

**REPORT ON  
THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS  
IN GEORGIA  
APRIL 9, 2000**



**A Report Prepared by the Staff of the  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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WASHINGTON:2000

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The OSCE is engaged in standard setting in fields including military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns. In addition, it undertakes a variety of preventive diplomacy initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States.

The OSCE has its main office in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations and periodic consultations among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government are held.

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The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), also known as the Helsinki Commission, is a U.S. Government agency created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance with the agreements of the OSCE.

The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. House of Representatives, nine members from the U.S. Senate, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair are shared by the House and Senate and rotate every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

To fulfill its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates information on Helsinki-related topics both to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports reflecting the views of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing information about the activities of the Helsinki process and events in OSCE participating States.

At the same time, the Commission contributes its views to the general formulation of U.S. policy on the OSCE and takes part in its execution, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings as well as on certain OSCE bodies. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from OSCE participating States.

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## REPORT ON THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN GEORGIA

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On April 9, 2000, Georgia held a presidential election. According to the Central Election Commission, turnout was almost 76 percent. Incumbent President Eduard Shevardnadze won reelection with about 80 percent of the vote. Former Communist Party boss Jumber Patiashvili came in second, with 16.6 percent. The other candidates on the ballot were largely irrelevant.
- Shevardnadze's reelection was no surprise, having been predetermined by the October 1999 parliamentary contest, when his ruling party, the Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG), handily defeated the opposition Batumi Alliance. The CUG's triumph, despite its flagging reputation amid widespread discontent, demonstrated the party's influence over election commissions country-wide, as well as the power of incumbency in the absence of a credible alternative, and ensured Shevardnadze a second five-year term six months later.
- Though Shevardnadze's victory was anticipated, it remained unclear until election eve whom he would defeat. Batumi Alliance leader Aslan Abashidze, boss of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria, had announced last year plans to mount a presidential race, but many expected him to drop out, as he had no real chance of winning. By threatening a boycott, Abashidze won concessions from the CUG on the election law, but his overall strategy collapsed when his Batumi Alliance colleague, Jumber Patiashvili, announced plans to run against Shevardnadze no matter what. One day before the election, Abashidze withdrew, leaving Patiashvili as Shevardnadze's only serious contender.
- The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights election observation mission began its assessment by stating that "considerable progress is necessary for Georgia to fully meet its commitments as a participating state of the OSCE." Among the problems in the election, ODIHR noted, *inter alia*, the authorities' support for the incumbent, the failure of state media to provide balanced reportage, and the dominant role of the CUG in election commissions at all levels. While voting was generally conducted "calmly," the "counting and tabulation procedures lacked uniformity and, at times, transparency." The ODIHR also observed ballot stuffing and protocol tampering.
- Considering the widespread cynicism and apathy among voters, the official results, especially turnout, strained credulity beyond the breaking point. Despite Shevardnadze's denials of chicanery, even his advisors and allies concede—some publicly, some privately—that the tallies were falsified, and blame local officials eager to present Shevardnadze with a landslide. While everyone agrees nobody could outpoll Shevardnadze, the announcement of implausible totals has discredited Georgia's democratization. Nor has Shevardnadze's own standing improved, as he has been reelected with figures more typical of Central Asian dictatorships than had been expected in reformist Georgia.
- Shevardnadze's priorities now involve addressing the related problems of economic decline and rampant corruption. Georgia has an abysmal record in tax-collection, with a debilitating impact on state revenues: the government owes \$175-200 million in unpaid wages and pensions. After the October parliamentary election, Shevardnadze undertook no bold anti-corruption initiatives, apart from creating yet another commission. But many hope that with the election behind him and mind-

ful of his place in Georgian history, he will finally display the necessary statesmanship to put Georgia's fiscal house in order. Shevardnadze would have to arrest corrupt officials, dismiss others, create new law enforcement structures, and – considering stories openly reported in the Georgian press— perhaps move against his own family members and relatives.

- According to Georgia's constitution, Shevardnadze may not run again. For several years, the two leading contenders to succeed him have been Zurab Zhvania, Speaker of Parliament, and State Minister Vazha Lortkipanidze. But after the election, Shevardnadze replaced Lortkipanidze. Though Zhvania now clearly leads the field, the strongly pro-Western, pro-reform Speaker is also identified with current power structures and current problems, and whether the ruling party can improve living standards will affect his chances.
- Shevardnadze's prospects for resolving the conflict in Abkhazia are bleak and he has little reason to expect help from Russia. Since the beginning of Russia's latest campaign against Chechnya, Moscow has accused Tbilisi of allowing or abetting the transit of Chechen fighters through Georgian territory. These allegations also aim to pressure Georgia in negotiations about the withdrawal of Russia's four military bases. High-level Russian political and military figures have made it plain that Moscow will try to retain the bases and will reassert its interests in the region to counter gains by Western countries, especially the United States.
- Tbilisi will need help from the United States in resisting a newly aggressive Moscow. Eduard Shevardnadze has long enjoyed good relations with Washington, which gratefully remembers his contribution as Soviet Foreign Minister to ending the Cold War peacefully. The United States has provided substantial assistance to Georgia and backed Shevardnadze morally as well. Presumably the congratulations tendered at the beginning of the State Department's April 10 statement reflected appreciation for his past services, rather than acceptance at face value of the election's results. President Clinton noted the election's shortcomings in a post-election letter to Shevardnadze, reiterated Washington's longstanding exhortation to attack corruption, and pressed him to implement urgent economic changes.

