

# POLITICS OF MEMORY IN INDEPENDENT GEORGIA

## (KEY TRENDS IN RECENT HISTORY)

Giorgi Maisuradze



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# COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND ITS POLITICS

The politics of memory is primarily concerned with statehood and national integration; its ultimate aim is the formation of collective identity. Collective identity, through which an individual associates themselves with this or that group or union, is based on collective memory (Halbwachs, Maurice, 1950). In turn, collective memory, especially in the context of nation-states, is largely a product of intentional policy. Such policy might entail the production of cultural signifiers (heroes and martyrs, glorious ancestors, and praiseworthy descendants) and of practices of their recollection and ritualized celebration (naming of cultural and educational institutions, streets and even cities after them), and the erection of their monuments and memorials. It might also entail the observation of national holidays, the commemoration of anniversaries, collective mourning and celebration, and historical and fictional narratives, which Pierre Nora calls “sites of memory” (*les lieux de mémoire*) (Nora, Pierre, 1986). “Site” denotes here not a geographical or spatial unit, but a crystallization of memory and its objectification. Such sites, whether they are symbols, figures, narratives and rites of celebration, make up “cultural memory”, which expresses the shared values of a collective (Assmann, Jan 1999, p. 21-22). The unification of such ideals and values into a single whole, as well as their transformation into collective memory, is achieved, first and foremost, through cultural and educational policy (Assmann, Aleida, 1993, p. 8-11).

The politics of memory become especially important in times of great transformation, when political systems change, or new nations and states are formed. In such periods, there appears a need to dismantle and replace existing forms of cultural memory. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a global-historical transformation, and as a result, the Soviet system unraveled, and new nation-states emerged. This was the context in which an independent Georgian state took over from the Georgian SSR and developed its national identity based on new forms of cultural memory. It is important to note here that in this process of redefinition, the Soviet legacy of cultural memory was a barrier that had to be overcome and transcended. In fact, many components of the memory politics of independent Georgia can be seen as a recasting of tendencies already present during the Soviet period.

# FROM THE SOVIET EMPIRE TO INDEPENDENCE

The initiation, in 1986, of the policy of *perestroika* by Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, marked the end of the uninterrupted and near-complete monopoly Soviet ideology previously enjoyed over the formation of public opinion and, by implication, over the culture of memory. The USSR, as an ideocracy, spared no expense for the ideological education of its multiethnic population. The core of its educational policy was the “national question”: the pursuit and management of “national self-determination” (nacional’naja samobytnost’) within the “family of Soviet peoples”. The general ideological framework of this policy was laid down in 1930, with Stalin’s formulaic articulation of “nationalist in form, socialist in content” (Martin, Terry, 2001, p. 245-249). Henceforth, the politics of memory was to be pursued according to this recipe. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the formation of “national forms” – expressed as national dress, music, literary canon, historical narratives and pantheons– across the Soviet Union.

The cult of the poet as a symbolic representation of national culture became a special trope in the USSR’s cultural program. In 1937, the Soviet Union staged union-wide celebrations of Shota Rustaveli’s anniversary (750 years since the writing of *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*). The main avenue in Tbilisi, the State Theatre, the Institute of Theatre and Film and the Institute of Georgian Literature were all renamed after the author of the medieval epic poem. Monuments went up across the country. That same year, the Georgian SSR celebrated the centenary of Ilia Chavchavadze’s birth. 1937 was a turning point in the Bolsheviks’ attitude towards Ilia Chavchavadze – his figure completed the transformation from being a representative of the feudal aristocracy and thus of the class enemy, into being stylized, along with Shota Rustaveli, as the “father of the Georgian nation” and as the discoverer of the poet and the future Supreme Leader Ioseb Jughashvili (Maisuradze/Thun-Hohenstein, 2015, p. 227). Shota Rustaveli and Ilia Chavchavadze became the most celebrated figures of Georgian history and ultimate symbols of Georgia’s national culture. During World War II, the trajectory of the politics of memory in the Soviet Union inflects national-historical narratives and heroization of the struggle against foreign invaders with even more enthusiasm. The post-war period saw the rapid development of historical, archeological, and philological sciences; the introduction into Georgian cultural memory of the Kingdom of Kolkheti and the myth of the Argonauts (Merab Berdzenishvili’s monument to Medea was unveiled in Bitchvinta in 1969 (Khalvashi, 2018, p. 17), the publication of the corpus of ancient Georgian literary works, as well as the rise of the historical novel as a genre and domination of the national-historical style in poetry, film, theatre and the visual arts. By the end of the Soviet era, the culture of memory in the Georgian SSR was mostly composed of national-historical narratives and figures. At that point, all-Soviet sites of memory – the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Lenin streets and monuments, memorials of Georgian Bolsheviks and celebrations of May 1 and November 7 – retained only the status of formalities. The only



site of memory in which the Soviet and the Georgian-national merged and coalesced, was the cult of Stalin, which, despite its denouncement in 1956, persisted semi-officially in Georgia in the form of a museum and a monument in Gori and Stalin streets in virtually all cities and villages in Georgia.

