

**Manana Darchashvili**  
**Main Researcher of Institute of Political Sciences**  
**of Ilia State University**

### **May 26 - the basis of the Referendum dedicated to the declaration of independence of Georgia**

May 26 is a crucial date in the recent history of Georgian politics, which not only decided the fate and future of Georgia in 1918 but also on March 31, 1991, during the first Referendum, because it was on this date that the state independence of Georgia was declared on April 9, 1991, which has an indelible significance in the history of the country.

It is necessary to mention that in the period before the holding of the Referendum - the actual struggle of the country for the restoration of state independence, when in a tense situation, the Soviet Empire, irritated by the independent political course of the government, tried to destabilize Georgia by all means. Parallel to the political processes, the activities of the Abkhazian "Aidgilara" and the Ossetian "Adamon Nikhas" of the separatist organizations managed by Russia intensified, which led to the deepening of ethno-political conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia Autonomous Region.

Georgia fought for freedom within the framework of the existing legislation, on March 9, 1990, a session of the Supreme Council, consisting almost entirely by communists, adopted a resolution on "Guarantees for the Protection of State Sovereignty", which condemned the occupation and actual annexation of Georgia by Soviet Russia in 1921 as an international crime and affirmed that the country strived to cancel the consequences for Georgia of the violation of the treaty of May 7, 1920, and to restore the rights of Georgia recognized by Soviet Russia under this treaty. The session of the Supreme Council, with the same document, recognized the agreement on the creation of the USSR as illegal and invalid and demanded the start of negotiations on the restoration of Georgia's state independence.

Thus, almost 70 years of rule in Georgia, established as a result of Russian aggression, was declared illegal by the Supreme Council of Georgia.<sup>1</sup>

In general, the situation in the Soviet Union between the centre and the republics was greatly aggravated, which is why the Union government decided to hold the Referendum at the end of December 1990 in order to preserve the Soviet Union. March 17, 1991, was set as the date of the Referendum.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>V. Guruli, M. Vachnadze History of Georgia XX century. Tbilisi, 2002, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>The processes taking place during this period were most fully covered in the government newspaper "Republic of Georgia". Therefore, as a primary source, we mainly rely on the materials published in it.

In Georgia, this process led to the necessity to take appropriate measures. In particular, the issue of holding the Referendum in Georgia itself was on the agenda, to which Zviad Gamsakhurdia (at that time the chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic, and later the first president of independent Georgia) paid great importance. At the beginning of December, he said in an interview that the parliament would introduce the law of the Referendum.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, on December 27, 1990, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia adopted a resolution: "Regarding the Referendum" on publication of the draft law of the Republic of Georgia for public discussion. The draft law consisted of 26 articles and included the basic principles of holding the Referendum.<sup>4</sup> Here we find that although the constitutions of the USSR and the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, which were almost identical to each other, provided for the organization of the Referendum, it had only a formal character. Naturally, the Soviet Empire did not allow the republics to do it.

The Referendum project immediately received a wide response from specialists. Remarks were also expressed for the perfection of the project. In general, the adoption of the law on the Referendum by the highest authority of the country was evaluated as a manifestation of true democracy.

On January 29, 1991, the first session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia discussed the issue of the future Referendum of the Union and made a decision that the Republic of Georgia would not participate in that Referendum, and the Republic Referendum was to be held on March 31 of the same year, thus the population of Georgia expressed its attitude to the issue of state independence.<sup>5</sup> "The Law of the Republic of Georgia on the Referendum" consisted of 3 chapters and 30 articles. After discussions, amendments and additions were made to it, which finally determined the manner and procedure of holding the Referendum.<sup>6</sup>

On January 30, 1991, according to the resolution of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, Archil Chirakadze was appointed as the chairman of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Georgia. After that, the Referendum activities became intense and wide-ranging.

