

*Time period notes: Protests ended after the parliamentary election  
on 1 October 2012.*

September 18

2012

to: October 1

2012

**Country:** Georgia

**Location City/State/Province:** *Tbilisi; Batumi; Poti; Kutaisi; Gori*

### Goals:

1. Remove from office the Minister of Justice, Zurab Adeishvili, and the General Prosecutor, Murtaz Zodelava. Both failed to investigate many documented cases of abuse. Their presence in office jeopardises the independence of any subsequent investigations
2. Launch an independent, impartial investigation, led by a special prosecutor, to investigate human rights abuses in the prison system, with the direct involvement of a civil society driven fact-finding mission
3. Launch a criminal investigation into the recently resigned Minister of Interior, Bacho Akhalaia, who allegedly instigated systemic abuse during his tenure as head of the prison system, and the former Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance, Khatuna Kalmakhelidze.
4. Stop terror over families and stop terror over society
5. Media should support rally by broadcasting it objectively
6. Free and fair parliamentary elections on October 1

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 023. Destruction of own property › burned brooms
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › stopped prisoner vans and blocked roads

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 023. Destruction of own property
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 023. Destruction of own property
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Human Rights

**Group characterization:**

- but largely students from Tbilisi universities
- people of all ages

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Approximately 9 student organizations in Tbilisi

**Partners:**

Transparency International Georgia , Human Rights House Tbilisi, Georgian Center for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims

**Involvement of social elites:**

European Union (Foreign policy chief Cather Ashton), UN Human RIghts Office (Rupert Colville), US Embassy,

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

### Groups in 1st Segment:

- EU
- UN Human Rights
- US Embassy

### Groups in 2nd Segment:

### Groups in 3rd Segment:

### Groups in 4th Segment:

### Groups in 5th Segment:

### Groups in 6th Segment:

**Segment Length:** 2 days

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

Georgian government and prison/judicial system

### Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Created human-line to obstruct protesters' march

### Campaigner violence:

None.

### Repressive Violence:

Several organizers were arrested.

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

Government officials and prison staff resigned, but not all involved were prosecuted.

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In November 2003, tens of thousands of Georgians took to the streets to protest against the contested results of a parliamentary election. This campaign ousted President Eduard Shevardnadze, a hold-over from the former Soviet leadership, and put in place a pro-Western party, the United National Movement (ENM), headed by Mikhail Saakashvili. After the demonstrations concluded, altogether known as the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili's newly elected administration implemented a zero tolerance approach to petty crimes. This policy decreased crime rates and petty corruption, but coupled with the government's dogged practice of plea-bargaining and its acquittal rate of less than 0.1%, the ENM's criminal justice tactics quadrupled the country's prison population.

On 18 September 2012, two TV channels, Maestro and Channel 9, broadcast several videos and images of penitentiary guards

torturing detainees at Gldani prison Number 8 in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital city. One video showed a group of uniformed officials brutally beating a prisoner to the ground as other inmates waited, heads bowed in line. Another video showed multiple guards sodomizing a prisoner with police batons and a broomstick. A video released later indicated that guards also abused juvenile inmates.

The night the scandal broke, thousands of enraged Georgians immediately took to the streets in protest while distraught family members and friends of inmates rushed to the Gldani jail. Georgians demanded accountability, asking for the resignations and independent, impartial investigations of the Minister of Justice, Zurab Adeishvili; General Prosecutor, Murtaz Zodelava; Minister of Internal Affairs, Bacho Akhalaia; and Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance, Khatuna Kalmakhelidze. Spontaneous protests erupted across the capital city as well as in other Georgian cities such as Batumi, Poti, Katsi and Gori. However, most demonstrators rallied near Tbilisi's State Concert Hall as rumors swirled that President Saakashvili was attending a performance in the Philharmonic Hall.

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Source:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20170510013311/https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Tbilisi%2C\\_Georgia\\_%E2%80%94\\_Tbilisi\\_State\\_Concert\\_Hall.jpg](https://web.archive.org/web/20170510013311/https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Tbilisi%2C_Georgia_%E2%80%94_Tbilisi_State_Concert_Hall.jpg) [3]

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tbilisi,\\_Georgia\\_%E2%80%94\\_Tbilisi\\_State\\_Concert\\_Hall.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tbilisi,_Georgia_%E2%80%94_Tbilisi_State_Concert_Hall.jpg) [4]

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People of all ages attended the protests, but the majority of participants were students from Tbilisi universities and young people. Roughly nine student groups formed the backbone of the campaign; the members of these groups ranged from anarchists to peace promoters to student-government leaders. Despite parliamentary elections less than two weeks away, this campaign was not aligned with any political party.

The protests across the country persisted overnight with thousands joining. For the most part, the demonstrations maintained their vitality over the subsequent week. In Tbilisi, protesters gathered in a number of locations including Tbilisi State University, Ministry of Interior, and the Penitentiary Ministry. Demonstrators blocked two main streets and chanted “Misha, go!” referring to President Saakashvili. During the rallies, some protesters carried and burned brooms, referencing the tools prison guards used to rape the inmates. The brooms became a symbol of the campaign. At the Gldani prison, the site of the filmed beatings and rape, demonstrators stopped several prison vans to ask detainees whether they had been subject to abuse.

