TRENDREPORT 13

WHEN VISIBILITY BECOMES A LIABILITY: SELF-SHIELDED CONTESTATION AND THE FUTURE OF PROTEST IN 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Governments across diverse political systems increasingly rely on technological surveillance-enabled deterrence to manage civic contestation, raising the personal and professional risks associated with visible protest without formally banning mobilization.

Protest has not disappeared under these conditions. Instead, it is being reshaped through adaptive, self-shielded forms of contestation, including identity concealment, digital risk management, fragmented mobilization, and selective visibility.

Comparative evidence from Turkey, Serbia, and Georgia shows that surveillance-driven deterrence redistributes participation along lines of risk tolerance and social exposure, with protest disproportionately sustained by younger cohorts while higher-risk groups selectively disengage or adapt through self-shielding.

Political outcomes depend less on protest frequency or visibility than on whether adapted mobilization leads to sustained political effects under conditions of monitoring, delayed punishment, and institutional absorption.

2026 represents a critical juncture, as self-shielded contestation either matures into a politically effective alternative to mass protest, or surveillance consolidates a durable advantage by normalizing exposure and eroding collective leverage.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Regierungen verschiedener politischer Systeme setzen zunehmend auf technologische Überwachungsmaßnahmen zur Abschreckung, um zivile Proteste zu kontrollieren, wodurch die persönlichen und beruflichen Risiken im Zusammenhang mit sichtbaren Protesten erhöht werden, ohne dass Mobilisierung formell verboten wird.

Unter diesen Bedingungen sind Proteste jedoch nicht verschwunden. Stattdessen werden sie durch adaptive, selbstschützende Formen des Protests neu gestaltet; darunter die Verschleierung der Identität, digitales Risikomanagement, fragmentierte Mobilisierung und selektive Sichtbarkeit.

Vergleichende Erkenntnisse aus der Türkei, Serbien und Georgien zeigen, dass überwachungsbasierte Abschreckung die Beteiligung entsprechend der Risikotoleranz und der sozialen Exposition umverteilt, wobei Proteste unverhältnismäßig stark von jüngeren Kohorten getragen werden, während Gruppen mit höherem Risiko sich selektiv zurückziehen oder sich durch Selbstschutzmaßnahmen anpassen.

Politische Ergebnisse hängen weniger von der Häufigkeit oder Sichtbarkeit von Protesten ab als davon, ob angepasste Mobilisierung unter Bedingungen der Überwachung, verzögerter Bestrafung und institutioneller Absorbierung zu nachhaltigen politischen Auswirkungen führt.

Das Jahr 2026 stellt einen kritischen Wendepunkt dar, da sich selbstschützende Auseinandersetzungen entweder zu einer politisch wirksamen Alternative zu Massenprotesten entwickeln, oder die Überwachung einen dauerhaften (staatlichen) Vorteil festigt, indem sie die Exposition normalisiert und kollektiven Einfluss untergräbt.

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WHEN VISIBILITY BECOMES A LIABILITY: SELF-SHIELDED CONTESTATION AND THE FUTURE OF PROTEST IN 2026

FROM VISIBILITY TO LIABILITY IN AN AGE OF SURVEILLANCE

Across a growing range of political contexts, technological surveillance is becoming a central instrument in the management of civic contestation. Governments increasingly deploy capacities such as facial recognition, data aggregation, online monitoring, and post-hoc identification to track protest activity and, crucially, to raise the personal costs of visible

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participation. The political function of these practices is deterrence: signaling that protest visibility may carry subsequent legal, economic, or social consequences for protestors. Rather than banning protest outright, technological surveillance is embedded into routine governance, lowering political and legal constraints

on its continued use and normalizing exposure-based deterrence across regime types.

