

Occupy Rustaveli:

Overreliance on Space and the “Protest Fatigue” during the 2009 Cell Protests in Tbilisi

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2009 Cell Protests, Tbilisi, Georgia. Photo by Tamta Gelashvili.

Abstract

The paper aims to offer a spatial analysis of the 2009 protest movements in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, where the opposition activists occupied public space in an innovative manner, by placing prison cells on the main thoroughfare of the city. Rustaveli Avenue thus became the central space of contestation between the dominant powers and their opponents. Similar occupations of public space (the so-called “Occupy Movements”) have been widely researched; however, the case of the 2009 Tbilisi protests remain largely unstudied. Using Lefebvre’s ideas, the paper describes how political actors constantly produce the physical, conceptual, and social aspects of space. The paper studies the spatiality of political events that contributed to the Avenue’s meaning and function. After establishing the theoretical and historical background, the paper elaborates on the 2009 protests and discusses them from a spatial lens. The paper stresses the opposition activists’ overreliance on space, the absence of methodological, strategic planning, and the resulting protest fatigue. Finally, comparing the 2009 events to the 2011-2012 protests, the paper argues that overreliance on the significance of space can, in fact, decrease protest visibility and fervor, instead of increasing it.

Key words: Cell Protests, Georgia, Lefebvre, Occupy, Protest, Protest Fatigue, Rustaveli, Social Movements, Space, Spatiality, Tbilisi.

Introduction

Walking down Rustaveli Avenue, the main thoroughfare of Tbilisi, Georgia, in April 2009, one would have encountered an unusual scene. Instead of everyday routine with noisy traffic and people rushing to workplaces or schools, one would see people in mock prison cells going through morning procedures: “shaving, brushing their teeth, and drinking their morning tea” (Kabachnik 2012: 17). Anti-government protesters had occupied what would normally be the busiest part of the city.

The occupation started on April 21, when opposition leaders decided to bring a popular television show, *Cell #5*, to the streets of Tbilisi. The idea came from Giorgi Gachechiladze, the show host, who had imprisoned himself in a mock cell earlier that year, and had promised to stay confined until President Saakashvili’s resignation (www.liberali.ge 2010). With more than 100 cells placed on the street, the protests continued for several months.

In a way, these demonstrations resembled the 2011-2012 protests in Northern Africa, Southern Europe, and North America, when protesters occupied central parts of major cities. Unsurprisingly, these movements became popular subjects of social science research; a number of authors offered spatial analysis of these protests, focusing on the protesters’ attempts to contest state domination over space and on the governments’ attempts to regain control.

The ideas of Henri Lefebvre are especially useful for such spatial analyses. In his works, Lefebvre explains how space is produced continuously, through contests between governing elites and their opponents. This process of production, he notes, includes constant changes in the physical, mental/conceptual, and living/social aspects of space (Lefebvre, cited in Dhaliwal 2012: 256).

Lefebvre’s ideas would also be useful to analyze the production of space in the center of Tbilisi. However, unlike the 2011-2012 movements, the spatial aspect of the demonstrations in Georgia has attracted little attention of researchers. This paper attempts to fill in this gap in literature. It aims to offer a spatial analysis of Georgian protest movements, especially focusing on the 2009 cell protests. The paper focuses on the 2009 events because the cell protests clearly illustrate the production of Tbilisi’s central public space through continuous contest over its meaning and function.

With this objective in mind, the paper first summarizes Lefebvre’s ideas about the production of public space. Next, it briefly reviews spatial analyses of the 2011-2012 movements. Using these examples, the paper then turns to Georgia. Specifically, it studies Rustaveli Avenue as the central space of contestation between the dominant powers and their opponents. Using Lefebvre’s ideas, the paper argues that these actors constantly produce the physical, conceptual, and social aspects of this space. The paper studies the spatiality of political events that contributed to the Avenue’s meaning and function. After establishing the theoretical and historical background, the paper elaborates on the 2009 protests and discusses them from a spatial lens. Finally, by comparing the 2009 events to the 2011-2012 protests, the paper suggests that overreliance on the significance of space can, in fact, decrease protest visibility and fervor, instead of increasing it.