In the twilight years of the Soviet Union, nationalist and patriotic themes dominated Georgia's culture of memory, in which they had to formally coexist with fragments of Soviet ideology. Both the "national form" and the "socialist content" were part of the official cultural policy and were produced through state institutions, but the national was rapidly turning into a "hot" memory, while the collective Soviet memory was declining into a "cold" and reactionary form.<sup>1</sup> In such circumstances, "sites of memory" historically excluded from the official sphere of Soviet memory – the Georgian Orthodox Church and notions of independent statehood – are reinvigorated and come to the fore. In the politics of memory, these two sites of memory occupied center stage in the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era.

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1 "Hot" and "cold" memory are Jan Assmann's terms developed after Claude Levi-Strauss' notions of "hot" and "cold" societies. According to Levi-Strauss, "cold societies" resist any change or novelty, while "hot societies" express readiness for change and advancement (Assmann, 1999, p. 68-70).

# NATIONAL LIBERATION AND THE REVISION OF MEMORY

With the loosening of state monopoly began the emergence of new loci of the politics of memory in Georgia. The first sign of changes to come was the Georgian Orthodox Church's canonization in 1987 of Ilia Chavchavadze as Saint Ilia the Righteous. At the inaugural service, the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II had this to say about the newly canonized saint: "From this day forward, we, Georgians, blessed by the prayer of Elijah the Prophet, will always celebrate the day of our new saint, the great Georgian writer, the uncrowned king of Georgia, the martyr and savior of Georgia – Ilia the Righteous!" (Ilia II, 1997, p. 246). The canonization of the "father of the nation", the sacralization of a secular symbol, also meant the establishment of *supreme authority* (Hochheitsrecht) over it (Andronikashvili/Maisuradze, 2010, p. 14).

Within the same sermon, Ilia II also introduced the notion of a "heavenly Georgia" (Ilia II, 1997, p. 247), which can be seen as the first example of the nationalization of the sacred and the universal. Ilia II had been repeating the same formulation since 1980, but the canonization of Ilia Chavchavadze became a major event of historical significance and the sermon he delivered on that day spread well beyond the parish and the church-going audience, inspiring and becoming the foundational text of the new religious-nationalist discourse. Starting in 1989, "Heavenly Georgia" became a popular rhetorical notion frequently deployed by the "Movement for National Liberation", gradually ossifying into a new site of memory. The Christian analogy for this notion is the concept of "Heavenly Jerusalem", with origins in the Bible (Revelation 21-22). According to the Book of Revelation, "Heavenly Jerusalem" will descend over reborn land following the Last Judgment. But in its Georgian iteration, it is a nationalized heaven for Georgians. "Heavenly Georgia" became a part of national identity. It made its way to collective cultural memory from the pulpit of the Georgian Orthodox Church and from the rostrums at mass demonstrations of the late 1980s (Andronikashvili/Maisuradze, 2010, p.14).

At the same time, the national movement gathered strength alongside the still decimated Georgian Orthodox Church. The movement subsequently morphed into a leading force in the politics of memory of the transitional period. The "national movement," which itself became a site of memory, is an umbrella term encompassing all social and political groups that fueled political processes in Georgia between 1988 and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The national movement was initially made up of the so called "informals", the majority of which were former political prisoners and anti-Soviet dissidents. In 1987 they founded the first "informal" organization – the Ilia Chavchavadze Society. A year later, another informal union named after Ilia Chavchavadze was established, but this one chose the canonized name instead – Saint Ilia the Righteous. Ilia Chavchavadze was made into the main symbol of the national movement, while a triad excerpted (and edited) from one of his earliest published writings – "A few words

on Prince Revaz Shalvas dze Eristavi's translation of Kozlov's *The Insane* – "language, fatherland, faith" became the chief battle cry of the national movement. It replaced the long-standing Soviet motto – "workers of the world unite!" Since then, the portrait of Ilia Chavchavadze has been a permanent fixture at all political demonstrations and government offices.