## **BACKGROUND**

Georgia's anti-communist, pro-independence movement gathered strength in the late 1980s, spurred on by universal outrage at the April 9, 1989 killing of unarmed demonstrators in Tbilisi by Soviet Army troops. Two years later, Georgia declared independence and in May 1991, longtime dissident and writer Zviad Gamsakhurdia became president of Georgia. But his political rivals and forces outside the country were determined to engineer his downfall, and his nationalist rhetoric and policies alienated the country's ethnic minorities. At the end of 1991, armed confrontations broke out between the authorities and insurgents, and by January 1992, Gamsakhurdia had to flee.

In March 1992, the leaders of the successful uprising invited Eduard Shevardnadze, who was living in Moscow after resigning as Soviet Foreign Minister, to return to his native country. Georgia's former Communist Party First Secretary made the transition to nationalist leader and began consolidating power. By the mid-1990s, he had gotten rid of or neutralized the men who had brought him back to Tbilisi. In November 1995, Shevardnadze's party, the Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG) won a majority in the parliamentary election and he was elected president.

After four years in power, during which Georgia charted a pro-Western course, launched economic reforms and largely restored stability,<sup>1</sup> the CUG faced the voters again in October 1999. Well aware of widespread discontent over poor socio-economic conditions, rampant corruption, the failure to resolve Georgia's territorial disputes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the resulting inability to return some 250,000 refugees to their homes, the anxious ruling party faced a serious challenge from the anti-Shevardnadze opposition. Led by Aslan Abashidze, the boss of Ajaria, an autonomous region bordering Turkey, the Batumi Alliance's campaign focused on combating corruption and improving living standards, especially the payment of salaries and pensions and job creation, while emphasizing the need for good relations with Russia.

Despite its concerns, the CUG won easily, gaining 42 percent of the party list vote and strengthening its hold on the legislature. Of the participating parties, only the opposition Batumi Alliance and the bloc Industry Will Save Georgia passed the seven-percent threshold for entry into parliament. Given the CUG's flagging reputation, the surprising margin of its electoral victory owed much to the ruling party's control of most election commissions and successful electioneering. Equally important, while many Georgian voters have lost faith in a ruling party they see as corrupt, most see the alternatives as even worse. Abashidze's alliance suffered a particularly damaging blow a week before the vote when the commander of the Russian military base in Ajaria forecast the Batumi Alliance's victory, crowing that Russia's four bases could then remain in Georgia for 25 years. Though all opposition parties claimed the campaign had been unfair and the results falsified, the OSCE's observation mission gave the election a qualified OK.<sup>2</sup>

The outcome of the parliamentary election, which demonstrated the influence of the CUG and the power of incumbency in the absence of a credible alternative, predetermined Shevardnadze's victory in the presidential contest scheduled for April 2000. Nevertheless, he campaigned actively inside the country and drew heavily on his international assets, as well. Emphasizing his statesman's aura, Shevardnadze arranged to be visited by heads of state and high-level dignitaries: Turkey's Suleyman Demirel, Ukraine's Leonid Kuchma, Azerbaijan's Heydar Aliev, U.K. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, and finally Armenian President Robert Kocharian. Building on Aliev's suggestion during the OSCE summit last November, Demirel proposed a Caucasus Stability Pact while in Tbilisi, clearly demonstrating to Georgian voters—and to Russia—that Georgia is not alone in the region. Shevardnadze, for his part, reiterated during Kuchma's visit the pledges he made last fall that Georgia will apply for NATO membership by 2005.

But while everyone assumed Shevardnadze would win, it was never quite clear whom he would defeat. Aslan Abashidze publicly announced last year his intention to run, but his prospects suffered a major blow after the Batumi Alliance's loss in October's parliamentary election. Moreover, Abashidze is more a regional boss than a plausible national leader, and he rarely leaves his Ajarian fiefdom, claiming that Georgia's central government—especially Parliament Speaker and Shevardnadze ally Zurab Zhvania—wants to assassinate him. Finally, the Batumi Alliance included another serious candidate: Jumber Patiashvili, the leader of the minority in parliament and former Communist Party leader (who took over when Shevardnadze joined Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow in 1985).

