
The Critical Position of Soviet Parliament Buildings Today: A Visual Analysis of the Crowds in the Built Environment

Kritični položaj sovjetskih parlamentarnih stavb danes: vizualna analiza množic v grajenem okolju

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Abstract

Nationalist discourses build societal unity by shaping rituals, historical narratives, and collective memory to construct the myth of a nation. Post-Soviet countries offer a unique context for examining the production of nationalism as a transition from a multinational past to a national identity. This process of decommunisation unfolds through the Soviet traces in the built environment. As a physical representation of the state narrative, we focus on the architectural memory and architectonic transformations of Soviet parliament buildings, analysed via large-scale axonometric drawings. Architectural landmarks such as parliament areas have evolved into focal points for confronting the traumatic memory of the second half of the twentieth century. The text focuses on the White House in Moscow, the Verkhovna Rada in Kyiv, the Government House in Baku, the National Assembly Building of Armenia in Yerevan, and the Government House in Minsk. How have communities reacted to the parliament buildings as tangible reminders of their problematic past? Following the methodologies the forensic aesthetic paradigm opened up, we traced the protest's morphology, its form, and the transformations made in the built environment. By analysing videos, photos, and newspaper articles, we mapped out the protests to discuss architecture's role in conveying state narratives.

Keywords: parliament buildings, post-Soviet countries, nationalist architecture, spaces of protest, anatomy of crowds.

Izvleček

Nacionalistični diskurzi gradijo družbeno enotnost z oblikovanjem ritualov, zgodovinskih pripovedi in kolektivnega spomina, da bi ustvarili mit o narodu. Postsovjetske države ponujajo edinstven kontekst za preučevanje nastajanja nacionalizma kot prehoda od večnacionalne preteklosti k nacionalni identiteti. Ta proces dekomunizacije se odvija skozi sovjetske sledi v grajenem okolju. Kot fizično predstavitev državnega narativa se osredotočamo na arhitekturni spomin in arhitektonske preobrazbe sovjetskih parlamentarnih stavb, analiziranih preko velikih aksonometričnih risb. Arhitekturne znamenitosti, kot so parlamentarne površine, so se razvile v osrednje točke za soočanje s travmatičnim spominom na drugo polovico 20. stoletja. Besedilo se osredotoča na Belo hišo v Moskvi, Vrhovno rado v Kijevu, vladno palačo v Bakuju, stavbo nacionalne skupščine Armenije v Erevanu in vladno palačo v Minsku. Kako so se skupnosti odzvale na parlamentne stavbe kot oprijemljive spomine na svojo problematično preteklost? V skladu z metodologijami, ki jih je odprla forenzična estetska paradigma, smo sledili morfologiji protestov, njihovi obliki in spremembam v grajenem okolju. Z analizo videov, fotografij in časopisnih

člankov smo naredili zemljevid protestov, da bi razpravljali o vlogi arhitekture pri posredovanju državnih narativov.

Ključne besede: parlamentarne stavbe, postsovjetske države, nacionalistična arhitektura, prostori protestov, anatomija množic

Introduction

This text explores the complex interplay between nationalism, architecture, and memory in the post-Soviet landscape. It is a reflection on the iconic structures that once symbolised the might and unity of the former Soviet Union – the parliament buildings that stood as architectural testaments to a bygone era. While numerous studies concentrate on the Lenin statues and the politics of memory associated with it (Vlasenko and Ryan 2024; Forest and Johnson 2002; Adams and Lavrenova 2022), this particular contribution focuses on examining the spatial composition of the parliament areas, comprising not only the Lenin statues and the buildings but also the public space that surrounds them. These elements were inseparable in the Soviet era and played a significant role in realising mass political rituals. We propose the spatialisation of five key moments in the nation-building process of five post-Soviet states, looking at how protests unfolded around parliament buildings. What we usually call ‘iconic moments’ of collective memory produce strong visual landmarks at the intersection of symbolic, material, and narrational spheres.

The Soviet Union was formed as a federative system of four states when it was founded, expanding over fifteen republics over time. The political system of the union was formulated around the critical notions of communism and national identity. In Lenin’s strategy, which shaped the states according to geographical, demographic, and cultural concentrations, the federative structure of the USSR was ‘national in form, socialist in content’ (Connor 1984, 513). The states were dependent on the central power of the Socialist Soviet Republic, while the peripheries could maintain their national identity – though under strict surveillance. The formation of a bigger society, called *sovietsky narod*

(the Soviet people), was planned within a comprehensive strategy that united all the nations, ethnicities, and communities under the umbrella of the USSR. Through the Union’s rule of approximately 70 years, the provision of Lenin’s structure transformed from national in form and socialist in content to socialist in form and national in content (Bremmer and Taras 1993). Tunbridge and Ashworth point out that the state buildings and their spatial organisation reflected this political manoeuvre. These structures were used to manage the multi-scaled structuring of the *sovietsky narod* as well as to demonstrate the ability of states to ‘nationalise heritage’ (1996, 57). The public heritage linked to multiculturalism policies aimed at a universal vision, but inevitably caused dissonances with those who have inhabited it. The parliament buildings and the Lenin squares, serving as the spatial concretisation of the central power, became symbols of nation-building, myth-creation, and nodes of criticism against the Soviet Union. Such places were shaped to exemplify the spirit of the Soviet Union in the built environment, promoting homogenisation while conveying identity politics as multinationalism and multiculturalism. The unwavering authority of centralised state power entered into the daily lives of individuals from a wide range of cultures and geographical locations. In their respective regions, they have served as main stages for fostering memory and power. After the dissolution of the USSR, however, the same landmarks became *loci* where societies’ traumatic reactions intensified, fought, confronted the past, and reflected their new political identities. The state buildings of the former Soviet Union gained major visibility with the public, while other existing sites were reinterpreted to fit the Soviet narrative. They highlighted themes such as resistance to oppression and socialist values while minimising cultural

or religious significance. This dissonance created conflicts in public memory, leading to a fragmented understanding of history (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). Along this line of thought, we propose reimagining the architecture and spatial organisation of parliament squares as platforms for public dissent. We will see how they became privileged scenes where societies elaborated on their troubled past. Memory politics relies on public visibility, which aims at fixing certain events or figures in a solid form made of stone or concrete. At the same time, memory activism counters dominant narratives on the same public ground, offering public expressions of critique in a performative dimension (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023; Huyssen 2003). The protests analysed below, we argue, were collective expressions of this kind in a climate of decommunisation.

