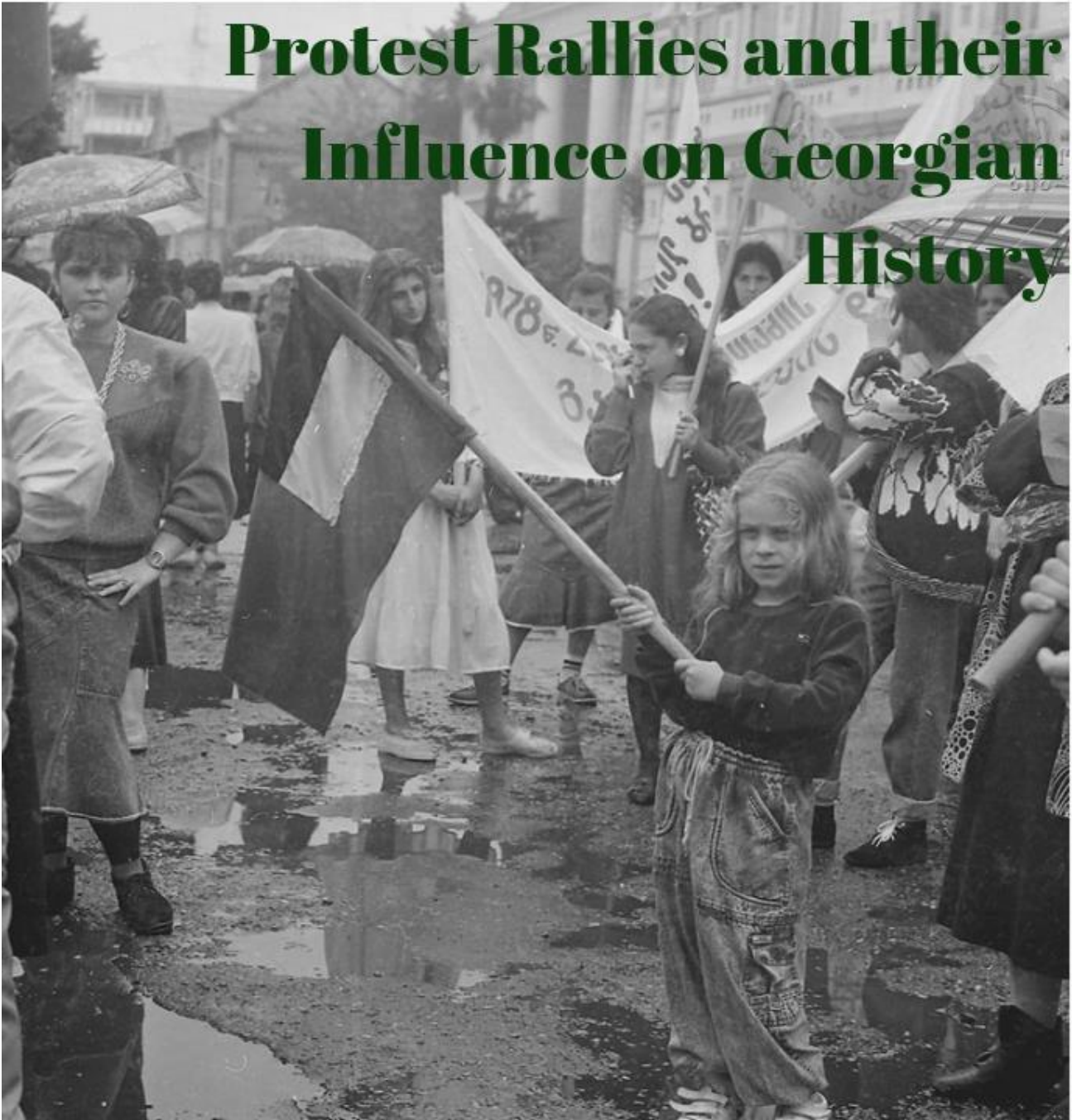


# 1989:

## Protest Rallies and their Influence on Georgian History



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## **1989: Protest Rallies and their Influence on Georgian History**

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**The opinions expressed in this report are the author's own and may not reflect the opinion of  
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### Abstract

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The present paper provides an overview of developments preceding the protest rallies of 9 April 1989 in chronological order and their symbolic characteristics. The research aims to provide an account of the protest rallies of 9 April 1989 through the theory of protest rituals and explain the respective ritualistic or symbolic characteristics, as well as their connections with the historic context. For the purpose of the research, 9 April is portrayed as a sequence of events rather than a specific date.

**Key words:** 9 April, rally, gathering, demonstration, protest, 1989, press, Soviet Union, Abkhazia, Georgia, Tbilisi.

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## Introduction

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In an interview<sup>1</sup> published by *Al Jazeera* on November 10, 2018, entitled 'My Soviet Scar: Confronting Architecture of Oppression', Georgian photographer Yuri Mechitov says that participants of the rally on April 9, 1989, died of asphyxiation and that the Soviet army had not intended to kill anyone. By all accounts, the statement came as a surprise for a journalist too. Mechitov's statement stirred harsh resentment among the wider public, especially among the youth of the country. Thirty years after the tragedy of April 9, anxiousness seems to dominate public sentiment. Members of the Anti-Occupation Movement<sup>2</sup> gathered in front of Mechitov's house and raised anti-occupation symbols and donned a list of victims from the April 9 tragedy<sup>3</sup>. The photographer was denounced as a traitor<sup>4</sup>.

The next day, a friend of mine sent me some messages posted in a social network slandering Mechitov as traitor. Some had gone as far as to demand his expulsion from the country or called for the isolation of the photographer.

"What in fact happened on April 9?" I asked my friend. "I do not know," he answered. After three days Mechitov released a video<sup>5</sup> statement: "My beloved people, I am shaken to the core by the fact that my statements have caused such pain to my compatriots. I did not mean to hurt anybody but that is what has happened." Mechitov's apology appeased the public's resentment but also raised more questions as to what actually happened on April 9 and why this day bears such significance for Georgians.