On February 28, 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia adopted a resolution - "Regarding the Resolution of the Supreme Council of the USSR on the Organization of the USSR Referendum and the Measures to Ensure It." With this document, the Referendum of the Union

---

<sup>3</sup>Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "About the referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1990, December 7.

<sup>4</sup>The Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, "About the Referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1990, December 28.

<sup>5</sup>Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, "The Law of the Republic of Georgia on the Referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, January 31.

<sup>6</sup>Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, "The Law of the Republic of Georgia on the Referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, February 12

was finally rejected and the resolutions were made: 1. The Referendum appointed by the Supreme Council of the USSR on March 17, 1991 should not be held on the territory of Georgia. 2. In accordance with the Law of the Republic of Georgia on the Referendum, on March 31, 1991, the Referendum on the restoration of Georgia's state independence shall be held in the Republic of Georgia with the only question: "Do you agree to the restoration of Georgia's state independence on the basis of the Independence Act of May 26, 1918?"<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that on March 16, 1991, on Georgian television, Zviad Gamsakhurdia once again noted that the law on the Referendum of the Union was suspended on the territory of Georgia.<sup>8</sup> However, the centre still planned to organize a Union Referendum in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which was devoid of any legal basis and was conducted with unusual, gross violations. Therefore, on March 22, 1991, by the resolution of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, the results of the Referendum of the Union of March 17 were cancelled in Georgia.<sup>9</sup>

March 1991 was politically very active, with a number of the Referendum events taking place almost every day.

On March 31, 1991, the Referendum on the restoration of state independence was held in Georgia. It is true that the Georgian people voted for national sovereignty at least twice - on April 9, 1989, and on October 28, 1990 (during the elections), but a general the Referendum was necessary for the will of the Georgian population to be legally approved now. Hence the only question posed was: "Do you agree with the restoration of Georgia's state independence on the basis of the Independence Act of May 26, 1918?"

We should note the extremely active participation of the population of Georgia in the March 31, 1991 Referendum. Practically, the whole republic came to the polling stations. The Referendum was not held only in the city of Tskhinvali, Java and Kornisi districts. As for Abkhazia, the polling station was not opened here, only in the city of Tkvarcheli, its residents had the opportunity to vote in Ochamchire, and in the Gudauti region, the polling station was opened only in Akhalsopeli. The great civil activity of the non-Georgian population of Javakheti is also noteworthy.

---

<sup>7</sup>The Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, "Regarding the resolution of the Supreme Council of the USSR on the organization of the USSR referendum on the preservation of the Union of the SSR and measures to ensure it", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, March 1.

<sup>8</sup>Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the Union Referendum, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", March 19, 1991.

<sup>9</sup>The Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, the results of the Union Referendum were annulled, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", March 21, 1991.

Observers who arrived in Abkhazia for the day of the Referendum, including representatives from Germany, France, Belgium, Lithuania, Estonia, etc., emphasized the fact that the Referendum in Abkhazia was held in a democratic atmosphere.

On April 4, 1991, a meeting of the Central Referendum Commission was held, at which the results of the March 31, 1991 the Referendum of the Republic of Georgia were summarized. According to the summary, the results were striking. 3,295,493 people (99.08 per cent of the participants in the Referendum) responded positively to the Referendum question. Most importantly, the non-Georgian population of the country also supported the idea of state independence of Georgia.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in accordance with Article 26 of the Law of the Republic of Georgia "On the Referendum", the issue put to the Referendum was considered accepted. With the Referendum, the act of restoration of state independence of Georgia was given a solid legal guarantee.

