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Paternalistic Attitudes and the Civic Passivity of Youth in Georgia

Research Report

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Summary of Research Findings

This study examines how paternalistic attitudes towards the state among young people aged 18–29 in Georgia relate to their civic agency and passivity. Its central question is how the formation and internalisation of paternalistic attitudes relate to civic passivity among young people in Georgia, and whether young people see themselves as individuals who expect care and protection from the state or as citizens who recognise their own rights and responsibilities.

The study seeks to explain the findings of the 2025 quantitative study “Gen Z Civic Activism in Georgia”. When asked about the role of government, 46% of young people agreed that people are like children and that government should care for them as a parent would, while 40% were more inclined to agree that government is employed by the people and should be controlled by citizens. In the same study, voting was much more common than organised civic participation, pointing to an uneven pattern of civic engagement among young people.

Analysis of the focus groups shows that young people's attitudes towards the state, civic responsibility, and civic activity are more complex and contradictory than a division into paternalistic and non-paternalistic orientations would suggest. In the discussions, a substantial proportion of young people clearly rejected the idea of the citizen as a “child” dependent on the state, viewing government instead as an institution elected by and accountable to citizens. At the same time, these participants often gave the state extensive responsibility for addressing social, economic, and public problems. This support for both citizens' political autonomy and a strong, caring state is one of the study's main findings.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish demands for a socially supportive state from political paternalism. Expecting the state to provide social protection, conditions for employment, education, or infrastructure does not in itself amount to a rejection of civic autonomy. A paternalistic orientation becomes clearer when responsibility for defining problems, solving them, and taking action is transferred entirely to the state, while the citizen's role is largely confined to waiting for action or voicing demands.

The findings also show that paternalistic attitudes alone cannot explain civic passivity among young people. In many cases, participants themselves stressed the importance of active citizenship while also describing an environment in which taking action seemed futile, risky, or beyond their means. Several distinct mechanisms therefore emerge behind civic passivity: transferring responsibility to the state, low trust in institutions, unsuccessful experiences of participation, economic dependence, fear, a lack of collective support, and insufficient encouragement of initiative within families and educational settings.

The study identifies two different pathways to civic passivity. The first is a paternalistic pathway: giving the state extensive responsibility gradually reduces the role citizens

see for themselves. The second is a pathway of blocked agency: a young person recognises their own responsibility and the importance of participation but believes that participation is ineffective, risky, or too costly.

Introduction

Democratic governance depends on citizens being able not only to express their preferences in elections but also to take part in identifying public problems, influencing decisions, and demanding accountability from those in power. Young people are often seen as an important force for democratic transformation and social change. At the same time, in the post-Soviet context, a history of state-centred thinking, distrust of institutions, and economic dependence may create conditions in which citizens look primarily to the state to resolve public problems.

Youth civic engagement remains a significant challenge in Georgia. The country has been described as a transitional democracy for roughly three decades, yet sociological studies frequently show relatively low levels of political activity, collective action, and formal participation among young people. According to a 2023 study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, approximately 63% of young people report that their interests are poorly represented or not represented at all in national politics, while about 80% say they would not want to hold political office. The 2025 study of Gen Z civic activism in Georgia also also points to young people's disengagement from political processes: while 76% of respondents report having voted in elections, engagement falls sharply to 29% for charitable donations, 24% for volunteering, 21% for participation in protests, and an even lower 11% for online activism.

According to the same study, when assessing the role of government, 46% of young people agree with the statement that “people are like children and government should take care of them as parents take care of their children”. A smaller share, 40%, agree that “government is employed by the people: people should act like bosses and should control the government”. A further 11% agree with neither statement. Further analysis shows that settlement type and level of education predict paternalistic perceptions of government. Young people living in the capital are less likely to endorse the idea of government as a parent than those living in rural areas. Likewise, people with higher than secondary education are less likely to believe that government should care for citizens like a parent than people with secondary education or less.

This study set out to understand what lies behind these attitudes identified in the quantitative data. What does a young person mean when they say that government should “care” for people? Does this imply obedience to the government? What responsibilities do citizens see as their own? How do young people come to believe that their actions matter, or do not matter? What role do family, school, university, peers, economic circumstances, and personal experiences with institutions play in this process? The study examines the formation of paternalistic attitudes among young

people in Georgia, the sources of these attitudes in their socialisation, and their possible connection to civic passivity. Its main research question is how the formation and internalisation of paternalistic attitudes relate to civic passivity among young people in Georgia.