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## Protest marches in Soviet Georgia and the aftermath of the Second World War

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A secret report on the 'Cult of Personality and its Consequences' presented at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union held on February 25, 1956,<sup>6</sup> condemning Stalin's cult caused a frenzy and a wave of protests in Tbilisi. Stalin's ethnic Georgian background also contributed to fueling the protest. According to eyewitness

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<sup>1</sup> The Soviet Scar: Legacy of USSR Architecture in Georgia; <https://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/europe/2018/11/soviet-scar-confronting-architecture-oppression-181108111743171.html>

<sup>2</sup> Anti-occupation movement. Available in Georgian at: [http://www.deoccupation.ge/about\\_idea](http://www.deoccupation.ge/about_idea)

<sup>3</sup> A demonstration against photographer Yuri Mechitov – protesting pro-Russian statements. A video aired by KavkasiaTV. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgMK1Rxu7Ro>

<sup>4</sup> 'This is a 100 per cent treason against the country especially against the backdrop of the current situation.' A comment made by an internet user, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Yuri Mechitov's apology. Available in Georgian at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BISil9FksFs>

<sup>6</sup> 'The Ministry of Communications – 9 March 1956'. Available in Georgian at: <http://archive.ge/ka/blog/45>

accounts, demands for Georgia's independence were also voiced at the protest march.<sup>7</sup> The demonstration was dispersed following the orders of the Soviet authorities and claimed 27 lives. Despite the resistance from the Soviet government, Stalin's museum was nevertheless opened in the small Georgian town of Gori in 1957.<sup>8</sup> Some of the architects of the April 1989 rally, which included Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava, were among the participants of the March, 1956 protests.

In 1977, 21 years after the March 1956 events, a decision was made to amend the Soviet constitution and those of the Soviet Socialist Republics to reflect a process of cohesion of the 'Soviet socialist nation'. Among other things, the process of cohesion meant the introduction of Russian as the state language of the USSR. This meant that Georgian would no longer enjoy the status of the state language. The decision triggered wide-scale protest in Soviet Georgia on April 12, 1978. On April 14, students who had taken to the streets in mass protest, moved from the state university area to the government palace (now the Georgian Parliament). In his address, Eduard Shevardnadze, then First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia (1972-1985)<sup>9</sup>, announced that<sup>10</sup> after considering the views of the public and those participating in the protest, they made a respective decision. The status of Georgian as the state language was subsequently sustained in the new constitution. Since 1990, April 14 has been celebrated as Georgian Language Day. Participation in the demonstration in protection of the mother tongue contributed to the awakening of the Georgian national identity and created a sense of shared history among the participants. Students and other groups participating in the demonstration established the first precedent of a victory in matters of national importance.

However, the fight to protect the Georgian language did not end in 1978, rather it had become part of the daily routine. An article entitled "Our Georgian Language – Part of the Everyday" published in 1989,<sup>11</sup> deals with the introduction of the Georgian language as a working language in industrial establishments:

"An item that has recently appeared on our agenda stands out for its significance and unexpectedness among issues that have never been discussed by a party organization in the trade sector. This agenda item concerns the purity and inviolability of the mother tongue."

The author of the article notes that agencies overseeing the trade sector had never looked into matters of 'purity of the mother tongue'. More specifically, the article stresses on stylistic and grammar errors. In addition, the author raises concerns over negligence with respect to Georgian:

"Any order, written directive or other documents are issued in Russian."

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<sup>7</sup> The March 1956 tragedy. Available in Georgian at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1979067.html>

<sup>8</sup> Photolibary: The Stalin Museum. Available at: <https://www.qartli.ge/ge/akhali-ambebi/article/4851-%20fotomatianestalinissakhlmuzeumi>

<sup>9</sup> Eduard Shevardnadze – the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party (1972 –1985), foreign minister of the Soviet Union (1985 – 1995) and the second president of independent Georgia (1995– 2003)

<sup>10</sup> Eduard Shevardnadze, developments of 14 April 1978. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fo8RORXaNFY>

<sup>11</sup> The evening newspaper of the city committee of the Georgian Communist Party and the Soviet of People's Deputies Tbilisi, N009 (10827), 1989, P. 3

Therefore, the Georgian language had turned into a venue of consolidation around the national project. Shortly after, in March of 1988, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic issued an edict (№3(573)) on Rules for Organizing and Conducting Gatherings, Meetings, Street Marches and Demonstrations (39; 40; 41)<sup>12</sup> (Utskebebi, 1988). The edict also mentions 'public buildings' which would also be opened for gatherings. Following the events of 1978, the next mass protest in held Georgia took place at Tbilisi hippodrome (one of the designated venues for demonstrations and gatherings), under the leadership of the Ilia Chavchavadze Society on November 5, 1988.<sup>13</sup> Participants of the hippodrome demonstration had several demands, including the termination of the oppression and bullying of Georgian soldiers in the Soviet army. At the same time, issues related to southern Georgia, as well as the autonomous the republics of Adjara and Abkhazia were also voiced. On November 11-12, hotbeds of unrest sprang up in Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In response to these developments, Mikhail Gorbachev initiated a series of amendments to the Soviet constitution. The amendments repealing the right of the Soviet republics to secede from the USSR snowballed into a rally of protesters organized at Tbilisi hippodrome on November 12, 1988 led by the National Democratic Party<sup>14</sup> and were followed by a hunger sit-in in front of the Supreme Soviet on November 22. Demonstrations were also held beyond Tbilisi in Kutaisi and Batumi with a demand to amend Articles 108 and 119 of the Soviet constitution.<sup>15</sup> In his interview, then foreign minister of the USSR Eduard Shevardnadze said<sup>16</sup> that he phoned Gorbachev to advise him on drafting a written appeal promising protesters that 'their demands would be discussed and considered'. The same demonstration proclaimed Kakutsa Cholakashvili<sup>17</sup> as the symbol of a soldier fighting against the Soviet occupation. A three-color Georgian flags that protesters waved<sup>18</sup> revived the memory of the first Georgian republic of 1918. Protesters also held crosses<sup>19</sup> symbolizing the salvation of the world by Jesus Christ in Christianity. In addition to symbols, a specific language, rather radical, was also used at the meeting. During the hunger sit-ins of 1988, Merab Kostava told the participants that 'readiness for sacrifice was a positive thing'.<sup>20</sup> By saying this, he was implying that those who are capable of making sacrifices, deserve to be free, an idea of freedom borrowed from Hegel's works and Christ's teachings.