Nationalist discourses build societal unity by inventing rituals, historical narratives, and collective memory to construct the myth of the nation (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Throughout the post-Soviet countries, this exploration is inseparable from the process of decommunisation – a transformation that goes hand in hand with navigating the delicate transition from a multinational past to the crystallisation of distinct national identities, and strategies for confronting the Soviet traces in the built environment. Andreas Huyssen (1993) critically approaches the relation of monuments and memory from a paradoxical perspective, claiming monuments may stand to remember, while also becoming symbols of forgetting. In a similar vein, the Soviet parliament buildings, with their interpretation and re-interpretation, have been transformed into a tool for not only forgetting the Soviet past and its power, but also remembering the great social movements when seceding from the union. Even if they belong to a traumatic past, the materiality of the parliament buildings prevents the speedy flattening of the historical dimension acquired through media images from obliterating the distance and the forgetting that is needed to form social memory

(Huyssen 1993). Communities have responded to their history under/within Soviet authority, with parliament buildings serving as tangible representations of a challenging past. As such, these physical symbols of collective memories were contested in the processes of a new political consciousness.

Methodology

The spatialisation of political phenomena introduces architectural studies to a sphere of mapping cultural heritage with a new perspective. Human and non-human actors, the crowd and the parliament building, function as a whole corpus to find their own reason for existence. In this contribution we focus on the architectural memory and architectonic transformations of parliament buildings analysed with large-scale axonometric drawings. The axonometric gaze is an abstract point of view, one that does not exist, one that the Modernist architecture adopted because it was supposed to render the visualisation of forms objective. The visibility of state narratives was generally achieved through large squares and boulevards that became scenes of the nation-building process (Avcı Hosanlı and Resta 2021).

The axonometric views proposed in this contribution serve the purpose of mediating the Cartesian organisation of monumental buildings with fleeting snapshots of moments of dissent. In other words, they show the fixed forms of dominant narratives in contrast with the performative acts of dissent. We intend drawing as an interpretative practice to observe and describe historical facts, study the movement of people across the squares, and understand the formation of groups and clearings according to the spatial layout of the squares. Some of these principles have already been implemented in what is called graphic anthropology (Ingold 2011). To examine how architecture conveys state narratives, we will analyse key moments of rallies and protests as depicted in local media, in relation to the visual significance of parliament buildings. Published visual material, combined

together, offers an approximate idea of the spatialisation of the bodies and the objects involved in the protest, which in turn interact with the built environment. According to Elias Canetti's analysis, the destructive power of crowds that damages statues and objects stands for the violation of what they represent. The destruction of the representational is a crack in the solidity of their meaning as they are meant to permeate the symbolic realm for a long time (Canetti 1978, 19). Hence, our attention is directed at episodes of dissent in which the Soviet space is appropriated, defaced, and repurposed. These moments in which national movements have broken the boundaries of centralised authority, social criticism has gained public visibility, and the destructive power of the crowds has shaken the stability of the Soviet Union.

We limited our analysis to five Soviet successor states – the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, and Belarus and their parliament buildings. These structures, designed mostly with an eclectic blend of Stalinist and vernacular architecture, imposed a material homogeneity on distant cities all over the continent. Today, they stand as architectural landmarks, transformed over time into focal points for confronting the traumatic memory of the twentieth century and forging new political identities. Their entanglements with politics make their heritage status particularly problematic, while the transformations these places and their toponyms have undergone reveal rich points of analysis for seeing decommunisation politics at work in Soviet successor states.

The proposed methodology employs CAD drawings, which designers generally use *ex-ante* to anticipate a certain spatial configuration, as a tool for analysis *ex-post*, after the events have occurred. Following the methodologies opened up by the forensic aesthetic paradigm, popularised in forensic architecture's visual investigations (Romeo 2024), we traced the morphology of the protest, its form, and the transformations made to the built environment. By analysing videos, photos, and newspaper articles, we mapped

out the protests, including the anatomy of the crowd, its distribution in the city, the layout of provisional structures, the removal of communist symbols, the creation of murals, the makeshift stage where the agitators spoke from, and their confrontation with the police. Finally, the stage of representation urged us to condense our reflections in visual forms, producing five portraits of protest that best signify these key moments in the urban space.

Stalinist Architecture

Josef Stalin's view was predominantly shaped by the power of discourse, materialising its semiosphere through spatial elements (Adams and Lavrenova 2022). His manifestation of the supremacy of the USSR combined the power of language with the power of architecture (Naiman 2003). The spatial politics of the Stalinist Era was, as a result, formed around the imagery of Soviet cities with ensembles of public squares, monumental buildings for governmental or public facilities, vast city gardens, major streets, and impressive statues of Lenin (Čepaitienė 2015). Soviet life was envisaged on a city scale; the city-planning professionals were to build the urban structure to accommodate the Soviet rituals, culture, and, most importantly, economic activities, which were controlled by the decisions of the party – the Politburo (DeHaan 2013). The design of these Soviet cities was intended to symbolise the narratives that reinforced the centralised power of the union and to visualise the authority of the socialist regime (Chmelnizki 2014). The urban space, mainly turning into the stage for festivals and parades, was constructed for visual propaganda, both for internal and external politics.

Heavily influenced by neo-classical, neo-baroque, neo-gothic, or Byzantine forms, Stalinist architecture was an eclectic blend of historical components and socialist-realist spatial configurations (Khmel-Nitskii 2006). These aesthetics extended beyond the centre, Moscow, to the peripheries and other republics in the union, especially after WWII (or the Great

Patriotic War in Soviet history) as a reconstruction strategy (Khmel-Nitskii 2006). In other cities like Yerevan, Kyiv, and Belarus, Stalinist architecture transformed the city's image with interpretations and influences from vernacular structures and architecture, although each project was strictly controlled and decided by the central government officials.

Various state and party institutions oversaw and directed urban development. The Commissariat of the Municipal Economy (NKKKh RSFSR) and its subordinate bodies, such as the Main Architecture and Planning Administration (GlavAPU), ensured plans aligned with state policies and objectives. Expert councils like the Expert Architectural Council (EAS) and the Scientific-Technical Council provided technical oversight and approval for architectural projects. Centralised planning agencies such as Mosgiprogor and Leningiprogor created comprehensive city plans for various regions, working closely with local city councils. The State Planning Committee (Gosplan) maintained control over the planning process in Russian and Soviet governance (DeHaan 2013). Stalin imposed a uniform architectural style and planning principles on all Soviet cities, using the Moscow City Plan of 1935 as a model to create a homogeneous structure that mirrored Moscow's grandeur and authority. Indeed, the parliament buildings and Lenin Squares, built in Stalinist style, stand at the centre of many cities. They serve as a testament to the propaganda of their time and the materialisation of the Soviet regime's aim to be remembered for centuries to come. (Kalashnikov 2019).