The findings suggest that the answers to these questions are more complex than a simple opposition between paternalism and autonomous citizenship.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach based on focus groups. Six online focus groups were conducted with young people aged 18–29, each with six participants.

Participants were selected with attention to settlement type (the capital, other cities, and rural areas) and age group (18–23 and 24–29). Gender balance was maintained in each group. Participants came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, including undergraduate and master's students, young people employed in the private and public sectors, and unemployed participants.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured discussion guide. It contained open-ended questions organised into five main themes: (1) understandings of what it means to be an active young person; (2) socialisation experiences in the family, formal educational institutions (schools and universities), and peer groups; (3) perceptions of the relationship between the state and citizens; (4) experiences related to civic passivity; and (5) possible incentives and enabling factors for civic engagement.

The guide also included a vignette, a hypothetical political scenario illustrating the symbolic or merely formal character of youth policy. This component was intended to explore participants' reactions and interpretations in greater depth.

The focus groups were conducted online via Zoom. Fieldwork took place on 10–16 May 2026. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

The limitations of focus groups must be taken into account when interpreting the data. In particular, focus group findings are not statistically representative and cannot be generalised to the relevant population of Georgia. The findings and differences between groups presented here therefore reflect patterns observed in these particular discussions.

Main Findings

The focus groups for this study and the fieldwork for the 2025 quantitative study “Gen Z Civic Activism in Georgia” took place after the October 2024 parliamentary elections. The findings should therefore be considered against the political situation that followed those elections. In late November 2024, the government's announcement that it was suspending negotiations on accession to the European Union was followed by prolonged protests in which young people actively participated. Subsequently, public

reports described tighter sanctions related to protests and cases of public-sector employees being dismissed.

This context matters for the analysis for three reasons. First, accounts of fear and the costs of participation (see “Fear, Economic Dependence, and the Cost of Participation”) may reflect reactions to a particular political period rather than only a general cultural characteristic. Second, the 21% protest participation rate takes on a different meaning depending on whether fieldwork was conducted before or after the wave of protests. Third, when discussing politically sensitive topics in online focus groups, participants may have been reluctant to speak openly about their experiences and views. This possibility should be considered when interpreting the theme of fear.

Perceptions of the Relationship Between the State and Citizens

At the beginning of the discussions, participants were presented with two contrasting statements. One compared the relationship between the state and citizens to that between a parent and child. The other described government as an institution employed and controlled by citizens. The findings showed that young people's views of the state's role rarely fit neatly into the distinction between a “caring parent” and a “government employed by citizens”. The data do not justify simply dividing young people into “paternalists” and “non-paternalists”. A mixed position appears more common: strong social responsibility on the part of the state combined with political autonomy for citizens. For young people, expecting the state to “care” does not always mean giving it full authority to make decisions.

Among participants aged 24–29 living in Tbilisi, participants clearly distanced themselves of the citizen-as-child model. One participant rejected this view because, in their opinion, “in reality, we are the ones who employ the government, and the government should obey the people more”. In this position, citizens are no longer passive recipients of state care. The state is seen as an institution created by the people, whose legitimacy depends on taking citizens' wishes into account. Similar views emerged in other groups. One participant aged 24–29 from a rural area said that government “should serve the people themselves”, since its operation and the salaries it pays ultimately depend on citizens' resources. In the participant's words, “people pay them to do this job, and the government should take people's opinions into account”.

In the same discussions, however, the state was not viewed solely as an administrative institution controlled by citizens. Participants also strongly expected the state to care for people. These were particularly evident in the group of rural participants aged 18–23. One participant stated directly: “The population still needs to be looked after, like a small child ... We are such a small country ... It shouldn't be difficult to care for and look after around 3 million people.” (Rural area, 18–23)

A participant from the older rural group also saw caring for citizens as the government's main function: “People elect ... the government, and the government

should always take care of the people, not the other way around.” (Rural area, 24–29) In this statement, however, the duty of care is linked to elections: the government is obliged to care for people because they elected it. This is closer to a model in which care is delegated to the government than to a model based on obedience: citizens elect the government and demand results from it. The words “not the other way around” suggest that the participant places citizens above government in this relationship.

Still, it would be too simplistic to label these responses as paternalistic. A substantial proportion of participants recognised the state's caring role without rejecting citizens' political autonomy. A participant aged 24–29 from another city expressed this position: “I agree more with the second statement, but the first is also partly true ... The state should take care of every citizen ... but people should also be involved in state decisions.” (Other cities, 24–29, Participant 5)

Participants' responses therefore suggest a hybrid model more often than classical political paternalism in which a caring state and autonomous citizens coexist. For young people, expecting social and economic security from the state does not necessarily imply obedience to those in power or rejection of citizens' political role.