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<sup>12</sup> Utskebebi - Newsletter of the Supreme Soviet of Georgia of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia, N3, 1988. Available in Georgian at:

[http://www.dspace.nplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/290282/1/Umaglesi\\_Sabchos\\_Uwyebebi\\_1988\\_N3.pdf](http://www.dspace.nplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/290282/1/Umaglesi_Sabchos_Uwyebebi_1988_N3.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ilia Chavchavadze Society, a right-wing-center leaning party founded in 1987. Available in Georgian at:

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/gwdict/index.php?a=term&d=35&t=80>

<sup>14</sup> National Democratic Party. Available in Georgian at:

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/gwdict/index.php?a=term&d=35&t=42>

<sup>15</sup> Batumi, 20 November 1988. Photo credit: Ucha Okropiridze. Available at:

<http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/28955>

<sup>16</sup> The mystery of 9 April, an interview with Eduard Shevardnadze. Available at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GA\\_v3sNjlns](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GA_v3sNjlns)

<sup>17</sup> A demonstration at Rustaveli Avenue . Photo credit: Ucha Okropiridze. Available at:

<http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/26953>

<sup>18</sup> In a televised interview on 100th anniversary of the first Georgian republic, a head of the state council on heraldry, Mamuka Gongadze noted that 'this flag is erected in the occidental part of the European civilization – in Sevastopol, Sukhumi and Tbilisi. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/news/heraldikis-sabcho-iniciativit-gamodis-pirveli-respublikis-droshasa-da-gerbs-istoriuli-memkvidreobis-statusi-mienichos/>

<sup>19</sup> A rally held in front of the Government Palace in November 1988. Photo credit Ucha Okropiridze. Available at:

<http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/29007>

<sup>20</sup> A hunger sit-in takes off at Rustaveli Avenue in November 1988. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVHHijLMHk>



A banner was created with the slogan reading: 'Those who are against the national liberation movement are traitors of their homeland!'<sup>21</sup>

Against the backdrop of these sentiments and, as a result of protest demonstrations of 1988, the new draft constitution was put on hold, and on November 29, 1988, the demonstrations stopped. National and civic groups formed amidst the political developments of the 1980s managed to forge new forms of protest rallies and demonstrations. By the 1980s, the protest rally had become the highest political act for citizens of Soviet Georgia, and an act that they continued to undertake beyond Georgia reclaiming its independence. With such a political manifestation, the Georgian nation attempted to legitimize and construct their own identity.

"We were born and formed out of meetings, as a political generation, as a certain species of Zoon Politikon who has chosen a meeting as a medium for expressing views, political will and passions,"<sup>22</sup> noted Giorgi Maisuradze on the developments of 1988. Therefore, the reading of Georgia's recent history in light of protest marches and rallies, is the course that will shape considerably our understanding and assessment of the country's recent history. Even though the events of April 9, 1989, took place in Soviet Georgia, they represent the invaluable source for studying protest behavior in independent Georgia because of their distinct form, content or outcome. It is likely that the protests of April of 1989 were driven by these victories and helped awaken the feelings of Georgia's national identity. The symbols, banners, slogans and expressions used by the speakers reiterate the form of the protest rallies organized in Soviet Georgia. As a result, the street demonstration becomes the key medium for expressing a protest or a standpoint accompanied by symbols and attributes retrieved from national resistance movements and fights throughout history. Symbols and slogans used in demonstrations reflect the sentiment and feelings of the gathered pertaining to the past, the present (the Soviet political system) and the future. The first democratic republic of Georgia, historical figures, Soviet occupation and Christianity, routinely referred to by participants of the demonstrations, are closely interlinked, cementing a nationalist narrative acceptable by the wider public and used for the mobilization of large groups.

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### Theoretical framework

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The main focus of the present research is Tbilisi's protest demonstrations of April 1989 – especially those held April 4-9. However, it is beyond the scope of this research to provide detailed information about the bloody events that transpired. Rather, this paper attempts to explain the protest rallies of April 4-8 in light of a theory of a protest ritual. Understanding this ritual as an analytical category goes back to the 19th century when theoreticians began using rituals to describe religions. Functionalists and researchers of symbolic anthropology used rituals to better understand societies and cultures. Ritual is a critical moment when several different social and cultural forces come into play. Examples may involve the integration of faith and behavior such as chaos and order, the individual and group, tradition and change and so on. Rituals are constructed by means of images existing in a culture and mental

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<sup>21</sup> A November 1988 demonstration in front of the Government Palace. Photo credit: Ucha Okropiridze. Available at: <http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/29247>

<sup>22</sup> Giorgi Maisuradze: Closed Society and its Guards. Tbilisi, 2011. P. 5 [Available in Georgian]

patterns. Rituals differ from religious beliefs, symbols, attributes or myths (behavior and thought). Myths, symbols and faith encourage behavior but they are not themselves a behavior. Ritual and faith are interrelated. However, they can be separated from each other: "There may be a belief without a ritual, but there will be no ritual without faith." The second pattern that makes ritual structurally different from a mental category of faith, is a behavior or an action. The separation of faith and ritual from thoughts and actions represents an important aspect of the research. However, on the other hand, ritual is the premise that integrates thought and behavior; a mechanism which brings together forces of different trajectories. Constructing meaning is the process of thinking encouraged by symbols, which, in turn triggers behavior. Ritual integrates 'our thought' and 'their actions'. Finally, ritual represent both a fusion of action and thought, as well as a process of their differentiation in the context, e.g. in a specific time and space. (Catherine Bell; 2009). Eric Hobsbawm uses a concept of ritualization to explain the invention of new traditions in the modern society. There are many meanings and uses for this term. However, for the purpose of this research, it stands for the process of replacing the sacred and symbols. According to a concept of collective action rituals, not only does the ritual express 'being here', but rather it is an action to be undertaken so that a group of individuals can develop 'into something' or transform into a unified and united legitimate organization. In this process, any sort of gathering, manifestation meeting or rally at which protest sentiments will be expressed, creates a feeling of unity and group solidarity. The continuity of protest demonstrations and marches charged with symbols creates sustainable connections between members of the group and the participants of these events, which is of particular importance in the process of shaping a collective identity. In addition, the permanent nature of assemblies and their symbolic manifestations have an indirect effect on shaping public opinion. Therefore, it may be seen as the 'symbolic framework that reigns as common sense' (David Laitin).