Literature on the Production of Space

Until the past three decades, space had been largely taken for granted in social science research. Lefebvre (1974) was one of the first social scientists to study the concept of space. He argues that space is inherently political, produced not only by formal transformations, but also by informal perceptions and living experiences (cited in Brenner and Elden 2009: 359).

Importantly, Lefebvre stresses that space should not be seen as a given. The production of space is a continuous process (Lefebvre, cited in Dhaliwal 2012: 256). This process, Lefebvre explains, involves transformations in three interrelated features: first, “spatial practice,” or the physical form of space; second, “representations of space,” or mental conceptions of space; and third, “representational spaces,” or the experience and social function of space (cited in Dhaliwal 2012: 256). Importantly, Lefebvre’s argument seems largely state-centric; he focuses on the governing power’s influence on the production of space. However, this paper uses Lefebvre’s ideas of space production to argue that people can also affect this process, mainly by changing the mental conceptions and lived experiences of space.

Narrowing the theory down to public spaces, it can be argued that both governments and ordinary citizens can participate in the production process (Attia 2011: 13). To begin with, public spaces signify state power. According to Stanford Lyman and Marvin Scott (1967), public spaces illustrate what Robert Sack calls territoriality (Sack 1986: 19), or the human desire to control the behavior of others by circumscribing a particular space. Indeed, as Lyman and Scott explain, governments (to varying degrees) regulate access to public spaces and control people’s behavior within them (Lyman and Scott 1967: 238). As a result, public spaces generally symbolize state power.

In order to challenge state power, then, people express their protest in public spaces (Attia 2011: 13). They occupy and give new meanings to space. In addition to symbolic importance, such occupation also has material significance. As the paper will illustrate further, public spaces often house administrative offices, business centers, educational institutions, and other key facilities. By occupying these spaces, protesters effectively hinder the transportation system, impede access to the abovementioned facilities, and thus, interrupt normal functioning of the cities.

Hence, political authorities and their opponents contribute to the production of space by affecting its physical, mental, or social features. As a result, contest over space is continuous (Brenner and Elden 2009: 367). This contest became evident during the 2011-2012 protests in Northern Africa, Southern Europe, and North America. The next section reviews spatial analyses of these movements in existing social science literature.

Literature on Occupy Movements

Space has been one of the most researched aspects of the recent protest movements. As Benski et al. explain, during the mass protests of 2011 and 2012, people occupied public spaces to challenge powerful elites. Examples are many: Bourguiba Avenue in Tunisia (AlSayyad and Guvenc 2013), Tahrir Square in Egypt (Ramadan 2012), Syntagma Square in Greece (Leontidou 2012), Puerta del Sol Square and Plaza Cataluña in Spain (Dhaliwal 2012), and Zuccotti Park in the US (Juris 2012), among others (Benski et al. 2013: 553).

In the abovementioned cases, protesters challenged the dominant powers' influence over public space in several interrelated ways. Firstly, their actions changed the mental conception of these spaces. They occupied spaces with symbolic meaning: Bourguiba Avenue, Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol Square and Syntagma Square have witnessed numerous political events. These places, as well as the Zuccotti Park, suggest symbolic presence of powerful elites (parliament buildings, embassies, financial districts, etc.). So by occupying them, the people expressed their resistance to these dominant powers (Benski et al. 2013).

Secondly, the protesters' actions changed the social aspect, or the living experience, of these spaces. Since these spaces are located in city centers, their blockage implied hindrance in everyday dynamics. The protesters practically impeded governments from exercising control, created barriers in transport systems, and obstructed people's access to workplaces, educational institutions, etc. They separated these spaces from the wider social order, and exercised direct democracy within (Benski et al. 2013: 553). Thus, by posing symbolic and practical challenges to the dominant power, the protesters gave new conceptual and social meaning to public spaces.

Literature on Tbilisi Cell Protests

Unlike the 2011-2012 movements, little research has focused on the 2009 demonstrations in Tbilisi. So far, extensive spatial analysis of these protests has not been published. The only article focusing on this case (Kabachnik 2012) largely emphasizes one particular element of the demonstrations - interestingly, the protesters placed mock prison cells in the center of capital Tbilisi.