It was with the initiative and support of the Central Party Committee of the Georgian SSR that the Shota Rustaveli Society was founded in 1988. Society members included many prominent representatives of the Georgian intelligentsia. This public organization was intended as the formal alternative to the national movement, but it soon came under the influence of the movement it was supposed to counterbalance. The national movement had by then, taken total control over the sentiment on the street. Rustaveli, as the main symbol of Georgian cultural memory, also became the political symbol of the national movement. In 1991, shortly before the presidential election, Zviad Gamsakhurdia published *Tropology of The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, for which the Georgian Academy of Sciences granted him a doctoral degree in philology. Thus, the political leader of the country also became associated with its most important cultural icon.



# INDEPENDENCE AS A “SITE OF MEMORY”

On May 26, 1988, a relatively small crowd, including students and “informals”, gathered in Tbilisi for the first political demonstration of its kind in the Georgian SSR. They gathered to celebrate a national holiday – Independence Day – established by the Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921). With Georgia’s sovietization in 1921, the holiday had been forgotten and replaced by February 25 – “the day of the establishment of Soviet rule in Georgia.” In 1988, May 26 returned to Georgia’s cultural memory. Starting from 1989, it was celebrated first informally and then, since 1991, formally as Georgia’s official Independence Day. February 25, on the other hand, became a tragic date, marking the loss of independence and the beginning of the Soviet era.

With the return of May 26, the idea of independent statehood itself made a comeback. The motto – “long live independent Georgia!” – had been heard at political demonstrations since the fall of 1988, but on April 4, 1989, at a protest in front of the Parliament (then the House of Government), a massive demonstration began with independence as its main demand. This demonstration, in which all then-active informal organizations participated, was eventually dispersed on April 9 by the Special Units of the Soviet Army, in an operation that killed 21 protesters. This day is a turning point in Georgia’s recent history: the government of the Georgian SSR was replaced; the national movement established itself as the most powerful force in the country’s political life, and independent statehood became the explicit goal of the national movement (Ronald Grigor Suny, 1994, p. 322; Jones, 2013, p. 28).

April 9 was even more important as a watershed moment in Georgia’s politics of memory. On the one hand, it became the day of national mourning and the struggle for freedom; on the other hand, the trauma of April 9 inspired the revival of the notion of Georgia as a “martyr”, which would later become the main leitmotif of the new national identity (cf. Zaal Andronikashvili, 2012, p. 73-112). Zviad Gamsakhurdia played a pivotal role in this development. He referred to those who had died on April 9 as “martyrs” and to the “blood that had been spilled” as “sacrificial.” From then on, April 9, with its undertones of martyrdom, became a permanent part of Gamsakhurdia’s political rhetoric. It was by no means an accident that in 1991, April 9 was chosen for the formal declaration of independence. With this choice of date, the notion of sacrifice became entangled with the restoration of independent statehood. Gamsakhurdia’s speech in parliament, announcing the restoration of independence, ended with these words: “It is of deep symbolic importance that Georgia’s independence has been declared on April 9, because it was on this day that Georgia’s fate was sealed. The souls of the martyrs of April 9 look down on us from the sky and delight in God’s heavenly light – their dream has come true; the wish of the Georgian nation has been fulfilled! Long live independent Georgia, may it be blessed by God!” (Gamsakhurdia, 2013, p. 335).

Gamsakhurdia, whose rhetorical style was full of religious symbolism, is the primary author of the original political narrative of independent Georgia. His narrative was messianic in form and nationalistic in content. It determined, to a significant extent, the nature of the politics of memory in Georgia to this day. “Our way is the way of the martyr – the way of the Christ, the way of the crown of thorns, of crucifixion and of inevitable resurrection!” This often-repeated articulation gave voice to the emerging culture of memory. A particular figure appeared in Gamsakhurdia’s narrative, which became both the main character of the narrative and the key determinant of the myth-motorics<sup>2</sup> of memory. It is Saint George (“Saint Giorgi” in Georgian) – a resurrected martyr who has returned to punish his torturer (Maisuradze, 2021, p. 48). The term “Giorgians”, meant to function as a synonym for “Georgians”, is also of Gamsakhurdia’s authorship (Gamsakhurdia, 1991, p. 208). After his death – officially ruled a suicide – which followed the military coup that overthrew him in 1992, his repatriation to Georgia and his reburial in the Mtatsminda Pantheon in 2007 and President Saakashvili’s declaration of Gamsakhurdia as a national hero in 2013, Gamsakhurdia himself became a part of the narrative and culture of memory.