From Dissolution to Decommunisation

Reinforced mainly by the economic crisis and political opponents during Gorbachev's rule, the nations of the USSR endeavoured to gain their independence, national identity, and economic rights. The end of the union witnessed numerous rallies and protests all over its crumbling landscape. One by one, the nations declared independence and seceded from the union (Bremmer

and Taras 1993). The crowds came together in front of the governmental buildings and main squares, showed their renewed remonstrance against the central authority in public, and produced new narratives in their fight for liberty. Being recorded extensively by the media channels, these crowds and their protests became the base for the national collective memory and the heroic saga of the successor states (Grigorevna et al. 2019).

The next phase of these politics focused on erasing their dark past and decommunising their culture and material traces. Some models commonly observed in the post-Soviet landscape include the writing of myths on the binary opposition between the Soviet enemy and a national hero, the destruction of the Lenin statues (or other Soviet symbols) to replace them with national characters, the renaming of Lenin squares as *Independence Square*, *Freedom Square*, etc., commemorating their role in collective resistance, the transformation of public buildings in terms of functional programmes, and the change of public holidays or parades according to the new national history (Grigorevna et al. 2019).

Five Parliaments, Five Protests

Although each nation-state followed its own path and timeline in developing a distinct stance on the legacy of the USSR, we aim to apply a transnational lens and compare their decommunisation effort in spatial terms, by focusing on the visual expression during episodes of protest that contributed to build crucial national histories.

Moscow and the Constitutional Crisis (Black October) – October 1993

The former House of Soviets, now White House, in Moscow's Krasnopresnenskaya embankment alongside the Moskva River, was designed in 1965 by a team called Mosproekt, led by the architect Dmitry Chechulin and inspired by Chechulin's 1935 airport project as a typical expression of Stalinist architecture. From its completion in 1981– with a cost of more than 94

million roubles – to the fall of the Soviet Parliament in 1993, it housed the Supreme Soviet of Russia and became the central place of power (Figure 1). The House of Soviets, symbolising the central power of the USSR, was the main scene of the unsuccessful coup in August 1991. The coup was planned by Vice President Gennady Yanayev with military units such as the Taman and Kantemir division, the Communist Party of Russia, and KGB agents, as an opposition to the New Union Treaty, which reinforced the ongoing economic crisis and the diminished central power of the Soviet Union (Dunlop 2003; White 1992). During the coup attempt from August 19th to 22nd, President Yeltsin called on a determined group of 200,000 civilians to resist. This resulted in a four-day period of intense conflict. Eventually, President Yeltsin delivered a successful political speech from the garden of the House of Soviets, standing atop one of the Taman tanks. Approximately 50,000 people gathered to listen to his speech and support his stance (Gibson 1997). Some results of the failed attempts were drastic: they provided Yeltsin with great power in the union, enabled the expansion of nationalist movements in the peripheries, accelerated the seceding of Ukrainian and Belarusian states from the Union in the coming days, and consequently, led to the dissolution of the Union in four months (Gibson 1997).

Two years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in the Russian Federation, a constitutional crisis and violent civil resistance occurred between the Parliament and president Boris Yeltsin due to opposing political movements (Malinova 2021). On 21 September 1993, when Yeltsin attempted to dissolve the parliament consisting of the Supreme Soviet of Russia and the Congress of People's Deputies, the parliament, as a response, called Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy to become president in place of Yeltsin (Désert 2014). On the 3rd of October, the crowds supporting Yeltsin gathered around the streets of Moscow and were met with a violent attack by the police (Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training n.d.). Although it

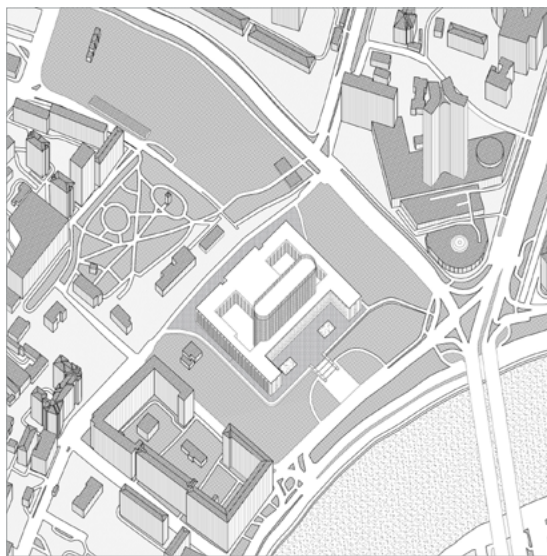


Figure 1: The former House of Soviets, now White House, in Moscow's Krasnopresnenskaya embankment alongside the Moskva River, axonometric view, authors.

had declared neutrality, the Russian Federation's army stormed the House of Soviets, following the order of Boris Yeltsin, from the tanks standing in front of the building. It caused great damage to the building and the lives of people inside the offices, and an end to the constitutional crisis in favour of Boris Yeltsin and his supporters (Koravlev and Alekhin 1993). The existence of tanks and military attacks on the square distanced the crowds from the building even when there were no fences. The result was a form of silent-curious mob, watchful of the fire spreading from the House of Soviets, whose dark smoke in the sky has been captured in several photos.

Eventually, Yeltsin oversaw the reconstruction projects. The responsible bodies decided to change the name of the building to the White House and to install a metal fence around the site to prevent any possible attack. Additionally, public access to the garden of the White House was blocked (Mamaeva 2019).

Baku and the Protests Against Black January – January 1990

The projects for the town planning of Baku, in a land rich in oil deposits, were drafted between the 1920s and 1930s (Crawford 2022). During this period, the Soviet Union organised architectural competitions to shape the urban scene of Baku like a Soviet city. The former Soviet Palace – now called Government House – and the Lenin Square in front of it (Figure 2) were one of the main projects commissioned in Baku (Darieva 2015). In 1934, the Soviet authorities announced a competition for the Soviet Palace, which would serve as a monumental symbol of Soviet power with a square to stage ceremonial mass demonstrations as ‘an integral part of the Soviet life’ (Presidential Library n.d.). The former Soviet Palace, designed by Lev Rudnev – a leading architect of Stalinist Architecture, Vladimir Munts and K. Tkachenko, is one of the most powerful examples of the socialist-realist buildings realised in Soviet Azerbaijan. It has eclectic features, controlled and influenced by the rules of Stalinist architecture drafted from the central authorities (Khmel-Nitskii 2014). The building, designed with baroque and vernacular elements, has a symbolic role in the city’s centre with its monumental scale and local construction materials, being a combination of national and Soviet heritage. It is located in the centre of the city’s coastal line. The Lenin statue and the square in front of the building were designed for mass demonstrations, military parades, and other events, such as commemorations of the October Revolution.