The scandal immediately gained international media coverage. The day following the release of the videos on 19 September 2012, international groups such as the European Union and the United National Human Rights Office issued statements condemning the acts of abuse and called for an impartial investigation. EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said she was “appalled by the shocking footage of abuses committed against inmates in Gldani prison,” stating, “It is of vital importance that these and other incidents are thoroughly and transparently investigated and that those responsible are held to account.” A spokesman for the UN Human Rights office in Geneva, Rupert Colville, also responded to the videos urging Georgia to “promptly, impartially, and effectively” investigate the cases of abuse and to take measures to “ensure that prisons and detention centers are managed in line with international human rights law and standards.”

That same day, President Saakashvili, responding to public anger, addressed the videos of abuse and ordered police to enter the prisons as temporary patrol officers until prison staff were re-trained or replaced. He proposed increasing funds for the Public Defender’s Office to permanently establish legal representatives in all prison facilities. The government removed a number of senior prison staff; over ten people, including the head of the Gldani prison, two deputies, and a number of guards, were arrested. The government responded further, and a number of senior officials resigned their posts. The Minister of Interior, Bacho Akhalaia, who oversaw the prison system in 2005-08, resigned, personally taking moral and political responsibility for the scandal. When the Minister of Penitentiary, Khatuna Kalmakhelidze, resigned, Saakashvili appointed Giorgi Tughushi to be her replacement. Prior to his new appointment, Tughushi served as the current ombudsman, an official appointed to investigate individuals’ complaints against maladministration, specifically complaints against public officials. Tughushi called for a thorough reform of Georgia’s prison system and allowed NGO’s and journalists to enter the prisons to speak with prisoners. Saakashvili also authorized prisoners to make unscheduled appointments with their families.

Although the President denounced the prison abuse, acknowledged the systemic failure allowing the unpunished beatings, and conceded the government had not paid attention to the warnings given by the Human Rights Ombudsman, he also suggested this scandal was the result of a political war. Saakashvili implied Georgian Dream, an opposition movement, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, bribed prison guards to mistreat inmates and film it. Saakashvili’s supporters also pointed to the fact that the two TV channels that broadcasted the abuse were opposition-leaning channels. Ivanishvili owned one of these channels. Later in the campaign on 24 September 2012, Georgian officials arrested three activists involved with the Georgian Dream. Videos showed they offered guards money to stage the scenes of abuse. The Georgian Dream, however, denied these accusations.

The government’s swift response did not satisfy the public, and demonstrations continued over the next two weeks. At rallies on 22 September 2012 and 23 September 2012, police arrested several of the campaign organizers and sentenced them to

administrative detention that would last until after the elections. In response, seven additional activists went on a three-day hunger strike at the House of Justice, demanding the release of the seven individuals. The government, however, largely ignored this protest.

The Georgian Dream leader, Ivanishvili stated, “Under no circumstances should you start unorganized street protests” and urged citizens to “express their opinion at the polls.” Although some student organizations planned to do just that and vowed to suspend protests until after the election, many Georgians continued to rally. On the afternoon of 24 September 2012, thousands of participants gathered at Tbilisi State University for the sixth day of protest. Two activists performed; one cut himself with a dagger and, using the blood, wrote “I love the police” on t-shirts.

After the performance, students started a march towards the defense ministry to demand the punishment of defense minister Dimitry Shashkin (formerly the prison minister) and the investigation of Akahalaia. The march moved to the House of Justice, where protesters demanded Justice Minister, Zurab Adeishvili, be held accountable too. Demonstrators planned to move forward to their next destination, but police officers appeared on the bridge and obstructed the marches’ path. In response, organizers decided to move the demonstration another direction and went to the State Concert Hall, where other protesters were already gathered. At the State Concert Hall, somewhat of an epicenter of all the campaign’s demonstrations, students blocked the main road. When the march arrived, police formed a human-chain not letting people pass through. Organizers decided to avoid provocation and ended the march asking people to return the next day. In the second week of demonstrations, other forms of protests emerged, such as a protest song published on YouTube that received over 100,000 views.

On 1 October 2012, the governing United National Movement suffered a landslide defeat to the Georgian Dream coalition in the parliamentary elections. The new administration promised to improve the penal system and prison conditions. On October 13, prisons minister Mgebrishvili announced a comprehensive prison reform that would introduce welfare and rehabilitation services. In 2013, over the span of three months, the government granted large-scale prison amnesty reducing Georgia’s 24,000-person strong prison population by half. A 2013 parliamentary report by the ombudsman office listed 48 prosecutions for abuse against prison staff, 28 of which resulted in convictions. Although the state never prosecuted certain high-level officials for the prison abuse, the campaign proved successful in forcing long term changes to the nation’s prison system.

## Research Notes

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**Additional Notes:**

Link to Rose Revolution case study: <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/georgians-overthrow-dictator-rose-revolution-2003>

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**

Juli Pham 23/03/2017

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