



International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Scholarly Publisher
RS Global Sp. z O.O.
ISNI: 0000 0004 8495 2390

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ARTICLE TITLE

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COMMUNICATION

ARTICLE INFO

Thea Shavladze. (2025) Political Graffiti as a Type of Political Communication.
International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science. 1(45). doi:
10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3284

DOI

[https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.1\(45\).2025.3284](https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3284)

RECEIVED

11 February 2025

ACCEPTED

21 March 2025

PUBLISHED

28 March 2025

LICENSE



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POLITICAL GRAFFITI AS A TYPE OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examines political graffiti as a significant form of street art and political communication. This urban expression reflects both contemporary social issues and global tensions, while simultaneously revealing nationalist, racist, and homophobic ideologies. Urban walls serve as valuable research sites, functioning as "litmus paper" that captures major social shifts and eruptions of contradictory opinions. Through this lens, we can observe the visual documentation of both domestic and international political dynamics.

This article examines the role of political graffiti in Batumi (a small town in Western Georgia), how graffiti artists shape public discourse, what types of political issues appear in these works, and how the city government responds to political inscriptions.

KEYWORDS

Political Graffiti, Political Discourse, Protest, Political and Social Problems, Propaganda

CITATION

Thea Shavladze. (2025) Political Graffiti as a Type of Political Communication. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 1(45). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3284

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INTRODUCTION

Graffiti ranks among the oldest forms of human expression, gaining particular significance during periods of social and political upheaval. In our era, graffiti transcends mere wall decoration. It serves as a vital tool for disseminating revolutionary ideas, reflecting pressing political and social issues, and functioning as a form of propaganda that can profoundly impact society. Graffiti provides a means of expressing civil-political positions in a non-violent yet often risky manner. Political graffiti acts as a historical document—a "time capsule" that captures and preserves the essence of a particular period.

The history of political graffiti goes back to the Ancient Roman Empire, where graffiti was used to express dissatisfaction with the ruling elite. Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries graffiti has been used as a tool of protest and political expression. (Garlin, 2025:1)

A. Pavoni, Y. Zaimakis, and R. Carpos in their scientific article "Political Graffiti in Critical Times" draw the reader's attention to the long history of political graffiti: "The political use of graffiti as a means of self-expression and critique, especially in contexts of reduced freedom of expression, has been documented over many centuries, from the Roman and Umayyad empires to Franco's Spain and Chile's Pinochet dictatorships; from the antifascist graffiti written in the Milan subway by Italian fighters (Fabbri 2007: 418), in Rome's Nazi prison by political detainees (Pugliese 2002) during the Second World War, and in Berlin's Reichstag by Soviet soldiers in 1945 (Baker 2002; Burdick and Vicencio 2016) to those employed as a means of communication among exiles on isolated Greek islands during post-civil war Greece (Mamoulaki 2013)." (Pavoni, 2021:11)

The authors also differentiate between ordinary and political graffiti, emphasizing the individualistic character of ordinary graffiti: "While graffiti have often been tied to an individualist subculture, political graffiti are usually produced through collective action, at the coming together of writers, artistic collectives, activists." (Pavoni, 2021:10). Thus, political graffiti is created by urban activists, marginalized people, and

political actors who either lack access to institutionalized forms of political participation or believe that conventional politics will not bring about the desired change (Waldner, 2013: 387).

Identified by Waldner and Dobratz as a type of political discourse, street art serves to spread ideas and values, as well as to voice grievances and disputes. Graffiti, as a medium of protest, has long symbolized resistance, especially in contexts where traditional avenues of opposition are restricted.

A. Haider draws readers' attention to the twofold character of political graffiti: its ephemeral quality and its enduring power. The same topic is discussed by S. Philips in one of her scientific papers: "Political graffiti is a critical intervention in urban space, especially as municipalities and police attempt to shut down the streets. Even after protests have dispersed, graffiti stands as a testament to the protestors' collective voice... The graffiti may soon be washed away, but not before it is documented, becoming part of history."