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<sup>1</sup> True, Shevardnadze has barely survived two assassination attempts and short-lived uprisings by pro-Gamsakhurdia diehards periodically take place. Nevertheless, the anarchy and criminal marauding of the early 1990s are long gone.

<sup>2</sup> The Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) said the election “represented a step towards compliance with OSCE commitments, although the election process failed to fully meet all commitments.” See Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Georgia's Parliamentary Election*, October 1999.



Considering that Abashidze had no real chance to win, many expected him to withdraw before the election but to go through the motions in order to influence the election law. Indeed, the Batumi Alliance initially threatened not to participate if the ruling party did not adopt all its proposed amendments, warning that a boycott, amid voters' general apathy and disaffection, would keep Shevardnadze from getting the required 50 percent turnout. Then it seemed as if Abashidze would be the Alliance's candidate, as Patiashvili did not submit the required number of signatures until the last possible day (February 19), although another scenario involved Abashidze and Patiashvili both running in an effort to deprive Shevardnadze of a first round victory.

It gradually became increasingly clear, however, that Abashidze and Patiashvili were at odds, as opposed to following a coordinated strategy to pressure Shevardnadze. Patiashvili's pledge to run no matter what irritated Abashidze, who apparently thought that he, as leader of the Batumi Alliance, should make that decision. Patiashvili's announcement also undercut Abashidze's ability to negotiate concessions from Shevardnadze, who needed to run against and defeat a credible candidate.

Assuming Abashidze would not participate, the election shaped up as a contest between Shevardnadze and Patiashvili, a rerun of the 1995 presidential election. Patiashvili could count on a certain pro-communist nostalgia vote, Shevardnadze-haters and those who are weary of him and the CUG. But given the CUG's hold on the government apparatus and Shevardnadze's international reputation, Patiashvili faced insurmountable odds. Indeed, the very date of the election—April 9—worked against him, inescapably associating him in voters' minds with a barbaric Soviet act against Georgia's independence when he was in power.

With the situation inside the Batumi Alliance unclear or indicating tensions, opportunities emerged for Shevardnadze. Both he and Parliament Speaker Zurab Zhvania went to Batumi to meet with Abashidze; the content of their talks remained secret but it was universally assumed that they were bargaining over Abashidze's exit from the race and what he would get from Tbilisi in return. As voting day approached, then, the question marks were not whether Shevardnadze would win but by what margin and whether and when Abashidze would pull out. Finally, the day before the election, Abashidze issued a statement announcing his withdrawal—without, however, offering a reason or calling on his supporters to cast ballots for Shevardnadze, as some had expected.

## **ELECTION LAW**

To enter the race, candidates needed 50,000 signatures. They had to get 50 percent-plus-one of participating voters to win, and a 50 percent turnout was required for the election to be valid.

In negotiations with Abashidze and the Batumi Alliance, the CUG-dominated parliament agreed to increase the number of minority party representatives in the Central Election Commission and lower level commissions. Parliament balked, however, at marking voters with indelible ink.



## CANDIDATES AND PLATFORMS

Ultimately, the Central Election Commission (CEC) registered seven candidates. Four others were rejected; two of them appealed to the Supreme Court, which upheld the decision of the CEC.<sup>3</sup> Below are brief descriptions of the programs of the only two relevant candidates.

*Eduard Shevardnadze:* Like the CUG last October, Shevardnadze promised voters that having ensured Georgia's survival and stability, he would now see to the country's prosperity. Apart from pledging to resolve the Abkhaz and South Ossetian disputes, Shevardnadze called for fighting corruption, collecting taxes, ending all wage and pension arrears within five years, restoring free education and health care, and revamping tax legislation, ultimately generating a "radical turnaround" in the economy.

*Jumber Patiashvili:* Patiashvili's slogan was "Change Life for the Better." His program called for ensuring Georgia's territorial integrity, eliminating poverty, establishing a socially-oriented, mixed economic system, creating free economic zones in Georgia's regions, and giving Abkhazia and Ajaria special status in the constitution. Naturally, Patiashvili also urged a war on corruption.

## CAMPAIGN

State television provided 70 minutes of free air time as of March 20, giving each candidate five minutes in the morning and another five in the evening. During the 3 days before the election, candidates received 10-minute spots in the evening.

With everyone convinced Shevardnadze could not lose, the campaign was lackluster. The incumbent, who could rely on TV coverage of his activities as president, only began to make use of his free air time on March 27. Nevertheless, he traveled all over Georgia, meeting voters and holding rallies. Abashidze remained in Ajaria throughout. Though he released a platform, he did not actively campaign, even in Ajaria. Patiashvili, by contrast, campaigned around the country, calling for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity and stressing socio-economic issues. On several occasions, protesters and hecklers threw eggs at him, prompting Patiashvili to charge that Shevardnadze was using dirty tricks. The public paid little attention; with the outcome clear in advance, all commentators noted that voters were bored and cynical.