Herbert Blummer (1900 - 1987), who studied collective actions and social movements, developed a concept of *esprit de corps*, known today as collective identity (1946). Blummer identified three main characteristics:

1. Inter and intragroup relations, based on which these groups perceive each other as an enemy. In the process of the formation of collective identity, developing a set of values different from that of the 'rival' group is the key to establishing differences. The identification of a rival or an enemy strengthens solidarity ties and further cements intergroup relations ('us' and 'them', 'our' and the 'stranger').
2. Creating informal associations is a way to develop a shared consciousness of 'we'. Spaces and venues whereby group members can produce alternative cultural codes (newspapers, literacy circles etc.), are defined by various authors as 'safe spaces'.
3. A ritual act of ceremonial character may be manifested in mass meetings, marches and demonstrations. Herbert Blummer argues that memorable ceremonial actions contribute to the strengthening of the 'we' identity. Rituals are accompanied by symbolic attributes (slogans, flags, songs, banners and photos), which serve to strengthen collective identity. Blummer holds that rituals are the key mechanism that supports the creation of the social movement and the mobilization of groups and individuals.

### **What is a ritual?**

The definition of ritual in sociology is associated with Emile Durkheim, who makes reference to religion while defining ritual. Rituals encompass relationship between belief and practice, which eventually come together around the sacred. Participation in a ritual connects participants to one another, as well as to the group. Rituals represent a form of action which originates in the gathered and stimulates, strengthens or re-generates some sort of mental condition (Durkheim). Social solidarity is a critical condition for society to keep together, while



rituals are an integral part of this process. Rituals serve as an integrating mechanism for a society or a group.. Ultimately, Durkheim's definition of the ritual has an integrational function for a social body on a consensual level. Protest rituals stem from this definition. However, Kertzer argues that a ritual represents a "social act which is standardized and recurrent" (1988), and in which anything can serve as a symbol for its unity as well as that of its participants (Geertz, 1973).

Jesus Casquete (2003) defines a protest ritual as a recurrent symbolic performance staged by social movements, which aims to influence those in power and the public. (Buber; 1977). Symbolically charged rituals may be used to express one's own self, as well as for attaining an informal goal. Ritual acts are characterized by three main features: (1) symbolic and standardized social behavior, (2) a form of protest connecting old and new forms, and (3) cases of social disobedience that are qualified as protest rituals.

Contents and meanings manifested via protest rituals and through which individuals express their emotions may become a formality or a legitimized behavior. Therefore, lines between an individual and a group may disappear or become blurred (Buber, 1997). This may be considered the most powerful characteristic of the ritual. The process of creating/renewing new participants or identities during a protest is the very indirect function which makes the notion of a ritual important in this specific case. Rituals belong to a traditional behavior which is periodical and manifested in physical gatherings. Protest rituals take place at the same time and place and acquire particular significance. Kertzer argues that individuals are not performers of the ritual, but they also create one, which tends to change along the way (Kertzer, 1988). Protest rituals are accompanied by an emotion. If participants gather around negative emotions (anger, fear, injustice), they try to find positive equivalents to these emotions (solidarity, hope, unity). In a modern society, past experiences and a history of success play an important role during protest rituals. Thus, the past protest experiences of 1918, 1921, 1956, 1978 and 1988, influenced the April 1989 demonstration. Emile Durkheim argues that rituals contribute to the integrity of society. The main idea with respect to ritual behavior is that it creates solidarity among group members without a consent over values. However, a protest ritual is not just an act of solidarity. Rather, it is a social behavior forming a shared past and memory (Connerton, 1989). Therefore, groups who bear this history, form 'encompassing groups' (Margalit, 2000). There is no social act without the 'we' identity, the creation of which, requires the generation or renewal of symbols existing in a culture and shared through memory, culture or ideas in a society. Demonstration is a process whereby a group of people sharing a 'we' identity desire to influence those in power and public opinion. Therefore, symbols of widely shared ideas and their connection to shared memories provoke strong feelings among participants and ultimately unites them. Even though definitions of ritual and protest ritual do not imply a consent over values among participants, the consent is nevertheless forged by shared symbolic characteristics and recurrent physical acts.

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### Methodology

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The present research is based on the qualitative research method, more specifically, a content analysis including the study of newspapers, video and photo material, as well as in-depth

interviews with participants of the 1989 protest demonstrations or individuals associated with these demonstrations.

As part of the content analysis, two Soviet-Georgian newspapers were processed. *The Communist*<sup>23</sup> (April, 1989) and *Tbilis*<sup>24</sup>. The selected method aimed to provide an account of the developments in a chronological sequence as reported in the party press and summarize the vision that these newspapers offered to the public.

The second component of the context analysis is the attempt to analyze existing video materials. The materials available on the internet are fragmented and footage of the demonstrations are not timestamped. Nor are the identities of the speakers indicated in the captured footage. These gaps complicate the process of ascertaining factual circumstances for a researcher without a memory of these processes.

The third component of the context analysis consists of photo material with textual characteristics which include demands and slogans, as well as symbols associated with the demonstrations.

Finally, the last component of the methodology comprises semi-structured interviews with individuals who either participated in these processes or are bearers of the memories of April 1989 and consented to talk to the researcher.

These methods have been employed to construct a timeline of events and crosscheck the accuracy of the timeline.

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### Limitations of the research

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This research was conducted in February-April of 2019. The process included the collection of relevant newspaper articles, books, memoirs, photo and video materials, reaching out to respondents and obtaining their consent. In addition to the limited timeframe, persuading former participants of the demonstrations of April 1989 to speak on the issue presented huge challenges. It is beyond the scope of this research to analyze outcomes of the April tragedy or to provide an in-depth analysis of the dissident movement[s] of the 1980s.

### **Perestroika (1989)**

Developments in Soviet Georgia should not be seen as stand-alone episodes taking place in isolation from other Soviet republics. Rather, they were part of a unified process. After ascending to power, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Secretary General of the Central Committee of the USSR's Communist Party, embarked on transformative reforms widely known as Perestroika, which encompassed spheres of the economy, science, journalism and foreign

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<sup>23</sup> A periodical under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, Supreme Soviet of Georgia and the Council of Ministers.