The idea to use cells came from Giorgi Gachechiladze, the host of a widely watched television show, *Cell #5*. Gachechiladze "imprisoned" himself on January 29th, 2009. For the following 11 months, his daily reality show featured political discussions with different public figures. According to Gachechiladze, the idea behind his show was that under President Saakashvili, the country resembled a prison (www.liberali.ge 2010). The name of the show was also symbolic – Saakashvili's ruling party, the United National Movement, was listed as number five on the election ballots (Kabachnik 2012: 7).

Given the added symbolism, it is not surprising that Kabachnik focuses on the metaphorical meaning of the mock cells. Additionally, Kabachnik does include spatial analysis in his research to some extent. He mentions how Rustaveli Avenue "has a long history of ... transforming itself temporarily to an oppositional space that challenges the political status quo" (Kabachnik 2012: 8). However, he only mentions the demonstrations of 2007 and the incident of 1989 briefly. Comprehensive spatial analysis of the symbolic and material importance of Rustaveli Avenue is not his main objective. Rather, he studies the influence of popular culture on political behavior (Kabachnik 2012: 1). Regardless, his discussion of the cell metaphors, together with his study of the people's attitudes towards the protests, offers important insights and is certainly useful for the purposes of this article.

In the following sections, the paper will outline the continuous transformation of Rustaveli Avenue space, using Lefebvre's definitions of three spatial aspects. It will show how the political authorities influenced the physical form of Rustaveli Avenue. Concurrently, it will also discuss

the transformations in the mental and social aspects of this space. Finally, the paper will focus on the 2009 cell protests to illustrate these processes of contestation and change.

Production of the Rustaveli Avenue Space

Rustaveli Avenue is the main thoroughfare in Tbilisi. Since its construction, it has always been a contested space. Dominant powers have developed it as the city center, housing the Georgian Parliament, the National Museum, the National Academy of Sciences, the Kashueti Church, the Rustaveli National Theater, and many other political, cultural, educational and business facilities. Those against the authorities, in turn, have been challenging dominant representations of this space. In order to understand the role of Rustaveli Avenue in the contest between governing elites and opposition forces, it is useful to review how this space was produced throughout Georgia's recent history.

The history of this avenue goes back to the early 1800s. After the annexation of Eastern Georgia by the Russian Empire in early 1800s, Russian Chief Commander's palace was built in the beginning of the modern-day Rustaveli. Gradually, the Russian authorities, including Mikhail Vorontsov, the Russian Commander-in-chief and Viceroy for South Caucasus, started constructing an avenue, bridging the palace with Tbilisi's other parts (De Waal 2010: 46). In mid-1800s, the avenue was named after Evgenii Golovin, then the Caucasian Governor (Kvirkvelia 1985: 26). It can be concluded that the Avenue, constructed with the initiative of the Russian authorities and named after the Russian-appointed Governor, adopted a particular conceptual and social character. Informally, the locals referred to this Avenue as the "road to Russia" (Kvirkvelia 1985: 27). Thus, as the Russians constructed the space as a manifestation of the dominant power, the Georgians associated the avenue with Russian domination.

When Georgia declared independence on May 26, 1918 (Suny 1994: 192), the government decided to change the name of the capital's central avenue. It was now named after Shota Rustaveli, the author of the *Knight in the Panther's Skin*, a national epic poem (Encyclopedia Britannica). In addition, the Avenue witnessed the first national military parade (Georgian National Archive). Apparently, hoping that the declaration of independence would terminate Russian domination, Georgians also tried to abandon the Avenue's original symbolic meaning. Now, Rustaveli symbolized Georgia's liberation from Russian influence.