It was interesting to evaluate the Referendum held in Georgia by the representatives of different countries, some of which we will mention. On April 1, 1991, a press conference dedicated to the Referendum held in order to restore Georgia's state independence was organized in the "Metekhi" hotel, where the international press centre was located. In his speech, the first deputy chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic, Akaki Asatiani, noted that Georgia has taken a decisive step on the way to its independence, that no force can oppose the will of the people, unless, of course, there is military intervention. In addition, he quoted the words of former US President Richard Nixon, 78 years old, who was in Tbilisi on the day of the Referendum: "You can capture land and water, but you can't capture a soul." I hope to attend the day when I come to Georgia once again, but already in free, independent Georgia."<sup>11</sup>

In addition, it was noted with satisfaction that the results of the Referendum revealed the unity of the residents of the Republic regardless of nationality, the unity of the desire for the freedom and independence of their homeland - Georgia, this is natural, because only a free, independent country can ensure equal rights and protection of interests of all its citizens, their potential business and creative opportunities.

It should be noted that the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, often held meetings with foreign guests, of which the meeting with the British Ambassador Rodrigue Braithwaite, who was on an unofficial visit to Georgia, is noteworthy. Zviad Gamsakhurdia presented the British diplomat with the preliminary data of the Referendum held on March 31 regarding the restoration of Georgia's statehood and noted: "The transformation declared in the Soviet Union actually ignores the restoration of state independence of the annexed

---

<sup>10</sup>Central Election Commission, Results of the March 31, 1991 Referendum, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 5.

<sup>11</sup>"About the Referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 2.

states, which indicates the absurdity of the transformation, therefore the process of self-determination of nations would be greatly facilitated by the active intervention of political circles."<sup>12</sup>The guest replied that Great Britain's position is to provide proper support to the people fighting for freedom, in particular, to the development of political, economic and cultural relations between Georgia and Great Britain.

The attitude of foreign experts and journalists attending the Referendum in Georgia as observers of the West and who spread information about the ongoing processes in Georgia in the media of different countries, where their support and goodwill were evident, is particularly noteworthy.

Chairman of the Supreme Council of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, while evaluating the results of the Referendum, in his speech particularly emphasized the fact that the entire population of the Republic of Georgia, both Georgian and non-Georgian, supported the restoration of Georgia's state independence and added: "We are very grateful to our non-Georgian brothers and sisters for they didn't leave us in this hardship and supported us with dignity".<sup>13</sup>

On April 9, 1991, the special session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia adopted the act of restoration of state independence and thereby expressed the will of the people of Georgia. The Act of Independence emphasized: "From now on, the people of Georgia are the bearers of sovereign rights and Georgia is a full-fledged, independent state."<sup>14</sup> Taking into account the will of the people expressed in the Referendum of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, the restoration of Georgia's independent statehood was announced before the civilized nations of the world on the basis of the Act of Independence of May 26, 1918, so that Georgia could take a worthy place in the Commonwealth of the Sovereign States of the World.

It is important to correctly understand the existing difficulties in Zviad Gamsakhurdia's time, which were highlighted in his speech: "It is true, we are aware of the difference that exists between the legal fact of restoring Georgia's state independence and the actual liberation of Georgia from the captivity of the empire, but we must also remember that the legal and legislative basis is the most important for such de jure recognition of Georgia by the states of the world, its entry into the union and other organizations. After that, it became more possible to restore Georgia's independence and negotiate with the centre about the withdrawal of the occupying army.

The Republic of Georgia gives the Abkhazian people a firm constitutional guarantee of preserving their autonomy, and the issue of Ajara's autonomy was to be decided by the Referendum."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 2.

<sup>14</sup> Speech of the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 10

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

Addresses to the peoples of the world were also received at the session, where the desire to engage the freedom-loving country in international democratic cooperation was conveyed<sup>16</sup>.

The Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia II, the head of the Orthodox Church, congratulated Georgia on this remarkable day.

Then the Supreme Council adopted the Law on the Constitution and Legislation of the Republic of Georgia.

On April 11, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia congratulated the entire population of Georgia on the restoration of state independence. It addresses the population to temporarily put aside personal social or political interests and subordinate daily activities to state tasks.

April 9, 1991 - the day of restoration of Georgia's state independence, despite the difference in positions, the whole of Georgia was congratulated by various local political and public organizations. They mentioned that they were doing everything together with the government for the liberation of the country.