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2 Jan Assmann uses “myth-motorics” as an umbrella term for signifying those figures of memory which carry the capacity for normative and constructive influence. They generate self-images and direct collective action (Assmann, Jan, 1999, p. 168).

# TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY – A NEW SYMBOL OF THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia began its life as an independent political subject with civil and ethnic antagonisms. A new zone of conflict emerged in Tskhinvali in December 1990, when the Parliament of Georgia dissolved the Autonomous Region of South Ossetia. In August 1992, war erupted in Abkhazia and, at the same time, tensions between Gamsakhurdia's supporters and state forces escalated into an armed conflict in Samegrelo. With the fall of Sokhumi in 1993, Georgia lost control of Abkhazia. A large portion of Abkhazia's ethnically Georgian population fled as refugees.

The conflicts that were ignited in the Autonomous Region of South Ossetia and the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia were classified as ethnic conflicts, while collective memory of these developments blamed a third party – “the Kremlin”. Therefore, less attention has been paid to the precipitating factors that appeared in the Georgian public's imagination that helped spark the conflict. The rising ethnonationalism of the late 1980s meant a clear worsening of attitudes towards “ethnic minorities.” Ethnic minorities were often referred to as the Kremlin's “fifth column”, especially in discussions related to minority rights. Conflicts emerged specifically in regions with non-Georgian ethnonationalist movements. In the Autonomous Region of South Ossetia it was the Ossetian popular front – Adamon Nykhas. In Abkhazia it was the Aidgylara movement. Ossetian and Abkhaz ethnonationalists collided with their Georgian counterpart and the collision led to armed conflict.

The ideological underpinnings of these ethnic conflicts are to be found in the politics of memory. As early as 1988, the Georgian press, which had come under the influence of the national movement, already featured publications that referred to the Autonomous Republic and the Autonomous Region as “minefields on the Georgian body”, planted by the USSR to nurture separatist sentiment in Georgia. The national movement addressed the problem of the autonomous regions with its own version of historiographic narratives. “South Ossetia” was replaced with “Samachablo” – a toponym introduced by Gamsakhurdia (Gelaschwili, 1993, p. 34). In March of 1989, and in response to an Abkhaz national assembly held in Lykhny, at which Abkhazia's demand to secede from Georgia was formally declared, political demonstrations began in Tbilisi, denouncing “Apsua Separatists” (Jones, 2012, p.45). In a speech delivered at one of these gatherings, Zviad Gamsakhurdia articulated what can be understood as a new paradigm of historical memory which shaped all subsequent understandings of the Georgian-Abkhaz ethnic conflict: “Historically, no Abkhaz nation existed.” Gamsakhurdia declared. “‘Abkhazia’ was a name given to western Georgia and Abkhazians were western Georgians. Primmordial, Christian, Georgian Abkhazians do not exist anymore. But the name “Abkhaz” is

incorrectly applied to the Apsua tribe. The “Apsua” – the “Apsar” – are a north Caucasian tribe of Adygean origin. We are not against self-determination by any tribe, as long as it strives to become a nation within its historical territory in North Caucasia. If these tribes recognize as much, we will support them, so long as they do right unto history – return our land to us and take abode wherever they came from.<sup>3</sup>

The Abkhaz-Georgian conflict did not originate in 1989. It was an outcome that had been in the making for decades (Toria, Malkhaz, 2015, p. 53-56). What’s more, historiographical polemics – more specifically, the dispute over who is native to Abkhazia and, therefore, who is entitled to its land – played an important part in the process. According to one view voiced by Pavle Ingorokva in his historical-philological work *Giorgi Merchule*, the population of the Medieval Kingdom of Abkhazia was ethnically Georgian, while modern Abkhazians, the “Apsua”, came to reside in modern-day Abkhazia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The book was met with furious criticism among Abkhaz civil society, which perceived Ingorokva’s book as an insult to their national sentiment and an attempt to deprive Abkhazians of their right to their land. It was this hypothesis – which had never been scientifically recognized – that Gamsakhurdia endorsed and popularized in 1989. In fact, he turned it into a paradigmatic view in Georgian historical memory – a view according to which only ethnic Georgians were native to Abkhazia.