The increased tensions between Azerbaijani and Armenian residents in the Nagorno-Karabakh region led to protests in Lenin Square, with criticisms directed towards the Soviet Union (Mehmood-Ul-Hassan Khan 2014). The Black January protests on 19–20 January 1990, and the military aggression by Moscow to silence Azerbaijani liberationists and enforce control, were the catalysts for Azerbaijani nationalist and anti-Soviet sentiment (Abilov and Isayev 2016). This eventually led to their liberation.

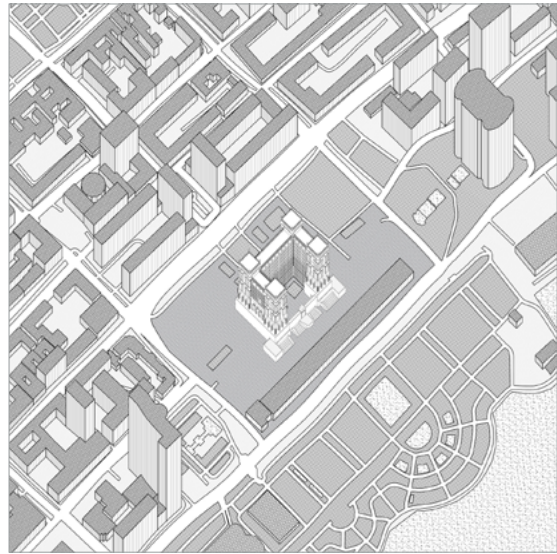


Figure 2: The former Soviet Palace, now called Government House, and the Lenin Square, axonometric view, authors.

Several visuals of the crowds published in newspapers and magazines became symbolic of nation-building processes in the country. After independence, the Azerbaijan Government took several steps to decommunise the urban scene of the city, changed the name of Lenin Square to Azadlıq Square (Liberation Square), removed the Lenin statue and raised the National Flag in front of the building, spent nearly forty million dollars to renovate the former Soviet Palace (Azerbaijan Business Center 2010) – renaming it Government House, and moved the Parliament building to a new place, leaving Government House to host some state ministry offices. Today, the square hosts the grandstand of the F1 Azerbaijan Grand Prix and its pit lane. All these attempts transformed the powerful language of Stalinist architecture into one of the most vital symbols for the roots of Azerbaijan’s national heritage, maintaining the tragic collective memory of Black January and the rampant crowds.

Kyiv and The Revolution on Granite – October 1990

From 1934, the construction of the city of Kyiv as a capital centre resulted in many projects for governmental buildings, including squares and public places that formed a new Soviet urban morphology (Vlasenko and Ryan 2024; Abyzov and Markovskiy 2015). The Verkhovna Rada (Figure 3), a parliamentary building, is situated in the Pecherskyi District, which is the historical and political centre of Kyiv (Abyzov and Markovskiy 2015). This building was built between 1936 and 1938 and designed by Volodymyr Zabolotnyi, who was awarded the title of Chief Architect of Kyiv due to his work on this project (Vlasenko and Ryan 2024). The Verkhovna Rada is located next to the eighteenth-century Baroque Mariinski Palace. During World War II, the structure was damaged and underwent a reconstruction project directed by Zabolotnyi, who followed the original design. As in many of the other cases, the eclecticism of the building was a combination of neoclassical and vernacular architecture – a common design principle of Stalinist architecture in the peripheries (Abyzov and Markovskiy 2015). The building is located in a green area of the district, and its square is smaller than Lenin Square. As a result, during the period of dissolution, main parades and protests took place in what is now Independence Square, which was formerly known as Kalinin Square, Soviet Square, or the October Revolution Square.

One day after the unsuccessful ‘all-Ukrainian rally’ in Kyiv, the liberationist student unions started a hunger strike in the October Revolution Square (Boyko and Kamionka 2023, 58). Their political attempt was unique to the Soviet Union to that point and it was historically one of the most crucial opposition protests in Ukraine (Boyko and Kamionka 2023). Tens of thousands of students on strike were joined by other activists fighting for liberation, such as workers, civilians, and people from neighbouring cities like Lviv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Ivano-Frankivsk

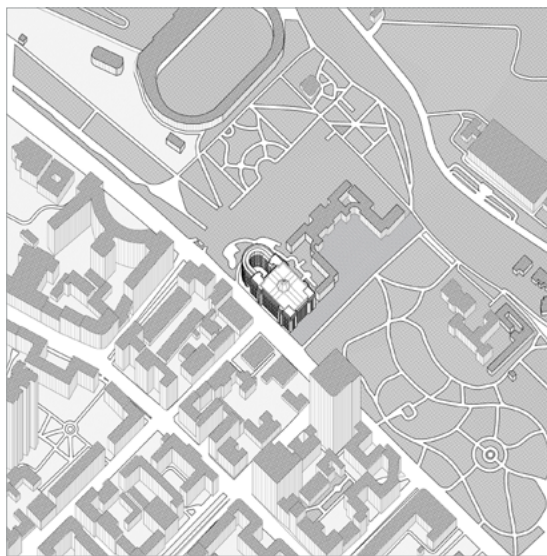


Figure 3: The Verkhovna Rada situated in the Pecherskyi District, axonometric view, authors

(Onuch 2019). They set up thousands of tents in the square on October 10th and made it their base (O'Connor and Tereshchuk 2020). The growing hunger strike was perceived by the authorities as follows:

“There is no doubt,” it is noted in the information of the students’ speech, “that the above-mentioned action is one of the components of clearly planned actions of anti-Soviet, anti-communist, anti-socialist forces” (Rukh – People’s Movement of Ukraine, URP – Ukrainian Radical Party, SNUM – Ukrainian Youth Association, etc.) aimed at seizing power, and dissolving the parliament of the republic. (TsDAHOU, Fund 1, as cited in Boyko and Kamionka 2023, 61)

The inconclusive meetings between the student representatives and deputies resulted in a second hunger strike, similarly organised with pitched tents on the ground (O'Connor and Tereshchuk 2020). It was formed on the evening of 15 October, in the square of Verkhovna Rada, under the name *Freedom Town* (Boyko and Kamionka 2023). This underlines that the protest was accompanied by a specific spatialisation scheme, a self-proclaimed town with an alternative layout of the Soviet public sphere.

The radical and massive demonstrations found echoes in the sessions of the parliament, concluding with an acceptance of the students' speech in the 17 October session, declaring their political demands for the government. After the declaration of independence in 1991, the capital city Kyiv and the parliament building underwent reconstruction projects – the Soviet symbols on the facade removed, the interior decoration renovated, the statues in the front replaced – to solidify the country's decommunisation politics that continued until the destructive effects of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war.