Officials of different countries congratulated this fact of the greatest historical importance of Georgia, among which we highlight the statement made by the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania Vytautas Landsbergis on April 9, in Vilnius, at the parliament session, which read: "We congratulate the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia on the act of historical importance of restoring the state independence of Georgia. The direct path will probably be difficult, but it is the path of honour, Lithuania is happy with your decision."<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting to note the 1st session of the 102nd Congress of the United States of America and the 94th resolution of the Senate, which was dedicated to the 2nd anniversary of the punitive operation carried out by the Soviet Union in Tbilisi, Georgia on April 9, 1989, and demanded that the Soviet Union recognize the will of the Georgian people and recognize the legitimacy of the March 1991 Referendum. On this issue in the United States Senate on April 9, 1991, Mr. Hales introduced a resolution that was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations, which naturally has high-level support.

---

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix #1

<sup>17</sup> Greeting telegrams, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 12.

The opinions of Robert English, an American political scientist, and a specialist in Soviet Union-American relations at Princeton University, who was in Georgia at that time, about the political processes in Georgia are noteworthy. He rightly noticed that the desire of the Georgian people for independence was dictated by the conscious need of the majority of its representatives to be free, and to create a civilized democratic state of Georgia. Regarding the results of the Referendum held in the multinational country, he noted: "The majority of the residents of the Republic of Georgia voted for independence and, naturally, to leave the Soviet Union, this is also confirmed by foreign citizens who followed the course of the Referendum." Thus, the majority of representatives of national minorities want the same as you, Georgians, they are with you in the fight for freedom. As for the events in Samachablo, I will say that the Ossetian syndrome was artificially created by the centre. Even the Ossetians recognized it. A few of them think that they are only pawns in a great game.<sup>18</sup>

In such a situation, the Kremlin should have avoided an obvious action against Georgia, because the legitimate government of Georgia was at the head of it. Democracy and legality were the highest postulates in the eyes of the West, and Russia, standing on the path of illusory democratization, had to refuse traditional, imperialist, direct violence. However, the situation became more tense day by day in Shida Kartli (Samachablo). It is significant that the introduction of an additional contingent of internal troops of the USSR into the region of the conflict "coincided" with the Referendum of the Republic of Georgia. This step of the Kremlin was ideologically prepared by the Union press and television, which deliberately darkened the situation in the region with their one-sided, biased information.

Perhaps it was not a coincidence that on April 10, 1991, the day after the Supreme Council of the Republic adopted the Act on the Restoration of Georgian Statehood, units of the internal army, using armoured personnel carriers, disarmed 22 employees of the Georgian militia at a checkpoint in the village of Okona, Kornisi district. On the same day, in the village of Tamarasheni, Tskhinvali region, 48 automatic weapons were confiscated from the employees of the internal affairs bodies of Georgia. 21 police officers were illegally arrested, and the village Of Eredvi, the working room of the district prosecutor was raided, illegal searches were carried out on many families of the villagers.<sup>19</sup>

On April 11, internal army units, which invaded the village of Dvani in the Kareli region under the pretext of cancelling the checkpoint, burned the Church of St. George and the Church of the Holy Trinity - monuments of cultural heritage, which are proof of the spiritual wealth of the Georgian people.

---

<sup>18</sup> Chronicle of the referendum, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 6.

<sup>19</sup> Political processes in South Ossetia, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 12.

Based on the mentioned situation, on April 12, 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia informed the President of the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev and the Minister of Internal Affairs Boris Pugo that the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia categorically demanded that the units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR Union be immediately withdrawn from the territory of Samachablo and that the units of Tskhinvali Military Command appointed by the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia be restored.

The leadership of the Soviet Union was not in a hurry to recognize the important political fact that happened in Georgia. It did not care for the will of the population of Georgia, to which the whole world responded with such a perfect expression.