On September 27, 1993, Eduard Shevardnadze made a historic speech. In it he said that Georgia had been defeated in a war with Russia and that Abkhazia is a territory occupied by Russia. With this statement, the Georgian side refused to recognize Abkhazia as a side in the conflict. Abkhazia’s de facto independence would henceforth be etched into Georgian political and historical memory as “an occupied territory.”

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3 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pe4QP3\\_u3WY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pe4QP3_u3WY)

# THE DARK 1990s AND THE RISE OF THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

The early 1990s brought so many simultaneous catastrophes that the period entered Georgia's collective memory as a dark spot, associated only with destruction, defeat and abject poverty. Only one mnemonic formula survives from this era: "Remember Abkhazia!"

Circumstances changed in 1995, when Georgia ratified a new constitution, introduced a national currency (Georgian Lari) and held presidential and parliamentary elections, in which Eduard Shevardnadze and his party – Citizens' Union of Georgia – emerged victorious. First attempts at articulating a new politics of memory were made as early as at Shevardnadze's two-part inauguration. The first part of the ceremony was held in front of the Parliament, while the second part took place at the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral. With this symbolic backdrop, threads were weaved between the ceremony and the place where the last Georgian kings (Kings of Kartli and Kakheti) were crowned and buried. It was also an act that established the Church as an institution that legitimizes political power. From this day on, it became customary for Georgia's presidents and others in high office to attend religious ceremonies.

Construction at the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi – the new religious center for independent Georgia – also began in 1995. Three presidents would later take credit for the project: Shevardnadze, under whose watch the project was initiated; Saakashvili, who was president when construction was completed, and Ivanishvili, who revealed, in his campaign in the run-up to the 2012 elections, that he had sponsored the undertaking. In these circumstances, the Holy Trinity Cathedral became a seat of supra-partisan power.

Shevardnadze not only laid the foundation of the close formal relationship between the Church and the state, but he also enshrined the relationship in law. In 2002, the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian state reached an agreement to include in Georgia's constitution an article recognizing "the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia." This "outstanding role" was used to justify increasingly more generous financial support and benefits the Church received from the state. But the symbolic meaning of this constitutional article, which is related to historical memory, was even more significant than the material support it helped mobilize (Andronikashvili, 2016, p. 260). The "outstanding role" of the Church was enshrined, through the Constitution, in the collective memory, which fed the rise of the Church's authority and influence.

The increasing prominence of the Church in the Shevardnadze years (1995-2003) served, first and foremost, to strengthen Shevardnadze's own legitimacy. Shevardnadze, who had come to power as a result of a coup against an elected government, was haunted by insecurities regarding the legitimacy of his presidency. Upon arrival in Tbilisi

from Moscow (March 7, 1992), he visited Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II and was christened as an Orthodox Christian. Both Ilia II and his Church would remain his devoted supporters and the constitutional agreement was the price Shevardnadze paid for their support.

The main concern of the politics of memory of this period is the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity ("Remember Abkhazia!"). It is this context that explains the erection of the statue of David the Builder (1089-1125) – the king associated with the unification of Georgia – on Republic Square in downtown Tbilisi in 1997. The second concern is the search of Georgia's place on the international stage. It too would be based on notions of historical memory – Georgia as a crossroads between Europe and Asia, an outpost on the "silk road" – the symbol of the connections between the country and the world. This line of thinking culminated in a 1999 speech by Zurab Zhvania, the Speaker of Parliament, in Strasbourg: "I am Georgian. And therefore, I am European", Zhvania declared at the Council of Europe. In Georgia of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Europe came to denote not only a political direction, but also a site of historical memory.



# THE ROSE REVOLUTION AND “EARLIEST EUROPEANS”

No government has devoted as much effort and time to the politics of memory as that of Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM). The announcement of the results of the 2003 parliamentary elections – according to which Shevardnadze’s Citizens’ Union of Georgia had won – led to massive protests, which ended in Shevardnadze’s resignation and the so called “Rose Revolution” on November 23. This revolution then became an “origin myth” of the new government. Saakashvili’s entire oeuvre in power consisted of staging this revolutionary myth. One of Tbilisi’s central squares became the Rose Revolution Square (it was renamed in 2018 and is now known as the First Republic Square). The square had been built in 1983 and Soviet authorities had called it Republic Square. It was intended to host Soviet parades, but subsequently it became a locus of anti-Soviet demonstrations. Therefore, the square became a site of memory, commemorating both the Soviet era and the struggle for independence. In Saakashvili’s politics of memory, “revolution” replaced the “republic”. The Rose Revolution symbolized a final rupture with the Soviet past, the break associated with notions of progress and modernization. But it also established the narrative of Georgians as “earliest Europeans” – a narrative replete with nationalist pathos, which strove to primordialize Georgia. This primordialization, in turn, was intended to support Georgia’s efforts to attain a special place within the Western political space (Maisuradze, 2018, p. 48). With this goal in mind, the UNM embarked on a project of institutional, symbolic, iconographic, and discursive production, which fueled a rapidly advancing politics of memory that became one of the central preoccupations of the new government.