Soon after, on February 25, 1921, the Red Army occupied Georgia (Suny 1994: 323). Following the occupation, new political authorities transformed Rustaveli Avenue again. They built a number of Soviet-style buildings (the Institute of Marxism and Leninism, the Telegraph, etc.). At the same time, they destroyed some of the older buildings. Importantly, the new political elite demolished the Alexander Nevski Military Church, where the cadets killed during the 1921 invasion were buried. In its place, they erected a new building for the Supreme Council of the Soviet Republic of Georgia (www.tbilisi.gov.ge). The building was an example of Soviet-style architecture. Interestingly, its facade had sixteen columns – arguably, to represent the sixteen member states of the Soviet Union (www.tbilisiguide.ge). Thus, after the occupation, the avenue re-acquired its original meaning. Surrounded by Soviet-style buildings, Rustaveli now symbolized Soviet power over Georgia.

Since the Avenue signified Soviet control, anti-regime demonstrators chose this place to protest. In 1956, Soviet forces crushed a demonstration calling for the secession of Georgia from the Soviet Union (Georgia Profile, BBC). The large-scale, clearly nationalistic demonstration, one of the few examples of civil disobedience and protest in the Soviet Union, followed the 20th Party Congress, where Khrushchev criticized Stalin (see Blauvelt 2009). Echoing the 1956 events, another nationalistic demonstration took place in 1978, when students protested the changes in language law, requiring the adoption of Russian (in addition to Georgian) as a state language (Walker and Stephenson 2013:115). This event shows how people contested Soviet authority over Rustaveli, expressing their resistance to the dominant power, and how the regime violently reacted, reclaiming its control over Rustaveli, and effectively, on Georgia.

Despite the violent response, the anti-Soviet sentiments continued to break out from time to time. In April 1989, the National Liberation Movement led an anti-Soviet demonstration on Rustaveli Avenue. On April 9, Soviet troops dismantled the protests, killing women and children (Tsamalashvili 2009). As in 1956, the protesters temporarily transformed Rustaveli Avenue into a space of resistance, thus challenging the Soviet power. Again, the regime emptied the street, restoring social order.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia declared independence, electing Zviad Gamsakhurdia as the first President of the country. The Parliament of independent Georgia was established in the former Supreme Council building (Tsuladze, Voice of America). Hence, as the newly formed government took political control over the country, it also acquired control over the city's central space and changed its meaning. This space no longer epitomized Soviet rule; rather, the avenue, with the Parliament building in its center, symbolized the newly founded national government.

Soon after the declaration of independence, a civil war erupted. Now a symbol of the Georgian state, Rustaveli Avenue became a battleground between Gamsakhurdia's government and its opponents. In January 1992, President Gamsakhurdia was overthrown. He was succeeded by Eduard Shevardnadze, who also got toppled after demonstrations (labeled as the "Rose Revolution") on Rustaveli Avenue in 2003 (Georgia Profile, BBC).

After the Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili, the newly elected President, declared 2004 as the beginning of a new era in the country's history. Georgia adopted a new flag, a new anthem, and a new coat of arms (www.liberali.ge 2009). As a part of his renovation campaign, Saakashvili also gave a new meaning to Rustaveli Avenue: the presidential inauguration, military parades, anniversaries of the Rose Revolution, commemorations of the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, and many other events took place on Rustaveli (Rodonaia 2004, Kunchulia 2009). Therefore, the new government changed the mental perception and the living experience associated with this space. Now, Rustaveli Avenue symbolized the reform-oriented Georgian government.

Concurrently, the avenue was also a common protest space. A few years after the revolution, massive anti-Saakashvili demonstrations erupted. Sporadic protests continued till November 2007, when people placed tents in front of the Parliament. For several days, people prevented the government from controlling the space that symbolized state power. In response, on the 7th of November, riot police violently crashed the demonstrations (Kabachnik 2012: 9). As the

government reclaimed control over space, the President declared a state of emergency till the 12th of November. During this period, military troops and vehicles were mobilized on Rustaveli Avenue (Kabachnik 2012: 9), reminding people that the government remained in charge.

After a temporary decline, protests re-emerged. On the 9th of April 2009, opposition forces started a large-scale campaign against Saakashvili (Kabachnik 2012: 2). Both the time and place of the initiation were symbolic. 9th of April is a national holiday, commemorating Soviet violence against peaceful pro-independence demonstrators. As usual, the rallies took place on Rustaveli Avenue, the traditional contested space between political authorities and their opponents. On April 21st, opposition leaders decided to place mock prison cells on Rustaveli Avenue (Kabachnik 2012: 5).