<sup>24</sup> A joint evening newspaper of Tbilisi City Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia and the Council of People's Deputies.

relations. The radical transformation consisted of several phases with Glasnost and democratization being part of the process. The period from 1985 to 1987 saw anti-alcohol and anti-corruption measures, as well as attempts to consolidate control over the quality of products. The process also envisaged the upgrade and modernization of workplaces. The next phase was designed as a period of transition (1988 – 1990) towards the autonomy of enterprises (Stephen F. Cohen, Katrina Vanden Heuvel; 1991). Soviet authorities hoped that Perestroika would bring prosperity and wellbeing to Soviet citizens. Party newspapers of the 1980s regularly published articles on ‘transparency lessons’ and the importance of democratization. The year 1989 was also part of the transformation and renewal process launched by Gorbachev in 1985 in response to existing crises and challenges. Failed plans, geological and seismic disasters in some Soviet republics, and the huge losses and costs sustained by the Afghan War snowballed into a heavy burden for the Soviet economy.

An article published in the January 5, 1989 n5 issue of *Tbilisi* newspaper<sup>25</sup> under the title ‘Transparency Lessons’, reports on the increased social activism among the youth:

“We are delighted to see social activism among our youth. Just overnight and in front of our eyes the youth have shed their apathy and engaged in a revolutionary transformation and established democratic norms with great zest.”<sup>26</sup>

According to articles published in newspapers of that time, reforms aimed at democratization and transformation, as well as greater transparency, would lift the burden of production or other crises of the past years off the shoulders of Soviet citizens. An article entitled “The Year of Active Action”<sup>27</sup> touches on the importance of “mass engagement and participation”, and cites “extremism-prone individuals who have become active” and who are “least concerned with the fate of people of the Republic, rather they are seeking to accommodate their personal ambitions and show off with their undeserved authority.” Thus, the official Soviet narrative of Perestroika aims to marginalize reactionist sentiment built on crises, labeling them “anti-Soviet” and “anti-Communist”. The article slams “self-proclaimed leaders Gamsakhurdia, Kostava, Chanturia and others, who organized sanctioned and unsanctioned demonstrations and” “who seized platforms and microphones giving an opportunity to speak to themselves ... or those who they favor”. During the decisive fourth year in a five-year transformation plan, Gorbachev initiated reforms that had failed to effectively respond to the developments taking place in the Soviet republics. Gorbachev’s ‘programmatic directives’ set two goals for scientists and teachers working in the republics: “To actively participate in accelerating scientific-technical progress” and to “raise youth with adequate knowledge and aspirations in line with the era”. In conjunction with highlighting Perestroika reforms, the January issues of newspapers draw reader attention to unsanctioned meetings: ‘leaders’ openly voiced anti-Communist slogans: “Georgia for Georgians!”, “Long live Georgia’s Independence!” and such blasphemous slogans as “Let the blood spill!”, “Terror to terror!” and “No to demographic expansion!”.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The evening newspaper of the city committee of the Georgian Communist Party and the Soviet of People’s Deputies Tbilisi

<sup>26</sup> Tbilisi newspaper, 5 January 1989, P. 2 [Available in Georgian]

<sup>27</sup> The Communist newspaper, the article published in issue No2, 1989 [Available in Georgian]

<sup>28</sup> The Communist newspaper, N3, 3 January 1989 [Available in Georgian]

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Review of the press: The period preceding April 1989

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In the period preceding the April 1989 demonstrations, articles, letters and pamphlets about Abkhazia appeared in the Georgian press. Akaki Bakradze's letter entitled 'Ignorance or Provocation?' was published<sup>29</sup> in the March 31 issue of *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*<sup>30</sup>. The letter was in response to a book titled 'In the World of Abkhazia's Architectural Monuments' published by Iskustvo Publishing, which provides an overview of the cultural and political history shared by Georgians and the Abkhaz. Bakradze points out Voronov, the book's author, for his sharply expressed tendency ('Georgia's historical province Abkhazia has nothing in common with Georgia') and the necessity of its justification.

On the last page of the same newspaper<sup>31</sup> is a small article entitled 'Shame!' authored by Tamar Daraselia and Giorgi Abashidze. The article highlights a case where a monument portraying Shota Rustaveli on Gagra's Rustaveli Avenue was damaged on December 8 (the author's note). The authors also talk about the changing of the names of medical-recreational facilities: "However, it may not come as a surprise for a town where medical-recreational facilities are given names such as 'Gruzia', 'Armenia', 'Skala', and 'Chaika', and where an enormous sign that reads 'Gruzia' written in Russian, overlooks the whole town."

On April 7, 1989, Nodar Lomouri published a letter 'How to the understand ethnonym 'Abkhaz'?'<sup>32</sup> In an introductory part of the letter the author indicates that the "Deep and scientific study of regions and ethno-political entities are of the utmost importance for a comprehensive and full research of the Georgian history. Abkhazia is among the intricate regions full of ethnic, political and cultural collisions." Lomouri mentions the scientific research about the history of Abkhazia and claims: "Firstly, we need to set aside all nationalist emotions, ambitions, and political constraints."

Examples from newspaper articles make signs of protest and controversial attitudes towards Abkhazia visible. In his letter, Bakradze speaks about the tight multifaceted history and relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia that is intentionally presented in a different light by "the third side". At the same time, pieces of news represent disrespect of Georgian heritage sites by Abkhazians, resulting in anger from Tbilisi. Moreover, the problem of "disrespect for cultural heritage sites"<sup>33</sup> is repeated by Zviad Gamsakhurdia during a demonstration in front of the government building on April 9, 1989. The third letter points out the importance of historical research without "any nationalistic sentiments and ambitions". At this point, the change of the status of Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia is already a well-known fact.

According to the participants of the April demonstrations everybody at these protests is univocal about "Abkhazian matters"<sup>34</sup>. However, independence and "anti-Soviet" demands are the matters of disagreement. Respectively, it is logical to ask: if during demonstrations there was a consensus about the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, but not about the demands

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<sup>29</sup> 'Literaturuli Sakartvelo' [Available in Georgian] N13 (2689), 31 March 1989 [Available in Georgian]

<sup>30</sup> 'Literaturuli Sakartvelo' [Available in Georgian]

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> 'Literaturuli Sakartvelo' [Available in Georgian] 7 April 1989 [Available in Georgian]

<sup>33</sup> Video of Mikheil Chiaureli; April 4; 1989.