This reflects a broader process whereby governments facing persistent mobilization adopt tools and practices long associated with authoritarian contexts to pre-empt protest and prevent destabilizing "color revolution" dynamics. What emerges is not convergence toward a single model, but a shared emphasis on anticipatory deterrence: discouraging broad participation by transforming visibility into liability (Greitens, 2020; Kurlantzick, 2021; Polyakova & Meserole, 2019).

Civic mobilization has not disappeared under these conditions. Instead, it is increasingly characterized by self-shielded contestation, a term we use to describe a mode of collective action in which protesters minimize exposure to repression by masking faces, avoiding identifiable symbols, rotating organisers, decentralizing leadership, and deliberately fragmenting participation across time and space. What distinguishes the current period is not that protesters adapt to surveillance—a long-standing feature of contentious politics— but that surveillance has become sufficiently pervasive, automated, and temporally extended to redistribute deterrence well beyond the moment of protest itself. This trend leads to the development of self-shielded citizenship

which refers to the practices through which citizens actively protect themselves from state surveillance and data extraction while remaining politically engaged. The social movements increasingly unfold within a diffuse digital panoptic environment, where the constant possibility of observation reshapes how collective action is organized and enacted.[1] While existing frameworks of shielded citizenship conceptualize protection as something granted by the state in exchange for visibility and legibility, our approach inverts this logic by relocating the shield at the level of the citizen. Extending this reversal further, self-shielding operates not only as a strategic response to external surveillance, but also as a way citizens manage exposure, risk, and vulnerability under conditions of constant observability. In this sense, opacity, selective visibility, and data refusal function as political practices through which individuals regulate how, and whether, they are seen and identified.

Digital practices therefore play a central role: activists rely on encrypted messaging, temporary accounts, anonymous content sharing, and rapid cross-platform dissemination to coordinate action while limiting traceability. Visibility is selectively rerouted rather than abandoned, shifting from sustained physical presence toward digital amplification, citizen journalism, and networked dissemination. At the same time, heightened exposure risks are producing "selective disengagement." While some citizens adapt through self-shielding to sustain participation, those facing higher professional, economic, or familial cost withdraw from protest altogether. Participation is thus redistributed rather than uniformly suppressed, becoming more uneven and increasingly shaped by individual risk tolerance rather than collective mobilization capacity.

> ❝ *The central question is whether, over the course of 2026, self-shielded forms of contestation will evolve into politically effective alternatives to mass protest, or whether rising visibility costs will erode collective political leverage.*

The central question is whether, over the course of 2026, self-shielded forms of contestation will evolve into politically effective alternatives to mass protest, or whether rising visibility costs will erode collective political leverage. In this report, the effectiveness of protest is understood in terms of its capacity to lead to discernible political effects, including policy response, institutional constraint, or changes in governing behavior. While surveillance-enabled deterrence is observable across regime types, this report focuses empirically on hybrid and backsliding democracies, where such practices expand without formal protest bans.

HYBRID SURVEILLANCE AND PROTEST ADAPTATION: COMPARATIVE ILLUSTRATIONS

Turkey, Serbia, and Georgia represent three politically distinct contexts in which protest has remained persistent but increasingly shaped by surveillance-enabled deterrence rather than overt repression, with the strong influence of technological investments in the methods of surveillance

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1   Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), refers to the idea of panopticon both as an architectural model of surveillance and as a diagram of power in which the constant possibility of being observed leads individuals to internalize discipline and regulate their own conduct.

and self-shielding. Across contexts, protesters have responded by dispersing leadership, varying protest formats, masking identities, and shifting coordination and narrative production to encrypted or semi-anonymous digital spaces, seeking to preserve mobilization while limiting individual exposure (Tufekci, 2017).