The replacement of Georgia’s state heraldry and insignia – the flag, the coat of arms and the national anthem – was the first order of business. On January 14, 2004, a new flag of five crosses, presented as having medieval origins and serving before its promotion, as the flag of the UNM, replaced the tricolor that Georgia had inherited from the First Republic (1918-1921) (Mindadze, Iva, 2005, p.66). In April of the same year, the national anthem of the First Republic – “Dideba” (Glory) – was replaced with the new “Tavisupleba” (Freedom). In October, Georgia adopted a new coat of arms, which depicted lions, a crown and an icon of Saint George slaying the dragon – an image also inspired by medieval monarchic symbolism. An inscription was added below the icon, which read “Strength in Unity.”

One of the most urgent and most problematic issues that Saakashvili’s government inherited from its predecessor was the “restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity.” In 2003, Shevardnadze had already created a special committee devoted to this problem.<sup>4</sup> Saakashvili expanded this policy direction and attempted to nurture and solidify the pop-

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4 <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/33784?publication=0>

ular military-patriotic sentiment. In 2005, Saakashvili's executive order created "Patriot Camps", with the aim of instilling new national values into holidaying students. One of these values was the figure of the "national hero" – a value that, with the establishment of the formal Order of National Hero, took on an institutional form.

But the production of the image of the national hero was an even more important development than its formal institutionalization. This image, as the "original", would serve as the embodiment of the idea of heroism. The historical figure chosen to epitomize it was Kakutsa Cholokashvili (1888-1930) – an officer in the Russian imperial army, Georgia's deputy Minister of Defence in 1919, an anti-Soviet guerrilla and one of the instigators of the 1924 Uprising. Cholokashvili's portraits appeared in national movement demonstrations starting as early as in 1988 and he started to feature prominently in collective historical memory in that same decade. In 2005, Cholokashvili's remains were repatriated to Georgia, where a two-day theatrical ceremony accompanied his reburial in the Mtatsminda Pantheon. Later his portrait was chosen to adorn the 200-lari banknote released in 2007.

In 2004, Saakashvili's executive order fully rehabilitated Zviad Gamsakhurdia. In 2007, his remains were repatriated to Georgia and re-buried at the Mtatsminda Pantheon. In 2013 he was posthumously awarded the Order of National Hero.

Along with Gamsakhurdia, Saakashvili also returned the figure of Saint George to the politics of memory. In 2006, Saakashvili unveiled, on Tbilisi's central Freedom Square, a monument of Saint George slaying the dragon – an image that was to become the main political and cultural symbol of the country. It was named "the Freedom Monument." The monument, as well as the symbol of Saint George took on a new meaning in the context of the five-day war with Russia in August 2008. In a speech delivered on Freedom Square on September 1, 2008, Saint George appeared as a symbol of victory over Russian imperialism. "Russian imperialism will be vanquished [...] the fate of the whole world is being decided here on Freedom Square under the watch of Saint George. [...] We are the nation of the Golden Fleece and of the Argonauts. We are a country of ancient civilization!"

The presentation of Georgia as an "ancient civilization", more specifically as an ancient European civilization, was a central component of Saakashvili's politics of memory. This narrative, together with its mythopoetic form and domestic and geopolitical connotations, was unveiled in the earliest days of Saakashvili's presidency. As early as in January 2004, Saakashvili addressed Javier Solana, the General Secretary of the United Nations, with these words: "Georgian people have proved that they are, by their nature and the nature of their action, a fully European people... We might be even more European, than older Europeans... There are older Europeans – Western Europe – and there are newer Europeans – Poland, Hungary... But there are also earliest Europeans, and that's us, Georgians."<sup>5</sup>

To solidify the notion of Georgia being an "earliest European civilization," Saakashvili deployed both mythical and historical figures, as well as the remains of *homo erectus* – named "Mzia" and "Zezva" – dating back 1.8 million years and discovered in Dmanisi through archeological excavations spanning the decade between 1991 and 2001 (Jones,