S. Awad in her article "Is graffiti an act of resistance?" underlines the importance of graffiti especially during difficult periods in a country's history: "The influence of graffiti messages often come to the fore in times of political and social turbulence, when an inclusive political dialogue is most needed but is not accessible to all social groups. In times when political struggle is about visibility and presence, and opposition groups strive to challenge authority's monopoly over the representation in public space, graffiti messages come to assert the right to self-representation and active presence in public space." (Awad, 2019:1)

Graffiti artists often feel a need to scrawl political statements on walls, even if it has no impact, to affirm their presence in public space, a presence that demands recognition even if none is in the end forthcoming.

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH RESULTS

Street art and graffiti in Georgia have a long and rich history, dating back to the Soviet era. During this period, street art functioned as a form of political dissent and rebellion against the oppressive regime. Graffiti artists utilized public spaces to express their dissatisfaction with the government and to disseminate messages of hope and freedom.

Political graffiti in Batumi, Georgia, provides a unique window into the region's social, political, and cultural landscape.

Batumi, like many cities in the former Soviet Union, displays political graffiti that reflects the tension between post-Soviet nostalgia and national identity. Some murals reference Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union and the ongoing struggle for national sovereignty. Political graffiti in Batumi frequently highlights resistance against corruption, government oppression, and issues related to economic inequality.

Batumi, a Black Sea coastal city, has a rich cultural mix, and this diversity is reflected in political graffiti. There is a blend of Georgian, Turkish, and European influences, with many pieces expressing a desire for greater European integration and Western-style democracy.

Graffiti often serves as a medium for youth expression, giving young people a voice in political discourse. Batumi has seen a rise in this form of activism, with university students and young artists using public spaces to discuss issues like youth unemployment, freedom of speech, and government reform.

As a popular tourist destination, Batumi's graffiti also serves as a form of "art tourism." Some political murals are designed to intrigue or provoke thought, acting as both political commentary and a draw for visitors. In some cases, tourists contribute to the graffiti culture by adding their own commentary on social and political issues.

The political graffiti in Batumi is dynamic, often changing in response to current events. Protests, elections, and significant political movements influence the imagery found on walls, making the city's street art scene a live commentary on the shifting political climate.

Batumi's historical significance, as a major trade city and port on the Black Sea, has made it a point of intersection for various political powers. Graffiti in the city often reflects historical struggles, like Ottoman rule, Soviet occupation, and the push for Georgian national identity.

Batumi's political graffiti is also a form of protest. In some instances, it directly challenges the status quo, taking on issues such as land privatization, inequality, and environmental issues, especially concerning the region's rapid development and the impact on its natural landscape.

My aim in the following article is to study what is the role of political graffiti in Batumi, what role do graffiti artists play in shaping public discourse, what types of political issues are depicted in them, how the government of the city react to political inscriptions.

Before examining the examples of political graffiti collected by me (the empirical material was gathered in winter, 2025), it is necessary to analyze current political situation in the whole country and especially in Batumi.

Batumi is a Black Sea resort and port city. It is the capital of the Georgian republic of Adjara. It has always been a hospitable, cosmopolitan city, where people of different nationalities lived side by side

(particularly in the Soviet Union period). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, number of Russians, Armenians, Azerbaijanians, Ukrainians, etc. decreased.

The Russian-Ukrainian War (2022) significantly impacted life in Batumi. Initially, Ukrainian refugees began settling in the city, soon followed by tens of thousands of Russians in early 2022. Currently, a substantial number of Russians and Ukrainians live in Batumi. They have established residences and businesses, and the Russian language is now commonly heard throughout the city.

Georgians strongly oppose the Russian invasion and view Russia as an enemy and oppressor. Consequently, anti-Russian statements such as "Russia is a terrorist state," "Russians go home!" and "No to Russian Occupation!" appear on building walls, entrances, doors, asphalt, window blinds, and any surface with sufficient space for expression.

In the city center, one encounters political messages of various types: pro-Ukrainian, anti-Turkish, anti-Russian, pacifist, and homophobic captions condemning Putin's military aggression, among others.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, initiated by Russia's invasion in February 2022, escalated into a complex and multifaceted war. This reality is depicted in numerous graffiti throughout Batumi. The war in Ukraine is condemned as terrorism, with Putin held responsible. Statements such as "Stop War" and "Fuck Putin" visible throughout the city demonstrate Georgians' negative attitude toward Russian President Vladimir Putin and his violent foreign policy in general.