Spatial Analysis of the 2009 Protests

Transformations in Mental and Social Aspects

As the history of Rustaveli Avenue shows, governing powers have gradually changed the physical form of the avenue. Political authorities defined spatial practices, such as the architecture and function of the buildings, the transportation system, the street signs, etc. The mental conceptions and social experiences of this space, however, were affected not only by the government, but also by citizens. The 2009 cell protests clearly illustrate Lefebvre's ideas about the production of mental and social space.

To begin with, the protesters chose Rustaveli as the terrain of resistance because of its historical conceptual meaning. As illustrated above, governing powers have always tried to influence the mental conception of this space. The Rustaveli Avenue, surrounded by administrative offices, educational institutions, and other facilities, symbolized state power and social order. By placing cells, the opposition challenged the state's symbolic presence and the association of Rustaveli with the government.

In addition to mental conceptions, the cell protests also influenced the living experiences associated with Rustaveli Avenue. As Kabachnik explains, the people resisting the dominant power changed (although temporarily) the function of this public space (Kabachnik 2012: 14). By occupying Rustaveli, the protesters disrupted the established order. Blocking Tbilisi's main avenue meant that government officials faced difficulties reaching administrative offices, children were unable to attend classes in the Public School #1 (located next to the Parliament), people could not attend performances in the Rustaveli Theatre or movies in the Rustaveli Cinema, etc. Since Rustaveli Avenue is the central transport hub, its occupation also meant disturbances in the transport system. As Kabachnik mentions, the cells soon created a "major nuisance" (Kabachnik 2012: 15). Hence, isolating the main thoroughfare of Tbilisi from the rest of the capital had material consequences. This way, the rallies transformed Rustaveli Avenue into a "terrain of resistance" (Kabachnik 2012: 10), changing the "representational space," or the way the Rustaveli Avenue space was "lived" (Lefebvre, cited in Dhaliwal 2012: 258).

In sum, the 2009 protests contested the government's power over space not only symbolically, but also materially. In Lefebvre's terms, these protests changed the mental and social space of Rustaveli Avenue.

Over-reliance on the Spatial Factor

With such transformation, the 2009 protests resembled the 2011-2012 movements in Northern Africa, Southern Europe, and North America. What made them different from these movements, however, was not only the added symbolism of cells, but also poor planning and over-reliance on space.

As noted above, the cell protests started in April. The number of cells gradually diminished, and in July, the last ones disappeared, presumably, in preparations for the US Vice President Joe Biden's visit (Kabachnik 2012: 6). However, it can be argued that the cells had already lost their initial appeal.

As Tbilisi residents point out in interviews with Kabachnik, the cells "made people's lives miserable and complicated," and thus were "unbearable" (Kabachnik 2012: 15). In contrast with 2007, the government decided to avoid any involvement. Saakashvili's decisions in 2007 caused harsh criticism from the international community (Kabachnik 2012: 12). Learning from the experience, the government stayed detached in 2009 and outlived the demonstrations. It even refused to provide movable toilets or to collect garbage (Kabachnik 2012: 14). As a result, the meaning of this space changed once again. As the government ignored the demonstrations, the situation evolved into chaos. People now compared Rustaveli to "a big toilet" and saw the cells as causes of "major nuisance" (Kabachnik 2012: 14-15). When the last cells finally disappeared, "erasing the traces of opposition in public space" (Kabachnik 2012: 6), the government regained control indirectly, without any active involvement.

Apparently, the Georgian protesters failed to organize the rallies carefully. In the 2011-2012 demonstrations, the protesters divided space into functional areas, created representative assemblies, and made decisions collectively (Benski et al. 2013: 553, Stavrides 2012: 588, Attia 2011: 14). While these protesters engaged in direct democracy, Georgian protesters aimed at prolonging occupation. Understanding the symbolic and material importance of space, they overemphasized and "fetishized" it (Miller and Nichols 2013: 467). Apparently, they forgot that the occupation of space had to be a means to an end – Saakashvili's resignation – they had initially announced (www.liberali.ge 2010). Thus, occupation became an end in itself; the government refused to remove the cells, while the opposition activists rejected any proposals for political dialogue (www.liberali.ge 2010).