## VOTING AND VOTE COUNT

Helsinki Commission staff observed the voting in various precincts in Tbilisi. Voting proceeded normally and Commission staff saw no violations. Most striking was the small number of voters present, regardless of the time of day precincts were visited.

An American observer told Helsinki Commission staff that he had witnessed the following sequence of events during the vote count. In his polling station, Shevardnadze received about 550 votes, Patiashvili about one hundred fewer. At the end of the count, police came into the polling station and took all the ballots and voting materials. The American observer then followed the police to the territorial election

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<sup>3</sup> Among those ineligible were Josef Stalin's grandson, barred because he is a Russian citizen, and Igor Giorgadze, former minister of national security, whom Tbilisi accuses of having organized the 1995 assassination attempt on Shevardnadze. Since then, Giorgadze has been living in Moscow and the law required candidates to have lived in Georgia for the last two years.

commission, where the eventual protocol reflected significantly inflated turnout figures, a huge win for Shevardnadze and few votes for Patiashvili. It is difficult to say, of course, how representative this observer's experience was.

## **RESULTS**

The CEC released preliminary results on April 10, giving Shevardnadze about 80 percent. The final results, which followed on April 19, confirmed the incumbent's landslide victory. According to official tallies, turnout was 76 percent. Shevardnadze received 79.8 percent, to Patiashvili's 16.6 percent.<sup>4</sup>

## **OSCE/ODIHR ASSESSMENT**

On April 10, the ODIHR election observation mission began its preliminary assessment by stating that "Considerable progress is necessary for Georgia to fully meet its commitments" as an OSCE participating state. Among the problems in the election, ODIHR noted, *inter alia*, the authorities' support for the incumbent, the failure of state media to provide balanced reportage, and the dominant role of the CUG in election commissions at all levels. While voting was generally conducted "calmly," the "counting and tabulation procedures lacked uniformity and, at times, transparency." The ODIHR also observed ballot stuffing and protocol tampering.

The European Institute for the Media, which monitored coverage of the candidates, established a clear bias in favor of Shevardnadze in state media, singling out state TV's Channel One as the worst offender. Non-state media, by contrast, were far more balanced; so were newspapers, but their small circulations limited their ability to counter pro-Shevardnadze bias in the electronic media.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND PROJECTIONS**

*Democratization:* Especially after last October's parliamentary election, which may have gotten a better assessment from OSCE than it deserved, Georgia's April 9 presidential election marked regression. Even to judge by the clipped, diplomatic tone of the ODIHR assessment, the election was a step backwards, if only because the observation mission, in contrast to its judgement on the parliamentary election, did not see it as a step forward. In fact, ODIHR's first sentence, unusually strong commentary on an election in Georgia, signaled clear disapproval.

Though all candidates could compete and appeal to voters, and the voting process was largely uneventful, the official results of the election are not credible. Despite Shevardnadze's public statements dismissing allegations of vote fraud, even his advisors and allies concede—some publicly, some privately—that the official tallies have been falsified. While everyone agrees nobody could outpoll Shevardnadze today in Georgia, which means that he would have won a second term in any case, the flagrant boosting of

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<sup>4</sup> None of the other participants received one percent. An unusual candidacy was that of the former Mayor of Batumi, Tengiz Asanidze, who has been in jail in Ajaria since 1993, on charges of terrorism. Though Shevardnadze has pardoned him, Abashidze has refused to release him. Asanidze withdrew from the race on April 8 but his name remained on the ballot and he got 0.12 percent.

turnout totals and his figures has discredited Georgia's democratization, and surely aggravated already widespread public cynicism about democracy and the country's leadership. In this connection, ODIHR made a none-too-subtle dig at the CEC's turnout figures: "observers reported...polling stations were not crowded."<sup>5</sup>

*Eduard Shevardnadze*: The CEC's release of election results which few find credible has also damaged Shevardnadze's own standing. His supporters have sought to absolve him of responsibility: Misha Saakishvili, head of the CUG faction in parliament, pinned the blame for inflating turnout figures and Shevardnadze's tallies on regional governors and local officials.<sup>6</sup> Allies of Shevardnadze privately told Helsinki Commission staff that the official results were implausible and an embarrassment, but also pointed the finger at local officials. Those less admiring of Shevardnadze may wonder if he himself wanted a big win.<sup>7</sup> In any case, Georgia's president is now associated with vote fraud. Indeed, if Shevardnadze went to Batumi so soon before voting day to bargain with Abashidze over the latter's withdrawal from a race nobody expected Shevardnadze to lose, he may really have been seriously concerned about his ability to pull the necessary votes to win convincingly.