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5 ციტატა გოგი გვახარია ბლოგის – „რას ნიშნავს უძველესი ევროპელები“ – მიხედვით: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1533205.html>

2012, p. 5). In his 2007 annual report to the parliament, Saakashvili articulated his own version of the myth of “earliest Europeans”, in which he emphasized the key pillars of the new politics of memory: “Georgia is returning to its historical European family. Europeans first learned of Georgia as the birthplace of the Golden Fleece. Now Europeans should learn of Georgia as a cradle of earliest Europeans, which aspires to soon become a full member of the European family” (Saakashvili, 2007<sup>6</sup>).

In 2007, Saakashvili personally unveiled, in quick succession, monuments of Prometheus in Tbilisi and a monument of Medea in Batumi. The purpose of popularizing these figures, especially that of “Georgian” Medea, was to promote those figures of memory that would strengthen the myth of “earliest European” pedigree (Khalvashi, 2018, p. 1). At the same time, the “rewriting” of the Soviet past through the revision of historical memory began in earnest. The opening, in the building of the former “Museum of the Friendship of Nations” of the “Museum of Soviet Occupation” in 2006 was, in this regard, an important turning point. The museum depicted all of Soviet history as a story of occupation and resistance. The rewriting of history intensified after the war in 2008. In 2009, the Monument to Glory in Kutaisi, dedicated to World War II, was detonated with explosives. In its place, the new building of Georgia’s parliament was built. In 2010, Stalin’s last remaining monument in the center of Gori that had survived destalinization in 1956 was demolished. In the same year, Tbilisi opened a Monument to Glory on Heroes’ Square, dedicated to soldiers who had sacrificed their lives for the struggle against Soviet occupation and for the restoration of Georgia’s “territorial integrity.” The “Eternal flame” was ignited nearby, watched over by the honorary guard. Saakashvili’s aim in his politics of memory was to connect the 2008 war with Russia with Soviet occupation (Toria, Malkhaz, 2014, p. 316-336); the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia, the war of August 2008, and the Soviet invasion of 1921 were to be united with the entirety of Soviet past into a single whole. The coup against Gamsakhurdia and the civil war also became part of this history. Through reference to Saint George as a symbol of Georgia’s resistance to Russian-Soviet imperialism, Saakashvili connected his government with those of Gamsakhurdia and with the national movement. The myth of “earliest Europeans” invoked through heroic tales and figures of classical antiquity, can be seen in large part as a revival of Gamsakhurdia’s messianism. But this time, the narrative accommodated the principles of a free market economy and formed a part of Georgia’s revolutionary transformation as “westernization.”

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6 The speech is available at this link: <https://www.president.gov.ge/Files/ShowFiles?id=0d2119cd-37c3-4365-b36a-71d7e09ddfe7>

# GEORGIAN DREAM AND “NINE YEARS OF BLOODSHED”

With the UNM's defeat in the 2012 parliamentary elections and the coming to power of Georgian Dream (GD), Saakashvili's project came to end. GD's billionaire founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, consolidated all major parties in the opposition behind him and successfully capitalized on the growing discontent with Saakashvili's government. In its political struggle, GD found an ally in the most influential institution of the time – the Georgian Orthodox Church. Saakashvili's policy of rapid modernization and his radical neoliberal agenda, which included violent crackdown on dissent and widespread political repression, generated not just social and political problems, but also cultural antagonism. Despite his explicitly nationalist rhetoric (cf. Jones, 2012, p. 225-226), his policy of “Europeanization” and progress, as well as his cultural liberalism, was perceived, among a large part of the electorate – especially among those who had suffered because of UNM's reforms – as an attack on traditional values. The Church contributed to the spread of this sentiment in significant ways. An anti-liberal backlash and a narrative of “protecting traditional values” became even stronger than the social discontent and protest against violent political repression, creating the ideological basis of GD's rule.

But GD's only true achievement in memory politics is related not to notions of traditional values but concerns the UNM and Saakashvili's time in office – it is the rhetorical formula of “nine years of bloodshed”, which the GD effectively uses against the UNM – now a major force in the opposition – to this day. All of GD's intellectual resources are mobilized to denounce and defame its predecessor as a ruling party and its current political opponent.