Minsk and the Workers' Rally – April 1991

The Government House in Minsk and the former Lenin Square in front of it, with a monumental statue of the leader (Figure 4), were designed by Iosif Langbard between 1930 and 1934 as an exhibition of Soviet topoi. In fact, Minsk played the role of gate city to the Union, and its monumental space was likely to be visited by Western envoys (Sokolova 2014). It was one of the biggest public squares in Europe of its time, occupying an area of seven hectares (Shostak 2006). The main parades were held in the square, and the building was home to the Politburo and the Communist Party of the Belarussian SSR (Kachanova 2023). During the Nazis' invasion of the city, it underwent many transformations: the Lenin statue was destroyed, and the building was transformed into Germany's official bureau (Kachanova 2023). The Government House was among the few examples that survived Germany's Occupation and the Great Patriotic War (Shostak 2006). Right after the fall of German rule in Minsk, the Soviet authorities reconstructed Lenin Square and re-erected the Lenin statue in its former location with the same material and form (Kachanova 2023; Aksenova and Novikova 2022). Until the workers' rally in April 1991, when the anger of mobs accelerated a public and nationwide demand for the resignation of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and reinforced the anti-Soviet movement (Marples 2004), the square preserved its central power status in the city.

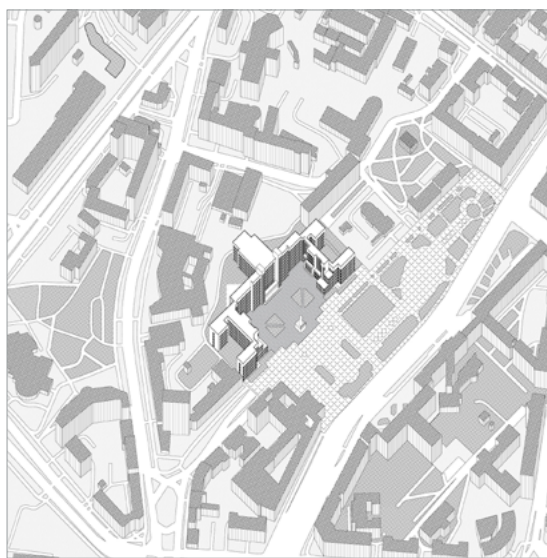


Figure 4: The Government House in Minsk and the former Lenin Square, axonometric view, authors.

On the days of the workers' rally, 3–4 April, 1991 – the largest protest in Belarusian history, above one hundred thousand people gathered in Lenin Square, protesting against unsuccessful policies on agricultural and industrial investments that led to an unprecedented economic crisis, with the Chernobyl catastrophe in the background (Vremia 2021). Due to excessive industrial and technological investments, many Belarusians worked in factories producing tractors, cars, computers, and more. However, the demand of the Union was lower than the supply (Vremia 2021). Over the years, the factories fired many workers. Another turning point was the Chernobyl disaster, which according to the Belarusian Ministry of Emergency Situations, impacted Belarus more than Ukraine and Russia (Vremia 2021). As a result, people could not work in factories or farms. Moreover, prices increased, and Gorbachev raised taxes. This led to a large workers' protest in the capital.

The strike very soon took on a political dimension, requesting the 'Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic', supported by the anti-Soviet Popular Front Party. On the 25 August, the government

officially declared itself as an independent state (Korosteleva et al. 2003). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Minsk witnessed several steps in line with nation-building and decommunisation politics (Korosteleva et al. 2003). The square, once known as Lenin Square, was renamed Independence Square, and the Soviet symbol was removed from the façade of the parliament. However, the statue still stands, representing the government's identity politics, which emerged as a realignment with communist ideologies, also known as ideological recycling (Bekus 2017). The Belarusian government, by maintaining the Lenin statue in front of its parliament building, positions itself as the true inheritor of Soviet heritage.

Yerevan and the 2020 Protests – November/December 2020

The National Assembly Building in Yerevan, formerly known as the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia, was constructed by the chief architect Mark Grigoryan between 1948 and 1950 (Figure 5). It is situated at the centre of the city, on one of the hills, towards the north-western boundary of the old town. This building on Marshal Baghramyan Avenue is an iconic example of Soviet Armenian architecture, serving as a testament to the city's history and culture (National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia n.d.). Even though it occupies a central place in daily life both in the Soviet period and in the Republican era and is listed as National Heritage, the lack of a square in front of it differentiates the experience of the building's public space if compared to the other cases. In Soviet times, the exterior space was heavily policed, with gated control of its spectacular garden and only a limited space for public use in the area adjacent to the avenue (National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia n.d.). In 1924, Tamanyan, the architect in charge of the urban planning project, chose to place the Lenin Square and the Theatrical Square in a plain in the old town, reserving the area called Northern Avenue for Governmental purposes and facilities (Vermishyan

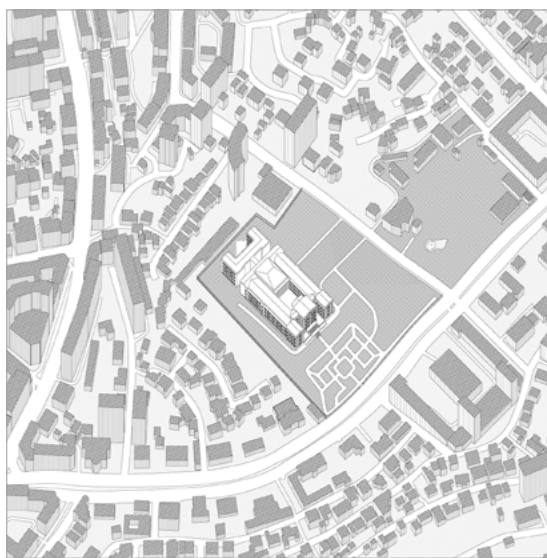


Figure 5: The National Assembly Building in Yerevan, formerly known as the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia, axonometric view, authors.

and Michikyan 2020). The Lenin Square (today's Republic Square) features several governmental buildings, monumental structures, and a Lenin statue at its centre, where Baghramyan Avenue connects the parliament building to the old town. This architectural solution resulted in crowds, parades, and demonstrations being held in what was once called Lenin Square, with only occasional extensions to the area of the parliament building.