After his reelection, Shevardnadze moved to placate segments of the population unfavorably disposed towards him. On April 20, he amnestied 279 prisoners, including some 65 supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, some of whom presumably still see Shevardnadze as a usurper, if not worse. The prisoners had been convicted of various crimes, including involvement in terrorist activity or attempted coups.<sup>8</sup> On April 20, parliament passed a resolution "On Eliminating the Consequences of the 1991-92 Civil Conflicts and Seeking National Reconciliation," which called Gamsakhurdia's ouster "an unlawful act of overthrowing the legitimate authorities."

The gesture was useful and perhaps overdue, but trying to mollify pro-Gamsakhurdia constituencies and releasing other prisoners can only win Shevardnadze so much good will. If the newly reelected president wants to make people forget the bad odor of the election results and justify his 80 percent mandate, he will have to improve the quality of peoples' lives. Unfortunately, he faces a complex of chronic problems that have bedeviled Georgia for years, along with some newer ones.

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<sup>5</sup> The BBC's Moscow correspondent, Rob Parsons, wrote the following on April 10, 2000: "The people of Georgia...voted Eduard Shevardnadze back into office by a margin even more monstrous than in 1995. He won some 80% of the vote... It is inexplicable because all the pre-election surveys showed that Georgians were thoroughly...fed up with Mr. Shevardnadze's government. And with good reason - 70% of the people in this once relatively prosperous country live below the official poverty line, the electricity supply is intermittent at best, life in some mountain villages is almost medieval and corruption is gnawing like a cancer at the heart and soul of the country.... And yet, the Central Electoral Commission would have them believe that four fifths of those who voted did so for Mr. Shevardnadze. The cynicism of the count takes the breath away."

<sup>6</sup> *Economist*, April 15, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1995 election, he got around 75 percent. In 1998, Azerbaijan's Central Election Commission said President Heydar Aliiev had been reelected with 76 percent. Perhaps Shevardnadze is upping the ante on his old Soviet Politburo colleague.

<sup>8</sup> Also among the amnestied prisoners was Jaba Ioseliani, former leader of the paramilitary organization *Mkhedrioni*, and a bitter enemy of Gamsakhurdia, who was sentenced to 11 years for helping to organize an assassination attempt on Shevardnadze.

*Economy:* Georgia's Government has made much of the country's economic prospects as an East-West transit point for energy and other goods. Despite the hoopla surrounding the signing in Istanbul last November of agreements for the Baku-Ceyhan (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey) oil pipeline, afterwards, negotiations stalled because Georgia demanded higher tariffs. Apart from economic and security issues, Shevardnadze presumably wanted to show voters that he was strongly representing Georgia's interests. During Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliev's visit to Tbilisi in late March, he and Shevardnadze reached agreement on tariffs, allowing Shevardnadze to claim that Baku-Ceyhan would proceed as planned, and Georgians would reap the economic and geo-strategic benefits.<sup>9</sup>

Tbilisi has already been earning money from the transit of Azerbaijani early oil through the Baku-Supsa pipeline and recent claims of oil discoveries within Georgia have sparked some hopes of revenues derived from oil production. But otherwise, the country's economy is still in poor shape, with production lagging and unemployment high. Though Tbilisi's reforms are backed by the international financial institutions and Georgia has been accepted into the World Trade Organization,<sup>10</sup> the population has endured plummeting living standards. Georgia's abysmal record in tax-collection has had a debilitating impact on state revenues. Shortfalls exceeded 30 percent in 1998 and 1999. On April 27, the chairman of parliament's Budget Office said that the government owes \$175-200 million in unpaid wages and pensions.<sup>11</sup> In the first quarter of 2000, the government collected 14 percent less than projected. Particularly disappointing has been revenue collection from the notoriously corrupt customs service, despite Tbilisi's hiring of a British firm (ITS) to supervise the operation.

These continuing revenue shortfalls will probably result in more budget cuts. Moreover, the government's inability to collect money jeopardizes new credits from the IMF, which insists on improved fiscal performance, and World Bank credits are linked to Georgia's agreement with the IMF. Unless Tbilisi can solve its revenue problem, the country's prospects for macroeconomic stability and growth are problematic.

Against this background, and considering Shevardnadze's campaign pledges, his new cabinet might have been expected to feature new faces. In fact, 14 of the 18 ministerial nominees were holdovers—as one commentator put it, “members of the same government which ran up a \$300 million budget deficit in 1999 and wrote off another \$200 million in debt in the first four months of this year.”<sup>12</sup>

Shevardnadze did make one big personnel change, however. He appointed Gia Arsenashvili, Governor of Kakheti, as State Minister, replacing his longtime associate Vazha Lortkipanidze. Arsenishvili told parliament, which confirmed him on May 11, that his priorities are economic reform, combating the shadow economy, and resolving social problems, especially paying off pension and wage arrears, and creating new jobs.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Annual transit fees are expected to be over \$60 million.

<sup>10</sup> Kyrgyzstan is the only other former Soviet republic to have joined, apart from Latvia and Estonia.