During GD's time in office, the Georgian Orthodox Church has emerged as the main driving force behind the politics of memory. The first sign of this development was Ilia II's declaration in 2014, that May 17 would be the “Day of the Sanctity of the Family”. This served a single purpose. A year earlier, on May 17, 2013, a small group of activists had gathered to celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia in Tbilisi. A large crowd mobilized by the clergy confronted and violently dispersed the gathering. This act of violence was traumatic for a significant part of the Georgian society. The establishment of the “Day of the Sanctity of the Family” was the Patriarch's attempt to capture and appropriate this site of memory.

The parliament's decision in 2019 to ratify – through a simplified, expedited procedure – the government's initiative regarding the establishment of May 12 as the “Day of Georgia as the Abode of the Holy Mother” was, in many ways, even more revealing. An identical edict of the Holy Synod had been released on December 27, 2018. Thus, the parliament had essentially complied with and legislatively affirmed the will of the Church. The notion of Georgia being the “Abode of the Holy Mother” emerged with the creation of a unified Georgian state in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and had been revived in Ilia

Chavchavadze's poetic narratives in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It had also featured as an integral part of the nationalist rhetoric of the late 1980s. Its historical trajectory makes the notion a prominent site of Georgian national memory, but no political power before GD had attempted to turn it into a holiday. Most of the public, however, reacted with irony. In its 10<sup>th</sup> year in power, GD's only truly successful project in its politics of memory is still the presentation of Saakashvili's period in power as "nine years of bloodshed".

# RECENT AND DISTANT PAST FROM THE LENS OF MEMORY POLITICS

Two central and continuous tendencies can be identified in the history of instrumentalization of the politics of memory in Georgia since independence: the first concerns short-term historical memory and its goal is to defame and denounce political predecessors – both individuals and the political system – of the ruling power. This tendency is a product of Georgia's peculiar political transformations. Following the armed ousting of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze referred to Gamsakhurdia's rule as "provincial fascism." Such a classification served, first and foremost, to justify the coup and to present Shevardnadze as a champion of democracy. This strategy gave birth to a tradition of total discreditation of preceding governments by acting powers and its goal was to prove the superiority of whoever deployed it. The tendency continued with both Saakashvili and the GD: Shevardnadze was often depicted, following the Rose Revolution, as the main obstacle on Georgia's path towards progress; the GD, which claimed the "restoration of justice" as its chief political goal in 2012, directed all its propaganda resources towards demonstrating the unjust and sinister nature of Saakashvili's rule. The tendency is alive and well to this day.

The role of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has managed to become the most influential institution in the country – and thus a driving force in Georgia's politics of memory – must be underlined separately. Out of all the official holidays in Georgia, nine are religious and only seven are civil. The nine official holidays are supplemented with more religious holidays on the Church calendar, which are genuine artifacts of memory politics.<sup>7</sup> Starting with Ilia Chavchavadze, the Georgian Orthodox Church has used canonization to dominate the politics of memory and to establish and spread its own versions of history. In this sense, its gaze is directed towards the distant past, forming the second major tendency in Georgia's politics of memory. It is also locked in a struggle of competitive advantage with the state and Georgia's political elites, whose views do not always coincide with those of the Church.

The second tendency is thus related to the distant past and national identity. It is common to refer to Georgia as "ancient" – a trend that has been borrowed from the Soviet culture of memory and that has remained unchanged throughout the post-Soviet period. On the one hand, it is a part of the "counter-present" myth, which tries to compensate for the ills of the present with past glory. In the words of Jan Assmann, "mythology is that which sheds luster on the present and the future" (Assmann, 1999, p.78).

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7 "They day of hundred thousand martyrs" (November 13) is a particularly revealing example. The day, which is commemorated with a religious procession in Tbilisi, is related to a 1227 massacre perpetrated by Jalal al-Din Mangburni.



An exclusively negative view of Soviet history, along with the tendency to glorify the distant past, is still an unchanging thread. In Georgia, independence begins with a radical break from the Soviet Union and from Georgia's Soviet past. Therefore, everything "Soviet" is burdened with negative meaning. "Soviet" became synonymous with imperial and exploitative, with poor quality, backwardness, and regress. The association has been used by all post-Soviet governments, as a negative rhetorical ploy, to distance themselves with the past, and to discredit political opponents.

In summary, the politics of memory in independent Georgia has served the emergence of a new national identity. This new identity includes notions of independent statehood and key pillars of foreign policy. European aspirations and a radical rupture with the country's Soviet past are the central determinants of this new image of the Georgian nation-state.

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