In Turkey, the current wave of protest mobilization followed the imprisonment of mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, but subsequent participation has been shaped less by the trigger itself than by surveillance-enabled deterrence and anticipatory risk. Legal and administrative pressure frequently follows demonstrations or online expression, often with delayed timing that extends exposure well beyond the event itself. As a result, mobilization has become socially stratified: students and younger activists remain visible drivers of protest, while journalists, academics, and public-sector professionals increasingly disengage or self-censor (Freedom House Turkey, 2025; Yeşil & Sözeri, 2017). These conditions have contributed to the rise of citizen journalists and non-institutional media actors, transforming how political information circulates. Protest persists, but its capacity to lead to sustained changes in governing behavior remains limited.

In Serbia, large-scale protests following the Novi Sad infrastructure collapse illustrate how surveillance and administrative pressure shape participation beyond the initial mobilization. Protest waves against political violence, environmental degradation, and governance failures have demonstrated considerable endurance and visibility, often led by youth and student networks. At the same time, authorities have invested heavily in urban surveillance systems and facial recognition technologies, while relying on media control, administrative delay, and selective pressure rather than mass arrests (BIRN, 2024). The result is a pattern of mobilization that is socially energetic

but politically constrained: protest endures and adapts, yet rarely translates into durable institutional change.

In Georgia, mass mobilization against the 2023–2024 "foreign agents" legislation provides a more conditional case of surveillance-driven deterrence. Recent protests succeeded in forcing policy responsiveness. However, these moments of success have been followed by intensified surveillance, including police filming and expanded monitoring, alongside growing concern among civil society actors about the longer-term personal and organizational costs of participation (HRW, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2024). In this context, surveillance appears less as an immediate barrier to mobilization than as a mechanism that may narrow future participation after protest has already proven effective.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that surveillance-driven deterrence does not eliminate protest, but reshapes its social composition, temporal dynamics, and political effectiveness. Across contexts, protest remains disproportionately driven by younger cohorts with higher tolerance for exposure, while higher-risk groups withdraw or adapt through self-shielding. Political outcomes vary not with protest frequency or visibility, but with whether mobilization leads to discernible policy, institutional, or elite-level change under conditions of monitoring, delayed punishment, and institutional absorption. These dynamics set the stage for assessing whether, over the course of 2026, self-shielded forms of contestation can evolve into politically effective alternatives to mass protest, or whether deterrence consolidates by redistributing risk and normalizing exposure as a condition of dissent.

OUTLOOK AND IMPLICATIONS: POSSIBLE TRAJECTORIES THROUGH 2026

Assessing effectiveness under conditions of surveillance-enabled deterrence requires moving beyond static evaluations of protest success or failure. Instead, it calls for an examination of how evolving forms of contestation interact with relatively stable structural constraints and more contingent political shocks. The following outlook therefore situates self-shielded contestation within the broader political environment shaping civic space in 2026, identifying both enduring drivers and potential points of disruption.

STRUCTURALLY STABLE DRIVERS SHAPING CIVIC CONTESTATION

The stable drivers are likely to persist regardless of short-term political outcomes. Surveillance capacities continue to expand and normalize, including post-hoc identification and administrative enforcement that extend exposure beyond the moment of protest. Governments face strong institutional incentives to deter mass mobilization without formally banning protest, favoring exposure-based governance that raises participation risks while preserving the appearance of legality. These dynamics are reinforced by political cross-country political learning and the spread of surveillance and protest-control practices across authoritarian, hybrid, and democratic systems, as governments adopt practices designed to pre-empt sustained mobilization. At the same time, risk is increasingly shifted from the state to individuals, transforming participation into a personalized calculation rather than a collective act. Within this environment,

self-shielded protest practices continue to evolve, including decentralized coordination, identity masking, and selective visibility, becoming a durable feature of civic contestation rather than a temporary response.