Against the background of these very important political processes for the country, actually, Georgia was in a state of war, the internal political situation was becoming tense day by day, which resulted in further aggravation of political processes and the country found itself in a miserable state.

In conclusion, the following can be said:

The holding of the general referendum in Georgia on March 31, 1991, was due to the dictation of time, which was correctly calculated by the legitimate government of Georgia - Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his political team.

The Referendum was held in full compliance with legal norms in Georgia. Based on the results of the Referendum, on April 9, 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia executed the will of the Georgian people and declared the state independence of Georgia.

The Referendum held on March 31, 1991, made it clear that the Georgian nation, together with the non-Georgian population of the country, was fully ready for this step. The whole world saw that, under the conditions of free choice, the overwhelming majority of the population of Georgia supported the restoration of state independence.

The Referendum, in one of the most decisive phases of the centuries-long dramatic history of Georgia, it emphatically demonstrated that the entire non-Georgian population of the Republic stood by the Georgians, which once again confirmed the groundlessness of the myth of national intolerance of the Georgian people widely declared by the imperial authorities during the communist rule.

On March 31, 1991, a Referendum was held throughout the whole territory of Georgia, thereby creating a legal guarantee of the country's independence and territorial integrity. Regarding the Referendum held in Georgia 33 years ago, which, apart from the legal one, has a very large political weight and the public opinion is as positive today as it was then.



**Appeal of the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia to the people of the world<sup>20</sup>**

On March 31, 1991, a general referendum was held in the Republic of Georgia, during which the population unanimously supported the restoration of Georgia's state independence based on the "Act of Independence of Georgia " of May 26, 1918.

On April 9, 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia adopted the Act on the Restoration of State Independence of Georgia and thereby expressed the will of the Georgian population.

The leadership of the USSR repeatedly used military force against the peaceful Georgian people fighting for freedom, one of the proofs of which is the tragedy of April 9, 1989. On this day, the units of the Soviet army carried out a barbaric action against the starving youth who wanted the independence of Georgia. Using chemical weapons and hex clay spades they killed tens of people, including many women, and poisoned thousands of people whose lives are still in danger today.

After the communist regime was overthrown in Georgia as a result of multi-party elections on October 28, 1990, the Kremlin declared a clear fight against the Georgian nation, which was manifested in artificially inspired ethno-conflicts, economic blockades, and spreading disinformation about Georgia.

The Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia appeals to the people of the world, all people of goodwill, to support the will of the people fighting for the ideas of freedom, democracy and justice, not to allow the realization of force against it, and to promote the recognition and establishment of the Republic of Georgia in the Commonwealth of Democratic States.

Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic  
of Georgia Z. Gamsakhurdia.  
Tbilisi April 9, 1991.

---

<sup>20</sup> <https://archive.gov.ge/en/sakartvelos-damoukideblobis-aghdgena-1>

## Bibliography

1. "About the Referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 2.
2. Central Election Commission, Results of the March 31, 1991 Referendum, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 5.
3. Chronicle of the referendum, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 6
4. Gamsakhurdia Zviad, "About the referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1990, December 3.
5. Gamsakhurdia Zviad, the Union Referendum, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", March 19, 1991.<sup>1</sup>
6. Greeting telegrams, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 12.
7. Guruli, V. Vachnadze M., History of Georgia XX century. Tbilisi, 2002, p. 170.
8. Newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 2.
9. Political processes in South Ossetia, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 12.
10. Speech of the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, April 10
11. Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, "The Law of the Republic of Georgia on the Referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, January 31.
12. Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, "The Law of the Republic of Georgia on the Referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, February 12
13. The Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, "About the Referendum", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1990, December 28.
14. The Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, "Regarding the resolution of the Supreme Council of the USSR on the organization of the USSR referendum on the preservation of the Union of the SSR and measures to ensure it", newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", 1991, March
15. The Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, the results of the Union Referendum were annulled, newspaper the "Republic of Georgia", March 21, 1991.