<sup>34</sup> Newspaper "Communist", 7 April, 1989.

on the independence of Georgia, how come the second claim replaced the first one? It should also be pointed out that Abkhazian independence almost vanishes from the printed press.

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### How does the “9th of April” start then?

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“We regret to inform you about the tragic events that took place on the 9th of April in Tbilisi in the square of the government building. Anti-governmental manifestations resulted in unfortunate human casualties. 16 citizens died, some have been injured.”<sup>35</sup>

## Abkhazia

In March of 1989, in Likhni in the Gudauta municipality of Abkhazia – The “Likhni proclamation” (Likhni letter) was passed at the historic square of the place. The proclamation referred to the change of autonomous status of Soviet Abkhazia demanding the reinstitution of the 1921 status of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia. An assembly meeting was organized by the Aidgilaras organization, which was founded in 1988. Regular citizens, as well as the first secretary of the central committee of Abkhazia attended the meeting. The Soviet government and a couple of scientific institutions represented by the communist party regional committee leader of Abkhazia Boris Adleiba signed the proclamation.<sup>36</sup>

“The Abkhazian nation sees the Soviet Union as the only way of maintaining authenticity,”<sup>37</sup> noted Deputy of the High Committee Vladislav Ardzinba during his speech. What did the demands of Abkhazia’s separation from Georgia and insistence on remaining in the Soviet Union mean for Georgia? Protests in Tbilisi with anti-Soviet and anti-Russian banners are logically connected to this question. On one hand, there are demands of separation of Abkhazian Autonomy from Georgia and a persistence to stay within Soviet Union. On the other hand, Tbilisi (and other cities) demanded to leave Soviet Union. As a result, Abkhazia became a subject of dispute. It became an excuse not only for the central Soviet government and Tbilisi, but between the demonstrators as well.

On the 3rd of April, members of the national movement Merab Kostava, Irakli Tsereteli, Irakli Batiashvili, Dimitri Jaiani and Vova Vekua took part in a demonstration. It was agreed upon to start demonstrations on the 4th of April in an effort to show solidarity of Abkhazians to

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<sup>35</sup> “Of course we might stay indifferent towards ongoing events in Abkhazia. As a citizen and historian I support demonstrators in their univocal negative attitude towards some Abkhaz extremists who claim vague unconstitutional demands of changing Abkhazia’s autonomy status. I also believe that the demonstration should focus on its aim.” Proclamation by Georgian Communist party central committee, Republic’s highest committee and Cabinet of ministers. Newspaper “Tbilisi” №82 (10901); 10 April, 1989.

<sup>36</sup> Brief summary of Likhni proclamation was published in the newspaper “Soviet Abkhazia”.

<sup>37</sup> TV programme „რე ა ლური ს ი ვ რ ც ე“, უ ა ხ ლ ს ი ს ტ ო რ ი ი ს გ ა კ ვ ე თ ი ლ ბ ი - 1989 წ ლ ს 9 ა პ რ ი ლ დ 5 დღ ე მ დე; „Потому что абхазский народ считает нахождение в СССР единственно возможным способом сохранения своей национальной самобытности“ - 0:56-1:05; [Last retrieved: 18/03/2019]; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZmET7af7zI>

Georgians and to demand punishment of the Likhni organizers. The Central Committee responded to these demands through staff changes. The First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party Jumber Patiashvili visited Abkhazia and fired Boris Adlieba (who signed the Likhni letter). This decision aimed to serve as an example of punishment for those who supported the Likhni letter. However, it eventually produced a different outcome and contributed to the further increase of tensions.

## Tbilisi

On April 4<sup>th</sup>, the Ilia Chavchavadze Society initiated the first demonstrations at Tbilisi and Medical State University. Later, the wave of protests moved in front of the government building. Demonstration in front of the parliament building went beyond the university. Students were not the only group participating in the protests. Moreover, demonstrations made it possible to block the central square and paralyze transportation in the city. Through the picketing of the university, the central square organizers of the demonstration were able to attract the attention of the Soviet government.

The April 8 issue of *The Communist* read: "The demonstration that started regarding Abkhazian issues on the 4th of April continues." It also cited People's MP Roman Oragvelidze, saying that "Some demands of the demonstrators contradict the vital interests of the Georgian people". While the director of the Tbilisi agency Soviet Georgia says: "Workers and staff of the agency, as well as the youth, supports various claims like those about nature protection, cathedral restoration and the sale of land. However, we cannot agree with the anti-Soviet and anti-Socialist slogans."

This same newspaper provides news from Abkhazia in which a correspondent reports about the war and the claims of labor veterans. The message aims to "normalize the situation on time". The article ends with the following sentence: "All controversial issues interesting for the society of the autonomous republic should be decided by competent entities."

Even during the demonstrations regarding Abkhazia, the participants presented anti-Russian attitudes: "Stop the Russification of Abkhazia", "Stop the falsification of history". The main demands were targeting separatism.<sup>38</sup>

Since the protest movement leaders called for the punishment of Likhni organizers, laying off Boris Adlieba served as fulfillment of their demand. The demonstrations that began on April 4<sup>th</sup> started to claim the independence of Georgia and demand separation from the Soviet Union. During the highest point of the protests issues related to Abkhazia were almost completely neglected and instead focused on demands for Georgian independence.

Workers went on strike, schools and universities quit classes, and transportation was delayed due to the blockage of the central square. Tbilisi's paralyzed city center garnered everyone's attention.

On the cover of the April 8<sup>th</sup> evening edition of *Tbilisi*<sup>39</sup> the city committee and city committee of people's deputy presented a brief review of the central committee meeting of the Communist Party. The text refers to the events in the central square of Tbilisi. "Unintended consequences" and "difficult events" are mentioned twice in the short text. "Everyone who

<sup>38</sup> Slogans: 1:16-1:20; [Last retrieved: 18/03/2019]; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZmET7af7zI>

<sup>39</sup> Newspaper "Tbilisi" №82 (10900), Saturday, 8 April, 1989.



cares about the future of the republic should contribute to the stabilization of the situation, which is becoming more tense and dangerous every hour and can lead to unintended consequences.” It also says: “Any method of violent ultimatum and opinion making is alien to democratization and transparency. It is hard times for the republic. Confrontation of the community forces might lead to difficult consequences.”

