

# Georgian coup d'état (1991-92)

# Background and Context

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The Georgian coup d'état, also known as the Tbilisi War, or the Putsch of 1991–1992, was an important event in the context of the Georgian Civil War. The coup still captures the attention of Georgian historians and the public, yet there has been no separate fundamental study of this issue in Georgian historiography. The sources mostly rely on the reports of individual historians, politicians, political scientists, journalists, and eyewitnesses that present a fragmented picture of what transpired in the Georgian capital in 1991-92. The conflict took place in the central district of Tbilisi, largely on one central street, Rustaveli Avenue, and can be considered an important event not only for the future development of Georgia but also from a geostrategic point of view in the context of the distribution of spheres of influence between Russia and the West.

In the most common narrative, the event has been preserved as a coup through military intervention. An alternative narrative states that the confrontation and armed conflict developed due to the government's deviation from a democratic path of development and its attempts to establish an authoritarian ruling style. Both sides often agree on one point: that the events of 1991-92 were not necessarily civil, but a Russian-Georgian confrontation; the Russian secret service managed to sow chaos in the country.

Russia expected to be given international recognition as a guarantor of peace and stability in the region, and gave post-Soviet countries that had regained their independence 'Near Abroad' status, emphasising that independent countries should maintain proximity and close ties with Russia (Toal, 2016). In instances where republics did not follow the path dictated by Russia, divide and rule tactics were employed and ethnic conflicts fuelled. In the case of Georgia, Russia utilised two levers simultaneously: the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the Autonomous District of South Ossetia.

Various other factors also played a significant role in the outbreak of conflict: the immaturity of the country's political elite; agents of Russian influence (including the KGB itself); the Soviet *nomenklatura* and former high-ranking officials within the country; and the social and economic problems that arose after the collapse of the USSR. The policy pursued by the country's president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, created fertile ground for Russian-backed separatists to escalate conflicts. As historian Stephen Jones (2013, p. 14) writes: "Georgians in 1991 were confused as to what sort of nation they wanted – a traditional community based on romantic conceptions of ethnic solidarity, harmony, the family and historical longevity, or a heterogeneous and 'secular' nation ready to tolerate internal territorial allegiances and integration with a pluralised modern Europe. The tension between these two visions underlay Georgia's civil war in 1991."

The prerequisites for the conflict were brewing in the country right after the declaration of independence on 9 April 1991. A severe political crisis lasting about six months had preceded the event. On 31 March a referendum was held in which the population voted on whether they wanted to restore independence based on the Independence Act of 26 May 1918. With a turnout of 90.3%, 98.9% answered the question affirmatively. Before the 1991 August Coup in the Soviet Union, various independent institutions began to be established in the country, among them the National Guard. The situation became tense in parallel with the August Coup. The State Committee on the State of Emergency coerced President Gamsakhurdia to abolish the position of the commander of the National Guard. Gamsakhurdia yielded to threats and demands, abolished the position, and changed the National Guard's status to that of an internal army, making it report to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Commander Tengiz Kitovani refused to comply with Zviad Gamsakhurdia's order and stationed guards loyal to him near Tbilisi; Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua resigned from his position. The former 'thief in law'<sup>1</sup> opposed to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Jaba Ioseliani, was released from prison and later founded the armed paramilitary group 'Mkhedrioni'. The above-mentioned trio united and represented the opposition to the elected president in the coup d'état.

Chaos and uncertainty descended on the country. The opposing parties accused each other of being Russian agents and of acting in Russia's interests (Chikovani et al., 2022: 123). Even today, after many years, it is impossible to know what constitutes historical 'truth' and find clear answers to all the questions raised about this period.

The Belovezha Accords of 8 December 1991 declared that the Soviet Union had effectively ceased to exist and proclaimed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in its place. On 21 December 1991, the first summit of 11 CIS states was held in Kazakhstan, and the Alma-Ata Protocol was signed. At this time, Georgia stood firmly on its position that it would not join the organisation, a position that was categorically against Russia's goal to preserve the Soviet Union in a new form. At this time, tension and unrest in Georgia reached their peak.

After several unsuccessful negotiations, an armed conflict between the government and the opposition began on 22 December 1991, with Tengiz Kitovani occupying several buildings. The fighting persisted for about 15 days, resulting in over 100 fatalities and approximately 700 injuries. The armed conflict concluded with the victory of the rebels, leading to the departure of President Gamsakhurdia from the country and the Military Council assuming control of the government. Many buildings in the city centre, including the Parliament Building and the Tbilisi Classical Gymnasium, were burned and destroyed.