The Artsakh Movement, a massive protest that took place against the Nagorno-Karabakh War, provides an interesting case to examine how crowds gathered in the former Lenin Square back in 1991 as it transformed the square's meaning from a protected institutional space to 'a space of protest and struggle' (Vermishyan and Michikyan 2020). This square later became the hub for the liberation movement. For a second time in 2020, people rallied in the Republic Square reaching to the front of the National Assembly Building to protest against the government's actions during the second Nagorno-Karabakh War. From 10 November to 25 December, mobs in Yerevan and all over

Armenia gathered and demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, whom they blamed for the fall of the Artsakh region in the war, calling him a traitor (Associated Press 2020). The protests began when the mob broke into the Parliament building and seized Ararat Mirzoyan, the President of the National Assembly, in their search for Pashinyan (Tass 2020). The aggression and following arrests grew during the two weeks, and people protested also in the Republican Square and the Yerevan Opera Theatre Square, extending to Baghramyan Avenue. On December 9, approximately 15,000 people rallied on Baghramyan Avenue to protest against Pashinyan's rejection of his resignation. The recent two-week protest in December 2020 echoes the crisis that was rooted in the first Artsakh Movement 25 years ago, utilising the space in front of the National Assembly Building as a cross-historical link.

Discussion

The protests mentioned above span from the early 1990s to 2020, showing that the process of decommunisation is a long, tortuous path, marked by political shifts and contested symbolism. Each case is accompanied by a series of studies that provide a deeper understanding of the political history of the dissolution caused in post-Soviet states that we have summarised above. This analysis has a more modest aim to elaborate on a methodology that visually reconstructs the morphology of the protest, based on local press coverage and photos. It is a work-in-progress elaboration that we plan to invigorate with more details while discovering new sources. The austere appearance of public space, static and immutable, became the stage for collective rituals, in which architecture acquired a fundamental persuasive role. The feature of repetition, employed in rituals, verbal formulas, and architectural elements, established a visual code, or style, to achieve a domesticated experience of the crowd performing its aesthetic role (Resta and Gatip 2021).

In the drawings, the built environment is represented in grey, human actors are represented

in red, temporary artefacts constructed by the protesters are in blue, and non-human actors related to the state have golden outlines. The five demonstrations presented above collectively contributed to the reconfiguration of urban spaces, reflecting broader socio-political narratives and shaping the public's interaction with the built environment. In the axonometric view, we can discern the areas under the control of the state and those that were left to the initiative of the crowd. Vegetation played an essential role in the definition of the morphology of the protest because it could limit the visibility of the crowd to itself (see Kyiv and Yerevan).

The drawing of the protest in Moscow (Figure 6) is based on the photos found in the archives of daily Russian newspapers like *Novaya Gazeta* (Новая Газета) and *Svodka Plus* (Сводка Плюс), further supplemented by online public archives of TASS and Radio Free Europe. The black smoke emanating from the upper five levels of the building is the most recurring theme. As Canetti points out, 'of all means of destruction the most impressive is fire. It can be seen from far off and it attracts ever more people' (Canetti 1978, 20). As shown in the axonometric view, the crowd was unable to station itself near the building because military vehicles protected the garden. Another peculiarity is the presence of a river and a bridge that allowed people to follow the event from a distance, staying on the opposite bank of the Moskva River. Eventually, after the flames were put down, the bright white façade of the parliament building shifted to a black-and-white elevation that bore the signs of the political conflict. The dense vegetation on the side facilitated the distancing of onlookers and the surveillance of the adjacent area. The clock tower on top of the building was eventually replaced with a symbol of the Russian Federation and a fence was built, marking some of the few changes executed in the post-protest reparation works. Compared to Moscow, Baku (Figure 7) was the stage of a much more actively participated protest, in which the crowd appropriated the building, used the architectural elements as stages, as is visible in

the photos that appeared in the archives of Russian and Azerbaijan media like *Ekspert Novostey* (Эксперт Новостей), and online public archives of TASS and Radio-Free Europe. The one at the entrance of the neighbouring buildings reads, 'Long Live Free Azerbaijan Without USSR and Comparty of SU!' Many photos from within the protest represent the gathering as a widespread assembly. Using photos sourced from local press outlets, we have reconstructed the original urban space, which has changed due to the presence of a temporary F1 racing grandstand. This structure not only altered the landscape but also obstructed the protests that occurred in Baku in 2020. Back in 19–20 January 1990, cars and buses were parked on the side and in front of the parliament, while the crowd formed a corridor connecting the southwest corner of the protest area with the central area next to the building, from where speeches were delivered. The façade was free from obstacles, and many photographers were able to capture the full extension of the gathering, even from a bird's eye point of view. Considering the design of the building with distinct tiers set back from the one below, protesters were able to reach many different levels and obtain an elevated position on the square. For this reason, among the five cases, the Black January protest is the most three-dimensional expression of dissent. While the public space in Baku was transversal to the entrance, in Kyiv it was much more extended in the parallel direction to the building's axis (Figure 8). Another difference is the presence of an elongated park called Denizkenarı Milli Park (Sea-side national park), with high vegetation, where people could walk but not gather. The Kyiv case, reconstructed through photos in Soviet newspaper archives like *Izvestia* (Известия), *Ukrinform* (Укринформ), and further supplementary online platforms, is characterised by limited visibility. The original form of protest for the Revolution on Granite contemplated the use of tents, which became iconic symbols of resistance. The protest in the square of Verkhovna Rada, as opposed to October Revolution Square (today's Independence Square),

was limited to an array of three rows of tents, spaced two metres apart, where people could sit and speak from a megaphone. Indeed, the idea was to visually organise a temporary settlement, free in spirit and form, in contrast with the austere geometry of the large parliament building. The latter was guarded by a row of soldiers, standing one next to the other to form a rectangular buffer area at the entrance of the building. This geometrical arrangement is captured in several shots. In essence, the Kyiv demonstrations created a close confrontation between the state and the people, with strong symbolic gestures. All the communist symbols on the buildings are now removed, and the building still stands despite the ongoing Russian offensive against Ukraine. Minsk poses the case of a concave parliament design that embraces an open space, allowing the crowd to get a central position with the scenography of the building in the background (Figure 9). The visual material gathered via Soviet Newspaper Archives of *Izvestia* (Известия), *Moskovskie Novosti* (Московские Новости), and online platforms shows that the podium of the Lenin statue became the main stage. The first page of *Moskovskie Novosti* (Московские Новости) published a photo of climbing workers rising in the foreground, in symbolic confrontation with the statue in the background. Another stage was mounted on the same line of sight, more detached from the building, so that it could be seen from all directions. The bulk of the crowd formed a P-shaped footprint, concentrating in the building's courtyard and Lenin Square (today's Independence Square). This public space was particularly favourable to the protest because it had no obstacles (i.e. river, vegetation), so the assembly gained maximum visibility. Finally, the more recent case of Yerevan is much more documented due to the multiple sources available (newspaper, social media, official reports). The morphology of the protest is very different from the previous one because the premises of the parliament building were heavily fenced and guarded (Figure 10). The crowd staged a parade-like demonstration that took the shape of the large boulevard on which