As a result, as much as the cells created a powerful metaphor in the beginning, they failed to sustain its meaning. As Kabachnik explains, over time, the cells started to irritate Tbilisi residents (Kabachnik 2012: 16). One possible reason why the powerful metaphor weakened over time is the failure of the opposition leaders to foresee alternative outcomes. As sociologist Iago Kachkachishvili notes, the opposition expected police violence that would cause international condemnation (as it did in 2007) and would eventually lead to Saakashvili's resignation (www.liberali.ge 2010). The government defied these expectations by staying inactive. Without

any concrete plans of alternative action, the Georgian opposition was unable to spread the sense of protest and empowerment in the wider population (www.liberali.ge 2010).

Unlike the 2011-2012 protesters, notably, the Indignados in Spain, the Georgian protesters failed to extend resistance beyond Rustaveli Avenue. As Dhaliwal notes, the Indignados left the occupied spaces after a month (Dhaliwal 2012: 259). However, instead of “capitulating” like the Georgian opposition, the Indignados created grassroots organizations and organized weekly meetings (Dhaliwal 2012: 260). If the Indignados managed to create a “sustained movement, rather than a fleeting experiment” (Dhaliwal 2012: 270), the Georgian protesters appear to have done just the latter. Indeed, there is no evidence that the Georgian opposition organized similar associations, empowered people (including the youth) for further actions, or tried to attract the attention of active civil society actors and non-governmental organizations.

Conclusion

Hence, the cell protests did transform the meaning of space in several ways. Firstly, they contested the government’s symbolic presence on Rustaveli Avenue. They reclaimed the public space, and hence changed its mental conception. Secondly, they interrupted normal social order by blocking the central thoroughfare. Therefore, the protesters also managed to change the living experience of Rustaveli Avenue.

However, the protests failed to maintain the initial fervor. As the protest leaders overemphasized space and denied to reconsider plans, occupation of space became an end in itself. Gradually, the cells disappeared and the government regained control, not only over space, but also over the political process. The sense of protest failed to expand beyond Rustaveli Avenue and waned, or at least, receded for the moment. According to social polls conducted in summer 2009, cell protests actually diminished popular support for the opposition (www.liberali.ge 2010).

It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the 2009 protests exemplified “inappropriate politics” and contributed to “protest fatigue” among Georgians (Kabachnik 2012: 18). However, it can also be argued that even if the protests failed to achieve Saakashvili’s resignation, their main goal, they still contributed to a larger political process. At the very least, they demonstrated how people can reclaim authority over public space. These protests can remain as significant historical experiences as long as they remind political authorities of the potential threat of occupation movements. Certainly, the possibility of similar events taking place in the future, with a better-planned strategy, cannot be excluded.

Apparently, Saakashvili considered this possibility. He initiated constitutional changes, moving the Parliament to Kutaisi, the second largest city of Georgia (Tsuladze, Voice of America). It is important to note that, unlike the Tbilisi center, the new location bears no symbolic meaning. The only declared reason for the relocation was the need to diversify political life (Tsuladze, Voice of America). However, the changes were approved hastily, without researching public opinion or consulting the political spectrum. Also, the government singlehandedly delegated construction works to its affiliate company, without announcing bids as required by the law. In the meantime, the Ministry of Economy prepared the old Parliament building for privatization (Tsuladze, Voice of America). Such rushed relocation of the country’s main legislative structure seems to indicate the government’s eagerness to reclaim the Tbilisi center once again and to

avoiding future demonstrations on Rustaveli Avenue. This eagerness can at least partly be attributed to the history of protests, the 2009 cell protests being no exception. Bearing this recent history in mind, it is also symbolic that the new Georgian government, elected in 2012 (somewhat ironically, after massive anti-Saakashvili protests on Rustaveli Avenue), is currently planning to move the Parliament back to the old building in Tbilisi.

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