

The elections in Georgia: an analysis of Shevardnadze's victory

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Incumbent Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze won the presidential elections in Georgia on April 9 with a landslide majority. Of the 70 percent of voters who went to the polls in the Caucasian republic of 5.5 million inhabitants, 80.4 percent cast their vote for Shevardnadze. His biggest rival, Communist Party Chairman Dzhumber Patiashvili, got 16.6 percent of the vote.

There were five other candidates, among them the chairman of the Supreme Council of Adzhariya and head of the Alliance for Democratic Rebirth, Aslan Abazhidze.

Patiashvili and Abazhidze were considered Shevardnadze's most dangerous rivals. Prior to the elections they formed an alliance that could have become a serious threat to the president, particularly if it had received backing from Russia. But this did not happen. Just before the elections Abazhidze withdrew his candidacy and didn't even call on his supporters to vote for Patiashvili.

Political differences were only of secondary importance during the election campaign. None of the candidates questioned Georgia's secession from the former Soviet Union. Also, they all supported the implementation of capitalist reforms and rapprochement with the West. The only bone of contention was what role Georgia was to play in relations between Russia and the West and how the country's regional and ethnic problems were to be solved.

The elections took place against a backdrop of severe economic crisis and a dramatic reduction in the standard of living of the majority of the population. Regional conflicts also threaten to tear apart the country. In two regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—the elections weren't even carried out. The Adzhariya region has a semi-autonomous status and rarely yields to decisions taken by the government in Tiflis, Georgia's capital.

A typical case is that of presidential candidate T. Assanidze. A few years ago he was sentenced to jail for an economic crime. Last autumn Shevardnadze granted him a pardon. But Adzhariya's supreme court refused to accept this presidential order, forcing Assanidze to run his election campaign from behind prison bars.

In the lead-up to the elections, the 72-year-old Georgian president succeeded in getting the unanimous support of the leading Western powers and also of Russia and several CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries such as the Ukraine and Azerbaijan.

There were visits to Georgia by numerous international dignitaries prior to election day. The most important of these was the official visit by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Schröder gave a speech to the Georgian parliament, declaring that it was a great honour for him to meet with the parliamentarians on the anniversary of Georgia's independence. Germany was one of the first European countries to recognise Georgia as an independent state.

During his speech, Schröder expressed regret for the "dark sides of history", in particular the Second World War (Shevardnadze's brother lost his life defending the Brest fortress during that war). But having said that

"for us, the crimes committed in the name of Germany remain a source of grief and shame", the German Chancellor immediately added: "Nearly 40,000 people from Georgia's German minority ... also paid for this criminal policy with deportation ordered by Stalin and death."

Schröder's confessions of guilt are merely a thin cover for re-emergent desires within the German ruling class. They want to have a share of the Caspian oil business, and are picking up the thread of so-called "Great Game" politics dating from the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, the fight for Caspian oil played a significant role in the outbreak of the First World War. In 1918, Imperial German troops fighting the British army occupied Georgia, which had just gained its independence from the Russian empire.

Schröder portrayed this as one of the positive sides of Georgian-German relations and placed it within the context of the present. He said: "More than eight decades ago, Imperial Germany helped give birth to modern Georgia. Eight years ago, the Federal Republic of Germany was the first European state to recognise Georgia when your country re-gained its independence."

Shevardnadze plays a key role in Georgia's relations with Germany. As the Soviet foreign minister in 1989, he was instrumental in achieving the reunification of Germany. Since then, he has been a close friend of Hans-Dietrich Genscher, his German counterpart at the time.

It was Genscher who advised Shevardnadze to return to Georgia in March 1992 to succeed ousted President Svyad Gamzakhurdia. In support of this move, Genscher arranged for the European Commission to grant financial aid to Shevardnadze. Since then, Germany has become the second largest international donor of development aid to Georgia, having provided 350 million marks so far. According to Schröder, another 60 million marks will be available shortly.

Genscher, who no longer has any official functions, together with his wife accompanied Schröder on the recent trip to Tiflis, where the former German foreign minister was made an honorary citizen of Georgia. Genscher praised the "historic achievements" of Georgia under the presidency of Shevardnadze, who made an official visit to Germany only last year.

Schröder was also full of praise. Striking a note of hypocrisy that would be difficult to surpass in view of the catastrophic social conditions in this Caucasian state, he said: "Under the leadership of Eduard Shevardnadze, your country has made remarkable progress in developing a democratic, constitutional state. It is an impressive sight to see how people, particularly young people, in your country are now building a civil society on the ruins of the Soviet Union."

Shevardnadze is also receiving substantial support from the US. Shortly before the elections, CIA director George Tennen visited Georgia. According to Georgia's government information agency *Sakinform*, Tennen and Shevardnadze discussed "measures for the fight against terrorism and perspectives for mutual cooperation in this field" during their meeting.

Georgia's relations with NATO were also intensified prior to the elections. Shevardnadze has been emphatically stating for some time that his country intends to join NATO by 2005, at the latest. Just recently he was reported in the *Financial Times* as saying: "We are going to knock very loudly on NATO's door."