An article published in the same issue entitled “We Need to be Modest and Careful” read: “Unauthorized demonstrations were joined by supporting groups from the regions and pupils. They brought some anti-Soviet slogans.”<sup>40</sup>

In 1989 the Georgian Communist Party leader Jumber Patiashvili asked General Rodionov (leader of the Caucasus military) to postpone the dissolution of the demonstration. However, his request was denied. At 4 am on April 9 and in accordance with the request of Patiashvili, the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II, asks the demonstrators to move to Kashueti Church, noting that the “danger is real”. The voices from the podium and the demonstrators say: “No, we swore.” Gamsakhurdia and Kostava told the Patriarch that if they end the demonstration now, people will consider them traitors. One of the leaders, Irakli Tsereteli, breaks the silence and calls for prayer:

“Our Father in heaven ...”

On April 9 at 4 am, South Caucasus army troops and 420 soldiers from Moscow (1,900 soldiers in total) with Igor Rodionov as their head, started to break up the demonstration. Armored vehicles descended on Rustaveli Avenue. People on hunger strike, as well as the participants and leaders of the demonstration were shrouded in teargas. Around 4,000 people were injured and 19 participants were killed (16 of them were women).

Based on the Soviet party newspapers *The Communist* and *Tbilisi*, widely spread opinions can be outlined from the 1989 Soviet Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, that circulated in Tbilisi among local intelligencia. First of all,<sup>41</sup> the independence of Soviet Abkhazia was seen as separatist sentiment and “someone else’s influence” is outlined in this process. Authors of written media articles,<sup>42</sup> historians and representatives of the arts community share this opinion. In his article, director Temur Chkheidze says that “it certainly is someone else’s doing, but who is it, what does it want, that one, who put forward the 16th century republic issue? From both historic and today’s perspective it is unjustifiable.”<sup>43</sup>

In the April 6, 1989 issue of *The Communist*, three news stories were printed about Abkhazia. Two of these articles directly refer to Abkhazia. One of them is about the assembly meeting

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Authors respond to the events of Abkhaz SSR. “History of communal living”, “common enemies”, “children of the same land” - these are the phrases authors of the letters use and thus connect them to shared history and past. Newspaper “Communist”, №(20418); 2 April, 1989

<sup>42</sup> History Truth is the text by historian David Muskhelishvili published in newspaper “Communist” in April, 1989 under the rubric “Opinion”. In introduction we read: “This letter was prepared in 1978 in response to “Abkhazia events”, but it was not published due to the reasons unrelated to author. It should be mentioned that the problem stated in this article worsened throughout these years. In February so called “Abkhazians Letter” was published in Gudauta regional newspaper (author, 1989), in “Sovetskaya Abkhazia” and in “Soviet Abkhazia. Georgian Communist Party, Abkhazian regional committee, Sokhumi city Committee, Abkhazia ASSR and Sokhumi city council, Sokhumi, 1937.

<sup>43</sup> Newspaper “Communist”, №(20418); 2 April, 1989, p. 1

of ASSR party activists, where they discussed the importance of “ideological and explanatory war.” The second one is a proclamation towards ASSR citizens.

The text, signed by workers, artists and scientists – including Vladislav Ardzinba, PhD in history, who would later go on and become the president – reads: “We are concerned with the ongoing events, and we condemn the criminal level of lack of self-restraint among some persons. Today, the most important thing is that we calm the people, ensure discipline, rule of law, and end the confrontation, which contradicts the party policy of perestroika, the enhancement and strengthening of relations between the USSR nations, and the carrying out of political reforms based on broadening status to the allied and autonomous republics of the country.” The third news article had to do with Tbilisi: “On April 4, a non-sanctioned march of the representatives of the youth and the intelligentsia took place near the House of Government in Tbilisi, later transforming into a demonstration. Those gathered expressed their concern regarding the events that occurred in the Abkhaz ASSR. The demonstration was still ongoing as of April 5.”

Thus, this view shares the motif that kick started the 1989 demonstrations, namely the opposition to the change of Abkhaz ASSR status, but it does not condone the “anti-Soviet” and “anti-socialist” slogans of some of the demonstrators. A second view, although indirectly, shows a different attitude towards anti-Soviet slogans. An article published in the April 8 edition of *Tbilisi* newspaper, titled “We Have to be Moderate and Calm”, contains interviews with representatives of different fields, who maintain that “there’s unanimous support with regard to Abkhazia events”; but they also address the issue of time and the high number of demands: “let’s not be impatient and let’s not wish to do everything in one day.”

The April 1989 edition of *The Communist* newspaper published “Appeal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, Supreme Council of the Georgian SSR, and the Council of Ministers to the Communists of the Republic, to Every Worker and Young Person”. It said that “the concerns caused by the Abkhazia events were taken advantage of by formal radical groups”. The text of the appeal can be divided into two parts. The first part deals with the protests and “anti-Soviet and anti-socialist proclamations” of the protesters, as well as the disorder in the city caused by the demonstrations. The second part has to do with the issue of autonomy of Abkhazia, saying that “it’s impossible to change the status of autonomous republic”. The text also calls for the end of unauthorized demonstrations: “Each of us must make a choice between, on the one hand, perestroika and democracy, and, on the other hand, anarchy and chaos, which may cause unforeseeable results.”

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### Protest Symbols and Attributes

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The demonstrations held on April 4-9, 1989, in Tbilisi, in front of the building housing the parliament of today’s Georgia, consolidated many demands. The movement that originated as a reaction against the demand of the Abkhaz ASSR to change its status, transformed into protests. In a few days, the demands of the protesters developed into a demand for Georgia’s independence. The latter was the main slogan of the April demonstrations. The demand was amplified by invoking faces, heroes and reconstructed symbols from history, such as the First

Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), and the “Golden Age of History” – King David the Builder. The identity created by these symbols of memory found its basis in Christianity too. Since it was prohibited under Soviet ideology, religion found new meaning in the fight against the Soviet occupation. The emotional and visual sides of the demonstrations were further amplified by cultural features such as folk songs, chokhas and so on.