Where Does State Responsibility End and the Citizen's Role Begin?

Paternalistic attitudes become clearer when the discussion moves from abstract notions of “care” to solving specific public problems. This shows how broadly young people understand the state's responsibilities and what role they reserve for citizens.

In almost every group, participants viewed the state as primarily responsible for solving public problems. This attitude was particularly evident when discussing economic and social issues. In the group of rural participants aged 24–29, some participants even regarded providing employment as a direct state responsibility. One participant assigned the government full responsibility: “The responsibility is, I don't know, 100 out of 100 ... Create the right conditions for your citizens and give them jobs.” (Rural area, 24–29)

Shifting responsibility to the state, however, did not always mean excluding citizens entirely. Several groups described a model in which the citizen's role is to identify a problem, speak up about it, and bring it to the attention of the relevant institution, while the state remains responsible for the solution. As one participant put it, “Public problems should be solved by the government. But the people's voice is also very important ... If we don't speak up, then it will be their responsibility to solve it.” (Rural area, 18–23)

This attitude does not amount to complete passivity. Citizens here identify problems and voice demands. Their role nevertheless remains relatively limited: they appear to have limited scope to take initiative, organise themselves, or solve problems independently or collectively.

One participant from the older Tbilisi group criticised this approach. They argued that when the prevailing view in society is that government should solve everything, citizens give the state both the authority and the responsibility to address problems that they could change themselves. They gave environmental pollution as an example and observed that state regulation should not be the only reason for everyday behaviour such as not littering.

This contrast highlights an important difference across the focus groups. Participants often acknowledge the state's responsibilities but understand their own role as citizens differently. In some accounts, citizens participate in solving problems; in others, their role is limited to making demands; elsewhere, they wait for “someone else” to act.

To understand paternalism, the more useful question is not whether a young person expects the state to solve a problem, but what role they see for themselves in solving it.

When the state carries out its proper responsibilities, this does not in itself constitute political paternalism. A paternalistic attitude becomes more apparent when responsibility for defining a public problem, solving it, and taking action is transferred entirely to the state and citizens no longer see themselves as people who can act.

Care Does Not Mean Silencing Citizens: Rejecting Procedural Paternalism

During the focus groups, participants were presented with a hypothetical situation (a vignette) and asked for their reactions. In the vignette, a municipality announces a new youth policy, saying it is designed to protect young people, reduce tensions, and maintain order. However, local young people have not been consulted. When a small group of young people requests an open public discussion, officials say that the time is not right and that responsible citizens should trust institutions.

The exercise showed an important distinction: young people may have strong expectations of state care while also rejecting the exclusion of citizens from decision-making. In all focus groups, participants agreed that public involvement in decision-making is important. As one participant put it, “If you don't ask the people you're doing it for what they actually want and how they want it, that's ... absurd.” (Tbilisi, 18–23)

This finding helps distinguish the expectation that the state provide care from procedural paternalism. A young person may demand extensive social responsibility from the state while also insisting on participation, consultation, and accountability.

A single question—“Should government care for people like a parent?”—cannot fully measure paternalistic citizenship. It is also important to measure expectations of the state’s social responsibilities separately from demands for citizen participation, consultation, influence over decisions, and oversight of government.

Perceptions of an “Active Young Person”

Another important focus group finding concerns what participants meant by being active. When describing an “active young person”, participants did not necessarily mean civic or political participation.

In the group of Tbilisi residents aged 24–29, participants initially understood being active mainly in terms of personal development. Participants spoke about education, professional work, ongoing personal development, having hobbies, and pursuing personal interests. One participant remarked, “An active person can also be apolitical.” (Tbilisi, 24–29)

On this view, a young person can be active in their personal life—studying, working, and developing their skills—while doing little to address public problems. Participants therefore did not always equate social activity with civic activity.

Perceptions differed in the Tbilisi group aged 18–23. Here, being active also meant keeping up with developments in society and expressing one's views. As one participant explained, “For me, an active young person is someone who takes part in various academic settings, expresses their views on different issues ... and should know what is happening in the society they live in.” (Tbilisi, 18–23)

A participant aged 18–23 from another city also linked activity to awareness of developments in the country and the ability to express one's position openly. As the participant put it, an active young person is someone who “already knows and understands something about the processes taking place in the country and can express their own position”. (Other cities, 18–23)

One participant from the older rural group initially described an active young person as someone taking part in various programmes “offered by the state”, whether charity, a development programme, or an activity benefiting the municipality. Only when prompted did the participant mention that activity also includes initiatives started by young people themselves.