<sup>11</sup> *RFE/RL Newsline*, April 28, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Ia Antadze, “Georgia's Nomenclature Still Sitting Pretty,” *Caucasus Reporting Service*, No. 32, May 19, 2000. Among Shevardnadze's choices was Agriculture Minister Bakur Gulua, who is implicated in a major corruption scandal.

<sup>13</sup> Parliament also approved Shevardnadze's plan to restructure the government and reduce the number of ministries from 21 to 18.

*Corruption:* Along with economic problems—with which it is closely intertwined—battling corruption is Shevardnadze’s chief priority. After October’s parliamentary election, he undertook no bold initiatives, apart from creating yet another anti-corruption commission. But many hope that with no more elections to contest and mindful of his place in Georgian history, he will finally display the statesmanship needed to address the issue and put Georgia’s fiscal house in order. He would have to arrest corrupt officials, dismiss others, create new law enforcement structures, and – considering stories in the Georgian press—perhaps move against his own family members and relatives.

Addressing Georgia’s pervasive corruption represents for Shevardnadze not only an act of statesmanship. Since returning in 1992, he has always sought to balance competing interests and groups, many of which have profited hugely from the corrupt status quo. Striking at them could entail genuine risks, considering the two assassination attempts Shevardnadze has already survived. But even favoring honest officials and punishing bribe-takers requires a conscious effort to transform the political system with which he has reached his own understandings and over which he presides. It remains to be seen whether Shevardnadze can revamp his established modes of thinking and governing the country.

Closely connected to the crisis of corruption are the prospects of democracy, particularly freedom of the press. Rustavi-2, an independent TV station that has often experienced official intimidation in the past, has launched a popular show called “60 Minutes,” modeled after the American original, which features investigative reporting and exposes of official malfeasance and corruption. Rustavi-2 representatives told Helsinki Commission staff credible, alarming stories about pressure by the authorities. Most recently, on May 19, Rustavi-2 held a press conference in Tbilisi to announce that someone in Georgia’s Procuracy had issued a death threat to a journalist.<sup>14</sup>

However reports about corruption by Rustavi-2 or other independent media may annoy the authorities or Eduard Shevardnadze, he is obligated as President to protect their freedom of expression. If he is serious about battling corruption, he must make sure officials do not silence or intimidate his greatest ally, a free press.

*Succession:* The Mayor of Tbilisi has suggested nominating Shevardnadze for a third term, despite constitutional prohibitions. Assuming the 72-year old Shevardnadze, who prides himself on his Western orientation and democratic reputation, does not take this Central Asian path, he will begin playing the game of indicating preference for a successor. For several years, the two leading contenders have been Zurab Zhvania, Speaker of Parliament (who ran Shevardnadze’s campaign) and State Minister Vazha Lortkipanidze, who had the unenviable tasks of handling the economy and managing the negotiations with Abkhazia. Shevardnadze’s nomination of Gia Arsenashvili to replace Lortkipanidze as State Minister, however, clearly altered the balance between him and Zhvania. Though some observers expected Lortkipanidze to get the new post of minister without portfolio for conflict resolution, Shevardnadze instead named Malkhaz

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<sup>14</sup> Students and representatives of 27 Georgian NGOs held a demonstration on May 22 in Tbilisi to demand the resignation of Prosecutor-General Djamlet Babilashvili and his deputy, Anzor Baluashvili, whom they accused of warning reporter Akaki Gogichaishvili to leave Georgia or risk being murdered. *RFE/RL Newslines*, May 17, 2000.



Kakabadze, Georgia's Ambassador to Russia, leaving the former State Minister out of the government. Still, Lortkipanidze's apparent fall from grace, though it gives Zhvania a leg up, does not automatically make him Shevardnadze's successor. The strongly pro-Western, pro-reform Speaker is also identified with current power structures and current problems, and whether the ruling party can improve living standards will affect his prospects. Shevardnadze's final term does not expire for 5 years, a long time in volatile Georgian politics, and new contenders could appear on the horizon. It is generally agreed, however, that Shevardnadze will play a key role in choosing his successor, so everyone will be watching carefully to see whom he favors.

*Shevardnadze-Abashidze Relations:* Though Abashidze did not endorse any other candidate when he withdrew, the election results in Ajaria indicate they had struck some deal: Shevardnadze—whom Abashidze had often implicated in assassination plots against him—won about 80 percent in a region Abashidze tightly controls. By contrast, in October's parliamentary election, Shevardnadze's CUG received, according to official results, about 35 percent in Ajaria.

At the end of February, after Shevardnadze visited Ajaria, he submitted proposals to parliament to define Ajaria's status in the constitution as an Autonomous Republic, as Abashidze had demanded. After the election, parliament overwhelmingly passed in the first reading an amendment to that effect. On April 24, Lortkipanidze told journalists that a free trade zone in Batumi—which Abashidze has also long demanded, and which Georgia's parliament has consistently rejected—would be economically expedient. Lortkipanidze added that Adjara might get representation in the new government.