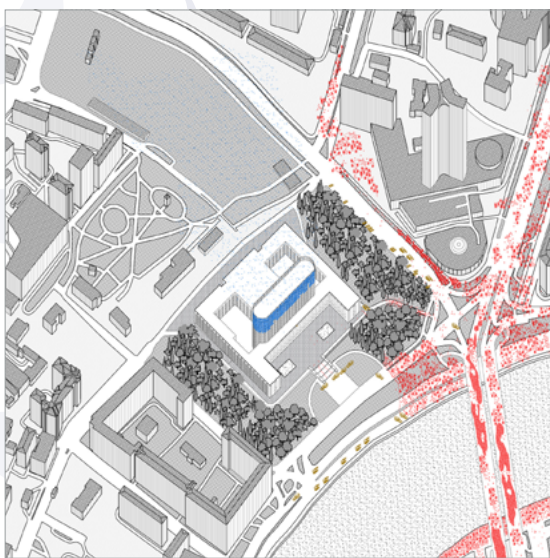


Figure 6: Moscow and the Constitutional Crisis (Black October) – October 1993, axonometric view, authors.

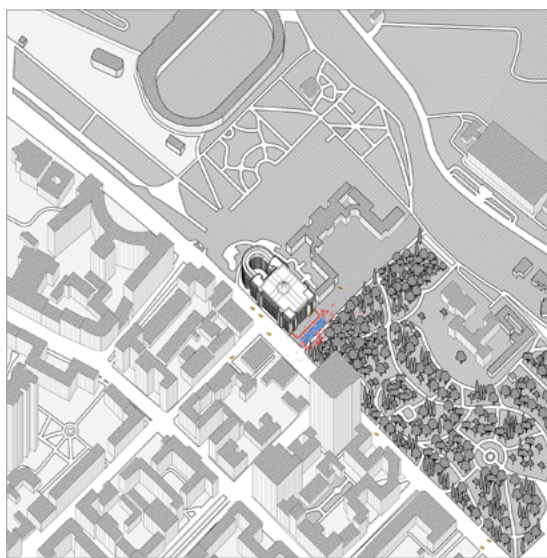


Figure 7: Baku and the Protests Against Black January – January 1990, axonometric view, authors.

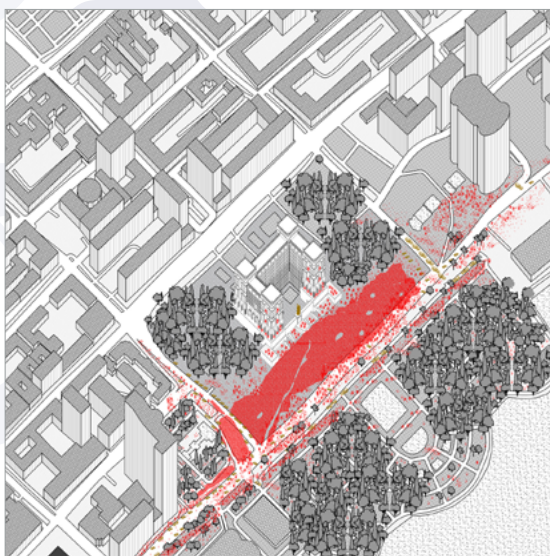


Figure 8: Kyiv and The Revolution on Granite – October 1990, axonometric view, authors.

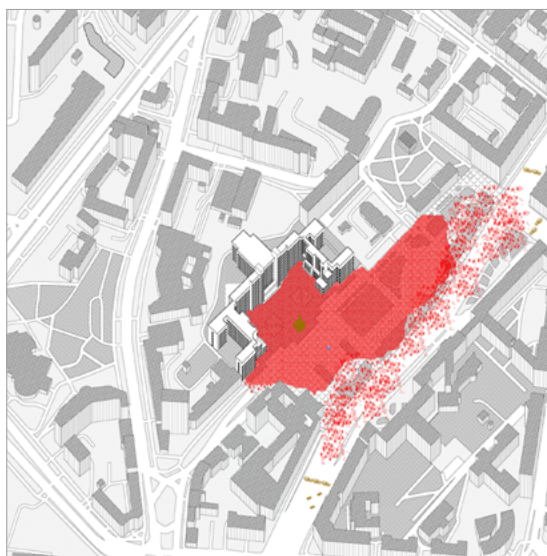


Figure 9: Minsk and the Workers' Rally – April 1991, axonometric view, authors.

it passed by. It was dynamic, extremely longitudinal, and distanced from the building. All stages were mobile, arranged on cars or carts, while the military presence headed the protest to maintain order. In this stance, the parliament building, as the symbolic target of the protest, was

at a distance, left untouched and protected from the actions of protesters.

Conclusions

Each of the urban squares discussed exhibits distinct morphological characteristics, dynamic



Figure 10: Yerevan and the 2020 Protests – November/December 2020, axonometric view, authors.

processes, and underlying reasons, all of which have been intricately shaped by their respective topographies and spatial configurations. The transformation of these landscapes of three-dimensional physical spaces has its origins in the ideological realms and the morphological characteristics of the assembled crowds. This initial phase of transformation is further augmented and reinforced through the narrational and political reproduction of a collective memory of decommunisation. Architectural studies generally represent state buildings erected by autocratic regimes in their pristine forms after the inauguration. At that stage, which corresponds to the design that was drafted on paper, public space is a materialisation of the propaganda machine (Resta 2019). In this article, we have analysed the very opposite: the stage of crisis of the monumental square against the rage of the protesting crowds.

The cross-analysis of textual, photographic, and video sources helped us reconstruct the geometry of fleeting moments against the stability of architectural edifices that were built to embody an immutable cornerstone of the state. The violation of its skin, like in the case of Baku,

was interpreted as the strongest stance of the crowd taking over the power. Also, the removal or the replacement of the statue is another clue as to how the symbolic and spatial focus of Soviet squares shifted in the 1990s. One can compare what was added and removed before and after the protest to read into the facts that unfolded in only a few hours, but set the direction of a country.

A detailed examination of these factors opened a deeper understanding of the multi-layered nature of urban square transformations during decommunisation efforts, which are not merely physical alterations but also reflections of changing societal values and historical contexts.

The photographic documents, combined together, offer an idea of the embodiment of the protest, allowing drawings to freeze ephemeral actions that survived in the memory of post-Soviet societies. In this way, those fleeting events that marked a stage of political self-awareness gain the same level of visibility as the built environment.

The idea of dissonance suggested in the introduction is rendered in a new format, in which the drawing overlaps the built environment, designed on paper by an autocratic government, with the disruptive uses enacted by collective unrest.