In Batumi, alongside the civic protests of 2024, graffiti emerged as a vibrant tool to express public discontent.

Many citizens of Georgia believe their country has a pro-Russian government. In early 2024, Georgia's parliament passed a "foreign agents" law that closely mirrored Russia's legislation, sparking widespread protests and international concern. Critics viewed the law as a threat to media freedom and Georgia's aspirations to join the European Union. Loud protests against the ruling government "Georgian Dream" and its Russian-aligned politics are expressed in graffiti examples such as: "Down with Georgian Dream," "Say No to System!" "Say No to Russian Law!" and "No Justice, No Peace!" (The slogan "No Justice, No Peace" has been used in various protests and movements to emphasize the interdependence of justice and peace).



Political graffiti declaring "Freedom to Mzia" has emerged across multiple locations throughout Batumi, transforming city walls into visual markers of political dissent. Mzia Amaglobeli, founder and director of the media outlets Batumelebi and Netgazeti, was arrested on January 12, 2025, under Article 353 of the Criminal Code, which specifically pertains to assaults on police officers. Through this political graffiti, Batumi protesters demand the release of what they consider a political prisoner. Graffiti stating "Go on Strike!" or "Don't give up" call on Batumi citizens to participate in protest marches and rallies against Russian influence. Political slogan "Take back Batumi" in the form of graffiti reflects local residents' perception that their town is experiencing occupation by Russians. These simple political statements on building walls are striking and possess significant persuasive power.



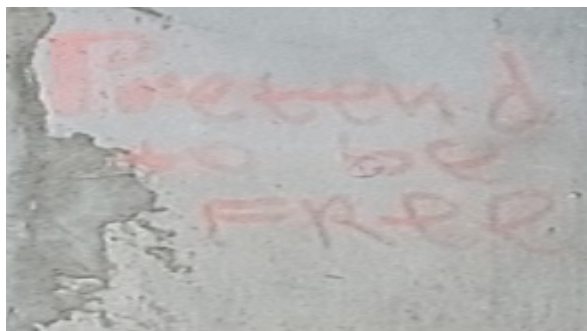
In Batumi streets, one can encounter political graffiti with the phrase "შე ქოცო." This Georgian expression carries a derogatory meaning and is commonly used to insult or criticize someone, particularly in political contexts. The word "ქოცო" refers to a supporter of the Georgian Dream party, while "შე" functions as an interjection that intensifies the insult. The phrase is typically employed in a mocking or negative manner to label someone as blindly loyal or submissive to the political party, often implying a lack of independent thought or critical judgment.



Anti-Russian and anti-Turkish statements are found in various locations throughout Batumi. These statements are primarily written in English and frequently contain vulgarisms and obscene, abusive vocabulary (including terms like "dick," "dickhead," "fuck," etc.).



The phrase "Pretend to be free" is notably featured in a powerful quote by Ijeoma Oluo: "The beauty of anti-racism is that you don't have to pretend to be free of racism to be an anti-racist. Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, including in yourself. And it's the only way forward." This phrase is used by graffiti artists in a political context. The implication is that Georgians pretend to be free despite knowing they are under Russian occupation.



Graffiti has gained increasing resonance in our time, as evidenced by the immediate reactions of authorities and influential figures — whitewashing walls containing undesirable texts, creating counter-graffiti, or completely repainting surfaces. Local authorities erase political messages painted on both public and private property to maintain control over public space, prevent the spread of dissenting or controversial messages, and suppress certain viewpoints.



CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study indicate that graffiti represents a unique form of political expression that contrasts with statements conveyed through more conventional forms of discourse. Political graffiti in Batumi, Georgia offers a unique glimpse into the region's social, political, and cultural landscape.

Political graffiti holds limited power in Batumi. It merely echoes political messages or slogans already circulating on television, social media, and at demonstrations and protest marches. While political graffiti enables the voices of marginalized classes to be heard, their civic-political positions receive little attention - the dogs bark, but the caravan moves on. Furthermore, political graffiti in Batumi is ephemeral in nature. Harsh, undesirable texts are quickly erased, leaving no trace of their political message.

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