In the event, Ajaria did not get a ministerial post when Shevardnadze announced his new cabinet, and negotiations about a free trade zone may continue for a long time. Apart from the acknowledgment of Ajaria's autonomous status in the constitution, it is unclear what else Abashidze sought or may have wangled from Shevardnadze when he dropped out of the race. In any case, despite the apparent improvement in relations and accommodation on the region's status, Aslan Abashidze and Ajaria will remain a problem for Tbilisi. Shevardnadze has not figured out how to get rid of Abashidze, with his strong ties to Moscow, or to weaken him into political insignificance. Abashidze, for his part, even if his presidential prospects have dissipated, clearly enjoys his role as a thorn in Shevardnadze's side, opposition leader and perennial alternative.

*Abkhazia:* Shevardnadze's initiative to formalize Ajaria's autonomous status in the constitution was a signal to Georgia's other troublesome regions, as well. As he said explicitly on April 10, the gesture "should demonstrate to the Abkhaz and the Ossetians that Georgia is offering a real model of autonomy to the former autonomies, and Abkhazia in particular."

Nevertheless, one troubling scenario for Tbilisi—which Shevardnadze presumably did not have in mind—is the prospect of Armenians demanding autonomy. During Shevardnadze's campaign stop in Armenian-populated Akhalkalaki, demonstrators representing an unregistered organization *Virik* ("Georgia," in old Armenian) demanded autonomy for the region.<sup>15</sup> Official Yerevan has not supported these demands: both former President Levon Ter-Petrossyan and current President Robert Kocharian have urged cool

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<sup>15</sup> *Asbarez*, April 8, 2000.

heads in Akhalkalaki, where an eruption of tensions would cause great difficulties for Armenia, as well as Georgia.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, tensions persist, which may tempt parties hopeful of destabilizing Georgia. Russian officials, well aware of the prospects for meddling, have openly warned Tbilisi against trying to close the Russian military base in the region.

OSCE Diplomats and Georgian officials are cautiously optimistic about South Ossetia, where Georgians can travel and Ossetian leader Ludvig Chibirov is considered a man Tbilisi “can do business with.” On April 25, South Ossetia’s “Foreign Minister” said that the region is closely watching how Ajaria’s status is defined in Georgia’s constitution. He added, however, that South Ossetia has experienced an armed conflict (unlike Ajaria), which presumably indicates the region expects more than Ajaria got (or will get) from Tbilisi. Chibirov has specifically pointed to South Ossetia’s need for economic rehabilitation. It would appear, then, that the region might agree to return to Georgian jurisdiction if its autonomy were guaranteed and an economic revitalization program were forthcoming.

Abkhazia, however, is quite another story, both in terms of substance and personalities, not to mention outside players. Negotiations in this dispute have gone nowhere, and the UN and OSCE Missions consider it a victory when the two sides manage to sit down together. Tbilisi has not changed its longstanding offer of the “highest level of autonomy.” Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba, who last year orchestrated a referendum in support of his pro-independence policy, continues to insist that Abkhazia and Georgia be equal members of a “common state.”<sup>17</sup>

*Russia:* There is little likelihood of serious negotiations, much less an actual resolution, of the Abkhaz conflict without help from Moscow. Russian peacekeepers have been in place since 1993, with a mandate that is periodically renewed. Georgia wants peacekeepers from other countries to join the operation but Abkhazia on May 1 barred Ukrainian participation, insisting that Russia retain its exclusive role. Unfortunately, prospects of significant assistance from Moscow are not promising, given persistent, serious problems in Russian-Georgian relations.

For Moscow, the ongoing war in Chechnya is not merely a battle against “terrorists,” or a campaign to ensure the integrity of the Russian Federation: it is also, as high-level diplomatic and military figures have made plain, an effort to stop or at least slow Western, and especially American, penetration of the Caucasus and to reassert Russia’s interests. Since the beginning of hostilities, Moscow has accused Georgia (and Azerbaijan) of aiding the Chechen insurgents. At Georgia’s urgent behest, the OSCE decided in December to expand the existing OSCE Mission in Georgia to include a border monitoring operation which could

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<sup>16</sup> On March 30, Kocharian said he and Shevardnadze had agreed to build a power line to supply energy from Armenia to Georgia’s Armenian-populated southern Javakheti region. *RFE/RL Newslines*, March 31, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> On May 11, the UN Security Council noted that the failure to resolve the conflict and determine Abkhazia’s status has “an unfavorable effect” on stability and the economic and humanitarian situation in the region. Abkhazia’s leadership, however, has even refused to discuss a UN plan to divide constitutional powers between Abkhazia and the Georgian government, and is apparently prepared only to begin talks on economic restoration and the repatriation of ethnic Georgian displaced persons to Abkhazia. Moreover, the Abkhaz had developed good working relations with Vazha Lortkipanidze, and have voiced doubts about the appointment of Malkhaz Kakabadze to negotiate the conflict. *RFE/RL Newslines*, May 15, 2000.