The violent overthrow of the government of President Gamsakhurdia strained the political situation throughout Georgia and led to a large-scale civil conflict. The Military Council failed to establish order in the country, and in March 1992 invited Eduard Shevardnadze (former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union) from Moscow to bring the country out of a deep crisis with his own diplomatic and

<sup>1</sup> A 'thief in law', in post-Soviet states, is a professional criminal who enjoys an elite position within organised crime circles and who holds authority over members with lower status. It is akin to a Mafia boss.

political experience and through his connections with Russia and the West. At the same time, irreversible processes had already been set in motion by separatist forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

On 27 September 1993, the city of Sukhumi in Abkhazia fell, and the Russian-supported Abkhaz separatists made the final turning point in the war towards victory. Three days prior, Gamsakhurdia, who had returned from exile to Samegrelo (a region bordering Abkhazia), organised a demonstration, after which he entered Abkhazia but returned to Samegrelo soon after. His armed supporters established control over several municipalities, including the strategically important port of Poti and the Samtredia railway junction. In October, Shevardnadze asked Moscow for assistance to suppress Gamsakhurdia and his supporters' insurrection. Russian troops helped as requested. The supporters of Gamsakhurdia were soon neutralised because they did not have heavy ammunition and the ability to continue fighting. After that, Gamsakhurdia took refuge in the distant village of Samegrelo together with a few supporters. On 31 December 1993, he died.<sup>2</sup>

All this led to a pro-Russian reorientation of Georgia's foreign policy. In October 1993, Shevardnadze signed Georgia's accession to the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States, and in the following year, Tbilisi joined the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty.

The Georgian coup d'état and ensuing Civil War has been ingrained in the collective memory as a negative schema, intensifying the traumatic impact of this event. That is why, 30 years later, this war periodically resurfaces in the present and is experienced as if it happened yesterday (Chikovani et al., 2022: 123).

Therefore, teaching about the Tbilisi Conflict and its effects is a very important part of understanding the past and helping people consider their individual responsibility for the country and its society in the future. Of course, establishing the historical truth and restoring justice is also important. The new generation must clearly understand what transpired in order to take responsibility for the historical past and present. Otherwise, it will be difficult to build a society based on truth and justice.

It is a challenge to teach these events in a public school because there is no common vision among academic historians from which to form an objective picture without political influence and propaganda. This is compounded by the incomplete and episodic information on the subject in the history curriculum and textbooks. There is only a chronological record of this issue, both in the curriculum and in the textbooks, which causes doubt and misunderstanding among certain historians and researchers.<sup>3</sup> Almost 32 years have passed since the beginning of the Civil War, and it is high time for the public and young people interested in modern history to know the real reasons for, and consequences of, this conflict.

The Georgian coup d'état may be a sensitive and traumatic topic for students, especially if their families were directly affected. Teachers need to approach the subject with empathy, and be prepared to provide support for students who may find the topic emotionally challenging.

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The prevalent belief is that suicide is the most likely cause, although a segment of the population thinks that he was murdered. This matter has been under investigation since 2004 by the State Commission and Prosecutor's Office, established by the decree of the President of Georgia. However, the results of the investigation have not yet been published.

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It must be noted that in new textbooks of history and civics education, the conflicts of the '90s and attempts to resolve them have started to appear.

The conflict is a recent event; there might be ongoing tensions or unresolved issues. Teachers must navigate these sensitivities and provide a safe space for discussions, while respecting diverse opinions. Finding appropriate ways to incorporate the topic without overwhelming the curriculum requires careful planning and collaboration between teachers and creators of teaching material and textbooks. Access to reliable and unbiased resources may be limited. Teachers need to ensure they have accurate and up-to-date materials to present a comprehensive understanding of the events.

Adjusting the content to be age-appropriate is crucial. Younger students may struggle with complex geopolitical issues, so educators need to tailor the material to the student's age, maturity, and comprehension levels. For example, to show what the city centre, Rustaveli Avenue, looked like before and after the armed conflict, so that students can recognise the destroyed buildings in the photos.

In addition to scientific material, the 2022 project 'Birth of Georgia,'<sup>4</sup> which has already produced 150 episodes, can be used as a tangible source. In extensive video interviews, individuals who were direct participants in the formation of the modern state of Georgia share their experiences. Of course, memoirs cannot be considered empirical sources since the participants narrate stories from their perspectives. However, by contrasting narratives, it is possible to develop critical thinking and gain insights into events from a multiperspective approach.

## References

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Jones, S. (2013) *Georgia: A Political History since Independence, Part 1: The Best of Times, the Worst of Times: 1985–1995*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

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See 'Birth of Georgia' YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@dabadeba> (only available in Georgian), accessed 14 February 2024.