By analyzing the photo and video materials, it is possible to determine all the essential slogans featured at the demonstrations. Videos show the following signs: “Stop the Russification of Abkhazia”; “Stop Falsifying History”; “Long Live Independent Georgia!”<sup>44</sup>

One of the persons addressing the crowd says: “Georgia must know what’s going on in Georgia, and in Abkhazia they must know what’s going on in Tbilisi. There, whenever they wish, they simply switch off our TV channel and ... the population is unable to hear about our decisions. Basically, what this means is that our laws are not in force in the entire territory. Our government went there and I’m offended they couldn’t be received duly... This means that we are not protected within the Soviet Union, that our sovereignty is not protected. As if it was not enough that our territory is contained within the boundaries of the 1920 treaty signed with Russia, now they cut us off from all sides ... everything. Now we face a reality when this autonomous republic of Abkhazia should leave ... if they desire. This will be followed by another autonomous district and so on. It seems that Soviet rule today cannot guarantee that our land is protected, that we are protected from encroachment, that a Georgian man is protected, that Georgia is protected. So, we must consider demanding Georgia’s independence”.<sup>45</sup>

At a demonstration held in front of the House of Government, Zviad Gamsakhurdia mentions “provocative letters” and “anti-Georgian attacks on Rustaveli statues, and on people” and demands the halting of “all the atrocities committed by them. If not, here we proclaim a multi-day hunger strike and national disobedience.”<sup>46</sup>

Video materials also show that those addressing the crowd often mention King David the Builder: “We gathered here today because our way towards the future, our goal is the freedom that we inherited from the great Georgians, such as David the Builder.” Notably, the year of the April protests marked 900 years since the king of “Abkhazians, Georgians, Kakhetians...”<sup>47</sup> David the Builder was crowned. The date played its role in the magnification of his name, especially in the context of Abkhazia. Since historical sources refer to him as “King of Abkhazians”, his name is heard at demonstrations time after time, as a proof of the historical unity of Abkhazia and Georgia.

Photos housed at the National Archives of Georgia and exhibited in the Digital Photo Chronicle of the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, show demands written on signs at the April

<sup>44</sup> TV program „Realuri Sivrtse” (რეალური სივრცე); “The lessons of the latest history – from April 9, 1989 to the present day”; [Last retrieved: 18/03/2019]; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZmET7af7zl&t=243s>

<sup>45</sup> Documentary footage of 9 April 1989; 03:48-04:57; [18/03/2019]; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYXyvY5ZqU&t=1327s>

<sup>46</sup> Documentary footage of 9 April 1989; [18/03/2019]; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYXyvY5ZqU&t=1327s>

<sup>47</sup> “Georgian Source Study xiii-xiv; P. 52; Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University Institute of History of Humanities and Institute of History and Ethnology of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Department of History and Studies of the Middle Ages of Georgia; [Last retrieved: 18/03/2019]; [http://dspace.Nepplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/81504/1/Qartuli\\_WkarotmcodNeeoba\\_2011-2012\\_Ne13-14.pdf](http://dspace.Nepplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/81504/1/Qartuli_WkarotmcodNeeoba_2011-2012_Ne13-14.pdf)

protests: “Stop Anti-Georgian Policy of Moscow!”, “Stop Terror Against Georgians!”, “No Russian ... Empire!” and “We demand the independence of Georgia!”<sup>48</sup>



Photo # 1. Rustaveli Avenue, April 1989, Georgian National Archive



<sup>48</sup> Photos from Georgian National Archive depict April demonstrations of 1989. Slogans on the photos say: „No Russian ... Empire!“ „We demand independence of Georgia!“

Photo # 2. Rustaveli Avenue, April 1989, Author: M. Utiazhvili, National Archives of Georgia

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### Conclusion

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Rustaveli Avenue, the main thoroughfare of the country's capital, is one of the most symbolic places in modern Georgian history, due to its political and cultural significance. After April 9, 1989, Rustaveli Avenue and the area in front of the Parliament of Georgia has created a new place in the memory of Georgians. It is connected to the idea of the country's independence, victory, and tragedy – all at the same time.

Symbolically charged meanings and the collective ritual acts of the April 4-9 protests, created a common emotion and memory among the protesters as a group and in short time, including the past. For the “memory groups”, protest rituals – prayer, speeches, linguistic and religious symbols, songs, traditional dance, slogans, and historical heroes, acted as a positive equivalent of anger, fear and disappointment in the form of hope, unity and happiness, transforming into solidarity. Such groups go down in history as “memory groups”, who remember the past by protest rituals.

The observation of the symbolic features of the demonstration and the ritual aspects of the process (the behavior of the protesters), shows that the April protests were directed against the Soviet Union, communist rule and Russia. The symbols and attributes used at the protests (Kakutsa Cholokashvili photo, crosses, icons, signs written in Georgian and English, religious candles, tricolored Georgian flag, and the national anthem of the First Republic of Georgia), relives the memory of Soviet occupation and *Sovietization*, and thus creates the conditions for the restoration of Georgia's independence on the basis of the years of 1918-1921. The idea of independence was constantly present at demonstrations held in Soviet Georgia (in 1956, 1978 and 1988), but this time the demand is saturated by cultural features – ethnicity, sacredness of the Georgian language, religion, the protection of the environment and cultural heritage. In this regard, the issue of Abkhazia's autonomy serves as a cause that resulted in demonstrations with the demand of Georgia's independence. In a few days, the issue of the change in Abkhazia's autonomous status was forgotten at the April demonstrations.

The construction of ritual thought and ritual acts became the sole prevalent truth at the demonstrations. The principal location for the ritual manifestation was the area in front of the House of Government. The April protests unified, modified, restored and manifested the memories of the past among the demonstrators regarding Soviet occupation and the independence of Georgia. In this process, the location of the protest – the central street of the capital city – became the source of legitimacy for the ritual act and thought.

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25. National Archives of Georgia and Georgian National Photos of the library.

Photo # 1



Author: Givi Nakhutsrishvili

[http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/93639/1/DSC\\_0249.JPG](http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/93639/1/DSC_0249.JPG)

Photo # 2



Author: Givi Natsukhishvili

<http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/93715>

Photo # 3



Author: Ucha Okropiridze

<http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/61489>

Photo # 4



Author: Nazi Gabaidze

<http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/32458>



Photo # 5



Author: Jemal Kasradze, 8-9 April, Tbilisi 1989

<http://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/53645>