These different responses suggest that “active young person” has at least three distinct meanings in these discussions. First is individual activity: studying, working, and self-development. Second is social activity, including participation in programmes, events, and volunteering. Third is civic and political activity: expressing views on public problems and trying to influence them.

This distinction matters for the central research problem, because we need to specify the area of life in which a young person is passive. Some focus group participants do not consider civic activity an essential characteristic of an “active young person” at all. Low civic participation is therefore not always evidence of passivity in social life more broadly.

Experiences Related to Civic Passivity

If expecting the state to assume broad responsibility is one possible form of paternalism, the discussions of civic passivity reveal another, more consistent mechanism: the sense that individual action will not lead to any real change.

In the Tbilisi group aged 18–23, one participant described this process as a series of events leading to withdrawal. A young person may have experience of participating in local self-government, but if they find that “there was no point in being there”, that they could not change anything, and that this happens “once, twice, three times”, they may eventually lose any desire to participate again.

Another participant in the same group, speaking from personal experience, said they often saw little point in expressing their position publicly when they were not sure it would lead to a tangible result. In such circumstances, the participant said, a person would have no desire to “put up with some kind of pressure just to change nothing”.

In these responses, passivity does not stem from a rejection of civic responsibility. On the contrary, people may understand that participation is necessary, but their willingness to take part depends on whether they expect results. If young people believe that institutions do not respond to their demands, they gradually stop seeing a point in civic action.

This distinction matters when examining the relationship between paternalism and passivity. A young person may not believe at all that “the government should do everything” but still remain passive if they think no one is listening to them. In such cases, the problem is not the transfer of responsibility but a low sense of political and civic efficacy.

Fear, Economic Dependence, and the Cost of Participation

Alongside a low sense of efficacy, participants also described another barrier to taking part: the possibility of personal or family losses.

In the Tbilisi group aged 18–23, one participant recounted a friend's experience to explain how in which a young person might see their political activity as a risk to their family's income. According to the participant, some young people “have a mother or father employed somewhere” where, if their political activity became known, the family member might be dismissed and the family could “lose a source of income”. The participant identified this as one of the main barriers to young people's activity.

Similar fears emerged in the group of rural participants aged 24–29. One participant observed that young people today may have the opportunity to express their opinions openly, but “most are still gripped by fear” and are afraid to speak out because of the possible consequences.

When interpreting these responses, participants' perceptions must be distinguished from independent factual confirmation of specific events. Focus groups show how young people perceive their environment and how these perceptions affect their behaviour. Fear can deter participation even when the anticipated sanctions never occur. It is enough for a young person to believe that such sanctions are possible and credible.

In this context, economic dependence is not simply a sign of social vulnerability. It increases the perceived cost of participation. When young people see their own or their family's income as insecure, civic activity may become a choice between expressing a public position and maintaining personal security.

Economic circumstances may therefore affect young people's civic participation in at least two ways. First, work, study, and everyday financial obligations directly reduce the time and energy available for participation. Second, economic dependence increases the perceived risk of loss and, consequently, the likelihood of holding back.

“What Difference Can I Make on My Own?”: From Individual Passivity to Collective Inaction

The focus groups also showed how much participation depends on what others do. Several participants directly linked their motivation to the feeling that other people were acting alongside them.

A participant aged 18–23 from another city, who described taking part in protests, said that they lost motivation when they saw people offering verbal support without joining in the action themselves. When the participant saw that “some people encourage me [but] sit at home”, they too lost their “enthusiasm and drive”. The same participant described a common justification for individual inaction: “If I don't go, what difference will one person make?” They observed that when thousands of people think this way, collective action ultimately loses momentum.

This finding highlights the importance of collective efficacy. Believing in one's own ability to act is not enough. They must also believe that others will join in, that collective action will reach a sufficient scale, and that their joint efforts will achieve something.

One person's inaction can then contribute to the inaction of others. If many people wait for someone else to take the first step, a self-reinforcing cycle develops: the expectation that others will do nothing weakens one's own willingness to act, while individual inaction further reinforces others' belief that collective mobilisation will not happen.

The Influence of Family and Social Networks

The original research design considered the family one of the main sources of intergenerational transmission of paternalistic attitudes. The focus groups confirm that the family matters, but its influence is not necessarily paternalistic.

In some accounts, the family is a setting in which young people may develop obedience to elders, caution, and doubts about their own abilities. Everyday messages that give little weight to young people's views or associate independent action with risk appear particularly important.