FRAGILE COUNTERVAILING FORCES AFFECTING POLITICAL LEVERAGE

Alongside these stable drivers, several contingent forces may disrupt or slow the consolidation of deterrence, though their effects remain uneven and fragile. Surveillance practices can, themselves, become politicized when monitoring and exposure are perceived as illegitimate, turning deterrence into a mobilization grievance. Youth and student mobilization continues to play a disproportionate role in sustaining protest, as these groups often face fewer professional constraints and exhibit higher tolerance for exposure, motivated by the prospect of building a better future in their home countries. Legal challenges and episodic court interventions may temporarily constrain surveillance enforcement or reaffirm protest rights, though such effects are rarely durable. Finally, international reputational sensitivity remains a conditional counterweight in contexts where governments continue to respond to external scrutiny or pressure, even as such sensitivity varies significantly across cases.

POTENTIAL DISRUPTORS AND INFLECTION POINTS

Several developments could significantly alter the trajectory of surveillance-enabled deterrence and self-shielded contestation in 2026. These include electoral outcomes that either incentivize restraint

or accelerate exposure-based enforcement; leadership transitions or health-related incapacitation that weaken elite cohesion; and major security or economic shocks that alter the political consequences of repression and mobilization. Highly visible misuse or failure of surveillance technologies such as misidentification scandals or unlawful data exposure could rapidly politicize monitoring practices and trigger backlash, particularly among younger cohorts. Less likely but potentially transformative disruptions would include sustained mass mobilization that overwhelms deterrence mechanisms, decisive judicial intervention constraining surveillance enforcement, or abrupt geopolitical realignments that reintroduce external reputational pressure. Together, these inflection points suggest that the evolution of civic contestation in 2026 may turn less on gradual institutional change than on episodic political shocks.

Over the course of 2026, three plausible trajectories for social movements emerge:

SCENARIO 1—ADAPTIVE BREAKTHROUGH.

Self-shielded contestation evolves into a politically effective alternative to mass protest. Protesters successfully combine decentralized coordination and digital amplification with new forms of strategic continuity and representation, allowing political pressure to be exerted without sustained physical visibility. In this scenario, frameworks governing technological deterrence are contested and reshaped, leading to stronger legal and institutional protections for citizen rights.

SCENARIO 2—DETERRENCE CONSOLIDATION.

Surveillance-driven deterrence succeeds in thinning participation and degrading collective leverage. Protest persists but becomes fragmented and episodic and is increasingly absorbed without meaningful policy or institutional response.

SCENARIO 3—POLARIZED HYBRID.

A small, adaptive activist core sustains episodic disruption while the broader public disengages. Surveillance neither fully suppresses protest nor provokes sustained backlash, producing volatility without durable political effects.

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> *The expansion of techno-logical surveillance has not ended civic contestation, but has fundamentally altered the conditions under which it occurs.*

CONCLUSION

The expansion of technological surveillance has not ended civic contestation, but has fundamentally altered the conditions under which it occurs. Across diverse political contexts, protest increasingly unfolds under exposure-based deterrence, prompting adaptation, fragmentation, and selective disengagement rather than outright disappearance. Civic participation persists, yet it is reshaped by individual risk calculation, social position, and technological mediation. While political protests have always adapted to surveillance, contemporary surveillance is increasingly pervasive, automated, and designed to apply deterrence well beyond the moment of protest itself.

2026 represents a critical period for assessing the political effectiveness of self-shielded contestation. The central issue is not whether citizens

continue to mobilize, but whether adapted forms of protest can lead to sustained political effects under conditions of pervasive monitoring, delayed punishment, and institutional absorption. Where leverage persists, it is likely to do so episodically and conditionally, rather than through sustained mass visibility.

The implications extend beyond protest dynamics to the future of democratic accountability. If surveillance-enabled deterrence consolidates, political participation may remain formally intact while collective influence narrows, gradually hollowing out the substance of dissent without explicit restriction. If, however, adaptive forms of contestation continue to generate leverage—through episodic disruption, elite sensitivity, or external pressure—surveillance may remain pervasive but politically constrained. The balance between these trajectories will shape state–citizen relations under conditions of routinized surveillance well beyond 2026.

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