Finally, we have highlighted the importance of non-human actors in shaping the protest. Rivers, trees, streets, cars, and surrounding buildings became part of the crowd's tactic to gain its maximum level of visibility in front of the seat of power. The multi-layered and multi-temporal snapshots proposed in this article allow for the investigation of urban spaces during specific incidents, blending history with journalism. Through such a forensic approach to the imagery of the protest and its spatialisation, we can open new frontiers of historical and political studies in which drawings combine information that written sources can only partially communicate. At the same time, this is a common ground in which architectural history and heritage studies can communicate with different disciplines.

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Summary

This paper investigates how Soviet and post-Soviet parliament buildings became stages where state power and collective memory collide, using five case studies – Moscow, Baku, Kyiv, Minsk, and Yerevan – to read protests through the geometry of the built environment. The authors situate these buildings within a Stalinist planning logic that paired monumental institutions with vast squares for ritualised mass performance, producing a spatial toolkit – axes, voids, pedestals, parade grounds – meant to visualise centralized power and a federative 'Soviet people'. After 1991, the same architectures were re-scripted as arenas of dissent and nation-building, as decommunisation policies re-

moved symbols, renamed squares, and reprogrammed spaces. The article's method blends media archaeology (photos, videos, press) with large-scale axonometric drawings to map crowd morphology, temporary structures, barricades, police lines, and the symbolic removal or survival of monuments. Drawing functions here like 'forensic' analysis: it freezes ephemeral movements against static edifices to reveal how non-human actors – rivers, trees, fences, boulevards – shape visibility, circulation, and confrontation.

In Moscow's 1993 constitutional crisis, the White House's defensible gardens, river frontage, and armoured cordon pushed the public into watchful perimeters; fire and smoke became the protest's graphic signature as tanks shelled the façade, followed by securitisation (fences) in reconstruction. In Baku (Black January, 1990), Government House's tiered massing and broad, obstacle-free square invited vertical and horizontal appropriation: crowds climbed levels, formed processional corridors, and left murals – an especially three-dimensional dissent. Kyiv's 1990 Revolution on Granite organised tents first in Independence Square and then at the Verkhovna Rada, producing an intentional 'town' plan that contested austere geometries; soldiers' cordons inscribed a rectangular buffer, making a face-to-face diagram of state vs. crowd. Minsk's Independence Square, a vast concave parterre, staged a workers' rally (1991) with Lenin's plinth as podium; despite renaming and some removals, Lenin's statue persists as an 'ideological recycling' of Soviet identity. Yerevan's parliament lacks a front square; protests (2020) therefore elongated along Baghramyan Avenue, distanced by fences and policing, with mobile stages and longitudinal flow linking the parliament to Republic Square – re-activating spatial lines first politicized during the Artsakh movement.

Across cases, the authors show how protest diagrams are co-produced by terrain and urban form: rivers enable spectatorship at a distance; tree belts occlude self-visibility; pedestals and terraces afford elevation; fenced setbacks compress or deflect assemblies. Axonometric overlays reveal how short bursts of action reconfigure monumental ensembles and how decommunisation's edits (names, symbols, programmes) sediment into new narra-

tives. The article proposes architectural drawing as a comparative language for memory activism, translating dispersed media traces into legible spatial histories of dissent.

Povzetek

Članek raziskuje, kako so sovjetske in postsovjetske parlamentarne stavbe postale prizorišča trka med državno močjo in kolektivnim spominom. Na petih študijah primerov – Moskva, Baku, Kijev, Minsk in Erevan – avtorja bereta proteste skozi geometrijo grajenega okolja. Te stavbe umeščata v stalinistični načrtovalski okvir monumentalnih institucij in velikih trgov za ritualizirane množične predstave, ki naj bi vizualizirale centralizirano oblast in federativno »sovjetsko ljudstvo«. Po letu 1991 so iste arhitekture dobile nove scenarije kot arene upora in oblikovanja nacije; politike dekomunizacije so odstranjevale simbole, preimenovalle trge in spreminjale rabe. Metoda, predstavljena v članku, združuje medijsko arheologijo (fotografije, videi, tisk) z velikimi aksonometrijami, ki kartirajo morfologijo množic, začasne strukture, barikade, policijske kordone ter simbolne odstranitve ali ohranitve spomenikov. Risba deluje kot »forenzični« instrument: zamrzne minljive premike ob statičnih stavbah in pokaže, kako nečloveški akterji – reke, drevoredi, ograje, bulvarji – oblikujejo vidnost, kroženje in konfrontacijo.

V Moskvi (ustavna kriza 1993) so se obrambni vrtovi Bele hiše, reka in oklepni obroč množice odmaknili na opazovalne obode; ogenj in dim sta postala grafični podpis protesta, rekonstrukcija pa je uvedla dodatno varovanje (ograje). V Bakuju

(Črni januar 1990) sta stopničena masa Vladne hiše in širok, neoviran trg omogočila vertikalno in horizontalno apropiacijo: množice so se vzpenjale po ravneh, oblikovale procesijske koridorje in puščale grafite – posebej tridimenzionalen izraz upora. Kijevska revolucija na granitu (1990) je šotore najprej postavila na Trg neodvisnosti in nato pri Vrhovni radi; nastal je namerni »mestni« tloris, ki je izzval strogo geometrijo stavbe, medtem ko je kordon vojakov zarisal pravokotni varnostni pas – diagram soočenja države in ljudi. V Minsku je delavsko zborovanje (1991) Leninov podstavek uporabljalo kot oder na ogromnem, konkavnem trgu; kljub preimenovanju in delnim odstranitvam Leninov kip predstavlja primer »ideološke reciklaže«. V Erevanu parlament nima velikega predprostora; protesti (2020) so se zato raztegnili vzdolž Avenije Baghramjan, z ograjami in s policijo, z mobilnimi odri in longitudinalnim tokom, ki povezuje parlament z Trgom republike –ponovno aktiviranje linij, politiziranih že v času gibanja za Arcah.

Skupni imenovalec primerov: protestne diagrame sooblikujeta teren in urbanistična forma. Reke omogočajo distancirano opazovanje, drevje zakriva samovidnost, podstavki in terase omogočajo elevacijo, ograjeni odmiki stiskajo ali preusmerjajo zborovanja. Aksonometrijski prekrivki pokažejo, kako kratki izbruhi dogodkov rekonfigurirajo monumentalne ansamble in kako se urejanja dekomunizacije (imena, simboli, programi) usedajo v nove narative. Članek arhitekturno risbo razume kot primerjalni jezik za aktivizem spomina: razpršene medijske sledi prevede v berljive prostorske zgodovine upora.