verify that Chechen fighters are not transiting Georgian territory. On April 12, the OSCE prolonged the border monitoring operation until November 15 and increased the size of the mission to 42 international personnel.<sup>18</sup>

Unless Russia totally defeats the Chechens, better spring and summer weather will allow Chechen fighters to step up their operations. An intensified military campaign may lead Moscow to cross Georgia's border to pursue Chechens. Meanwhile, Russian officials continue to point publicly to alleged Georgia-based threats to Russian security: on May 16, Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev warned that Russian forces plan "preventive measures" against "Chechen gangs" in Georgia before they cross into Chechnya.<sup>19</sup>

One of the goals in Russia's continuing accusations of Georgian assistance to the Chechens is to pressure Georgia for concessions in the ongoing negotiations on the withdrawal of Russia's four bases. At the November 1999 OSCE Istanbul summit, Tbilisi and Moscow reached agreement about the closing and handover of Russia's bases in Vaziani (near Tbilisi) and Gudauta (in Abkhazia) by July 2001, and of the bases in Akhalkalaki and Batumi by 2003. Though procedures and a timetable have apparently been agreed for the closure of Vaziani and Gudauta by the end of June 2001, Russia has refused to leave Akhalkalaki and Batumi by 2003. In fact, apart from Vaziani, Georgia will have problems closing the bases: Tbilisi is in no hurry to close the base in Akhalkalaki, the main source of employment for the local, restive Armenian population. Aslan Abashidze, for his part, will resist efforts to dismantle the base in Batumi, and Vladislav Ardzinba has warned that his forces would take over the base in Gudauta if Russian troops withdraw, which could spark new Abkhaz-Georgian fighting.

In mid-May, a high-ranking Russian military officer made plain that Russia will "not hurry" to vacate its bases. Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov also cautioned Georgia (and Azerbaijan) against pursuing their rapprochement with NATO, warning that Russia has the right to take countermeasures, including military ones, in order to protect Russian interests. Moreover, he limited participation in discussions on any South Caucasus security pact to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, Russia, Iran and Turkey—pointedly excluding the United States.

Tbilisi steadfastly denies Russian claims about the presence of Chechen fighters on Georgian territory, but Georgia cannot on its own resist intensified Russian pressure, especially if it takes military form. To deal with an increasingly aggressive Moscow under a new president, clearly determined to restore Russia's influence in the region, Tbilisi looks to Washington.

## **U.S.-GEORGIAN RELATIONS**

The State Department on April 10 issued a statement which began by congratulating Shevardnadze on his reelection. But the rest of the statement noted the concerns expressed by the OSCE/ODIHR assessment, specifically mentioning "serious irregularities," including "instances of ballot stuffing, media

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<sup>18</sup> By mid-July, the OSCE's Permanent Council will re-evaluate the operation and decide whether any changes, including the dispatch of more monitors, are necessary.

<sup>19</sup> *Jamestown Monitor*, May 18, 2000. Moscow has also charged that Afghanistan's Taliban use Georgian territory to assist the Chechens.

bias, and lack of transparency in vote counting and tabulation.” In a post-election letter to Shevardnadze, President Clinton voiced confidence that he would “work with the OSCE to consider its remarks on the irregularities that took place” during the election.<sup>20</sup>

Considering the general view that the election results had been falsified, Washington’s willingness to congratulate Shevardnadze reflected residual good feelings towards him.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Shevardnadze does enjoy a different relationship with Western capitals, which still gratefully recall his services in ending the Cold War peacefully and withdrawing Soviet troops from Europe. In no small measure, the generosity of Washington<sup>22</sup> and the European Union, which have given Georgia considerable humanitarian assistance, especially during the worst period of the early 1990s, has reflected this sense of indebtedness to Shevardnadze personally.

Nevertheless, Washington has long been urging Shevardnadze to address the critical problems of corruption and tax collection. President Clinton reiterated that message in his letter, calling for “urgent changes in the economic field – a full-scale attack on corruption and a special effort to raise budget revenues.” Shevardnadze, with no elections ahead of him, now has to make tough decisions if he wants to ensure his legacy.

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<sup>20</sup> President Clinton’s letter has not been officially released and the White House has declined to make it available. Nevertheless, the letter appeared in the Georgian press.

<sup>21</sup> By contrast, no congratulations were tendered to Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrossyan (1996), Azerbaijani President Aliev (1998) or Kazakstani President Nazarbaev (1999) after they won elections criticized by the OSCE. Granted, ODIHR’s assessment of those elections was substantially harsher than its verdict on Georgia.

<sup>22</sup> According to the State Department, total U.S. budgeted assistance to Georgia from 1992-1999 was \$733.4 million. The figure for 2000 is \$115.2 million.

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