Other participants described the opposite. One participant from the Tbilisi group aged 24–29 linked family support to confidence and a sense of agency. According to this participant, “support from the family is hugely important”, and families should give young people both direction and the “courage to believe you can do things”.

The family is therefore better understood not as an automatic transmitter of paternalism, but as an early setting in which civic agency develops. Family life may first shape how young people answer questions such as these: Does a child's opinion matter? Is it acceptable to question an elder's decision? Can a young person make decisions independently? Is a mistake a reason for punishment or an opportunity to learn? How welcome is initiative?

These everyday experiences may later shape how young people see their place in relation to the state and society.

The Role of Educational Institutions: Civic Education as Passive Transmission

Like the family, the education system appears in the focus groups as an institution with mixed effects. For example, several participants described schools and universities as settings where initiative, independent thinking, and expression of personal views were not sufficiently encouraged.

One participant in the older Tbilisi group assessed the school system particularly negatively, saying that there was “no independent thinking at all” and “no expression of your own opinion”, and that pupils were mainly required to act “as they tell you, as they teach you”.

Participants in the younger Tbilisi group also described cases in which expressing a different opinion at school drew a negative response from teachers. According to one participant, when they saw an issue differently, teachers told them that “we were wrong and shouldn't say it out loud”.

The discussion of education also provided a clear counterexample. A participant aged 24–29 from another city remembered their school experience very differently. The participant said they had studied civic education, learned about their rights at school,

participated in many projects, and gained “a great deal of self-confidence” through school, including experience of speaking in public.

These accounts show how much educational experiences vary. Even within the same formal system, young people may have very different experiences depending on their school, teacher, university, programmes, and the extent to which they are given real opportunities to make decisions and take initiative.

The data also suggest that simply providing information about democratic institutions may not be enough. Young people are more likely to develop a sense of agency when young people have real opportunities to plan projects themselves, express their opinions publicly, see the results of their initiatives, and receive feedback.

Possible Incentives and Enabling Factors for Civic Engagement

If a participant links previous unsuccessful experiences to declining motivation for civic activity, the reverse may also be true: seeing an action succeed could increase their willingness to take part.

Across the focus groups, participants' accounts suggest that civic agency does not develop through abstract knowledge alone. It is especially important for young people to experience firsthand that their views have been taken seriously, that their actions have brought about even a small change, or that other people have joined them.

This suggests two opposing cycles: unsuccessful action → low efficacy → reduced willingness to participate again; and action → visible results → a sense of efficacy → increased future participation.

Social support is also important. Other participants' responses suggest that people find it much easier to act when they feel they are not alone and feel supported by friends, family members, or peers.

In participants' accounts, young people often see greater scope for action on smaller, specific local issues than in national politics. At this level, young people can more readily see the link between their actions and outcomes. Rather than simply teaching young people that “being active is important”, it may be more effective to create experiences in which they can see that their participation can make a difference.

Conclusion

The six focus groups, considered together, suggest that at least two different pathways lead to civic passivity among young people.

The first can be described as a pathway in which responsibility is transferred to the state in a paternalistic way. Here, the state is regarded as the main actor responsible for addressing public problems, while the citizen's role gradually diminishes. Citizens

may make demands but are less likely to see themselves as initiators of or participants in solving problems. This attitude may contribute to civic passivity.

The second pathway is quite different and can be called the pathway of blocked agency. In this case, young people may understand civic responsibility, support oversight of government, believe that expressing their views is essential, and want to participate themselves. Yet they may remain passive because their experiences or perceptions lead them to believe that institutions are unresponsive, the likelihood of achieving results is low, support from other citizens is insufficient, or the personal and economic cost of participation is too high.

The relationship between paternalism and civic passivity is therefore not straightforward. Paternalism is one possible source of passivity, but not the only one. Expecting the state to provide social support is not, on its own, a sufficient indicator of civic passivity or political obedience. In participants' discussions, expectations of care mainly reflect a particular understanding of the relationship between the state and citizens, in which the state is the main institution to which public problems are addressed, while citizens vote, voice demands and, in some cases, oversee decisions. Civic passivity among young people in Georgia does not always express obedience to the state or a rejection of civic responsibility. It is often a response to the surrounding environment by citizens who hold critical views but have a low sense of efficacy, face high perceived risks and lack sufficient collective support.

Research on civic passivity should therefore distinguish between the questions “Who bears responsibility?” and the question “Does a person believe their actions can produce results?” The first relates more directly to paternalism; the second to civic efficacy. The focus groups show that both dimensions must be considered together to understand young people's actual behaviour.