An "International Military Council" run by retired NATO generals has already been at work in Georgia for one and a half years. Just a few weeks ago, the Georgian Ministry of Defence was given four overhauled American helicopters and another four helicopters that can be used for spare parts retrieval. The Coast Guard received a patrol boat.

Increased military activity in the region is no longer excluded as a possibility. This is shown by comments made several months ago by Chris Donnelly, the NATO official responsible for the CIS states. Donnelly said it was time that the Caucasus conflict was resolved, and that one perspective for this might be the "Yugoslav model", although it was still too early for that.

Because of its geopolitical situation, Georgia is of particular interest to the West. The most important export pipelines for Caspian oil and natural gas are planned to run through the Caucasian republic. US President Bill Clinton called the Baku-Tiflis-Ceyhan pipeline project that will run from the Caspian Sea via Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean "the most important achievement at the end of the twentieth century".

Another reason for the West's activities in the Caucasus is its desire to reduce Russian influence there. Russia, on the other hand, wishes to regain the positions it lost in the region. This is one of the main reasons for its war in Chechnya.

Russia did not support Shevardnadze's rivals in the elections, although it would have had ample opportunity to do so, since the three regions of the country that have, at least partially, withdrawn themselves from the Georgian government's sphere of influence—Abkhazia, Adzharia and South Ossetia—are heavily influenced by Russia in several ways. Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia, but are scheduled to be withdrawn by 2001 according to agreements reached at last year's Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) summit. A Russian tank division with which the leader of the autonomy movement (and presidential candidate) Aslan Abazhidze has friendly relations is stationed in Adzharia. And South Ossetia is in direct contact with Russia via North Ossetia, which is part of Russia.

Nyevissimaya Gazeta, the newspaper controlled by Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, characterised Russia's approach to Shevardnadze as follows: "Russian diplomacy ... not only looked on with indifference as 'Candidate No. 1' achieved his election triumph, it actively supported him. For instance, a few weeks before election day the Russian utility 'JES Rossiya' 'switched on' the lights and heating in Georgia again. And two weeks before that there was suddenly no more talk of terrorist camps or Chechnyan evacuation routes to Georgia."

One of the reasons for this approach is that at present Russia wants to avoid any further exacerbation of its relations with the West. At the same time it is trying to recapture the initiative in the region and at least gain control of some of the most important transportation corridors. These matters were discussed in early March during a visit to Tiflis by the president of (Russian) North Ossetia, A. Dzazochov. Dzazochov described the development of Russian-Georgian relations as a "strategic partnership" and proposed the realisation of the "Gateway to the South" project to Shevardnadze.

At present, two major transportation routes run from Georgia to Russia, and both of them pass through Ossetia. Most of the freight traffic from the southern Caucasus (the so-called "Transcaucasian" region) to Russia is transported along these routes. Historically, both routes are part of the old "Silk Route" from Asia to Europe.

The objective of the "Gateway to the South" project is to enlarge these traffic routes and combine them with the European TRASECA project, in

order to re-direct a significant portion of freight traffic coming from Asia and the Middle East to Europe through Russian territory.

Another important element in Russia's rapprochement with Georgia was the handing over of documents compiled by the so-called "Sobchak Commission", which investigated the tragic events of April 9, 1989, when 19 supporters of the independence movement were shot dead by the Soviet Army during a demonstration in Tiflis.

According to the commission's findings, the main responsibility for the use of armed force against the demonstrators rested with the Georgian Communist Party leadership of that time. A resolution passed by the Georgian CP's central committee on April 8, 1989 explicitly sanctioned the involvement of the Soviet army in suppressing the demonstration. One of the signatories of the resolution was Dzumber Patiashvili, Shevardnadze's main opponent in the recent elections. It is a remarkable coincidence that the elections were held on the eleventh anniversary of these dramatic events.

With his ceremonial inauguration on April 30, Shevardnadze began his second five-year term as president of independent Georgia. He is a typical careerist from the ranks of the Soviet bureaucracy, who successfully adapted himself to every turn in politics and was thus able to play a leading role for decades.

Born in 1928, he was elected first secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU in Georgia in 1972. At that time he praised Leonid Brezhnev, then secretary general of the CPSU, with the words: "For some people, the sun rises in the East. For us in Georgia, it rises in the North."

With Gorbachev's accession to power, Shevardnadze became one of the foremost propagators of the "New Thinking" which culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In December 1990 he resigned from the Gorbachev government after declaring that a military coup was imminent. After that, he disappeared from the stage for a while, only returning to politics in 1992 when he took over the office of president of newly independent Georgia from his ousted predecessor Sviad Gamzakhurdia. He survived two assassination attempts in 1995 and 1997.

In the opinion of some commentators, Shevardnadze won the latest elections "Soviet-style", i.e., through tricks and manipulation. His victory signifies the continuation of the politics of rapprochement with the West and NATO, combined with a difficult balancing act with respect to Russia. But the political and social problems of Georgia will remain unsolved. The conflicts in the various regions of the country will continue to fester and the majority of the population will continue their daily struggle to survive.



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