

Eduard Shevardnadze must be one of the most respected politicians in the world today due to his perceived contribution to the collapse of Communism in the Eastern Bloc. But could this love-affair between the West and the former KGB general be about to end? Recent developments in both Georgia and Russia suggest so. BHHRG went to Tbilisi to find out how things have changed.

GEORGIA, 2001

Twilight of the Shevardnadze Era:

A New Beginning or Rejuvenation of the Regime ?

Resumé

Eduard Shevardnadze's fall from grace has been sudden. For most of the last decade, the Georgian President has been lauded as a model democrat and reformer. His role as Soviet foreign minister at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism across the Eastern Bloc gave him a reputation which ignored his long years as the Kremlin's placeman in charge of his native Georgia (1972-85) and viewed his seizure of power there after a military coup ten years ago through rose-tinted spectacles.

But now the love affair between Western governments and their favourite post-Soviet reformer seems to be cooling rapidly. Although in the eyes of this Group's regular team of observers in Georgia nothing much has changed in the ten year decline in living standards and the ongoing combination of electoral fraud and police brutality, suddenly Western commentators who sang Shevardnadze's praises as the model post-Communist saviour of his nation have detected that Georgia is a "failed state" mired in corruption, cronyism and a possible base for international terrorism.

Protests in the streets and parliamentary accusations have subjected the Shevardnadze regime to unparalleled scrutiny and put it on the defensive. Leading politicians have defected from the ruling party and called the President's future into doubt. BHHRG sent four regular visitors to Georgia to assess the situation and to consider whether real change is now in the offing or merely a rejuvenation of the regime.

Recent Events

With average monthly incomes hardly more than 10% of their Soviet level and a growing part of society living at subsistence level outside the formal economy, especially outside the capital Tbilisi, it is not surprising that discontent with the regime is widespread. It has been there for the last decade as transition has meant the relentless rise of corruption and the fall of the standard of living.

In the past, public protest has been violently dispersed or intimidated by shows of Western-backed force such as the ostentatious appearance of U.S.- supplied Black Hawk attack helicopters over Tbilisi in the run up to the elections in 2000. This year, however, demonstrations have become increasingly routine in the capital and the police have failed to disperse them as they have in the past.

On 30th October, 2001, the most significant protest to date occurred in the streets of Tbilisi outside the Rustavi 2 TV station. Tax police accompanied by security officials had entered the independent TV station, which broadcast live the confrontation between its directors and state officials. A crowd gathered and the controversy about Rustavi 2 took on such dimensions that it led to the resignation in quick succession of the key, so-called "power ministers", then of the

Speaker of Parliament and, finally, the whole government. This necessitated repeated crisis-management by President Shevardnadze and the election of a new Speaker (the number two in the constitutional order) as well as a new cabinet.

However, this re-shuffle of the government does not seem to have ended the crisis. Vocal elements within Parliament and in the media and intelligentsia once closely associated with President Shevardnadze have continued their criticism. And, more troubles could be in store for the regime because other issues and controversies are gnawing away at its legitimacy. The unsolved murder of a young Rustavi 2 journalist, Giorgi Sanaia, in July has been connected to the existence of a video cassette which, allegedly, names officials involved in criminal activities like drug dealing with Chechen terrorists operating in the Pankisi Gorge on Russia's border. If the cassette's contents are made public - which many say will happen soon - the government's problems will only intensify.

To pile on the agony, Georgia is coming under regular attack from Moscow for failing to improve the security situation on its border with Chechnya. It is also alleged that Chechen guerrillas were transported by the Georgian authorities to attack the breakaway region of Abkhazia. At the end of November Georgian sources say the Pankisi gorge region was bombed by Russian aircraft, which Russia denies, though it's difficult to imagine where else such aircraft could have come from.

It also seems that, for the first time in his long career Eduard Shevardnadze is losing the international support which enabled him to ride out the crisis of 1993, for instance. The IMF has been highly critical of the Georgian budget and demanded savage cuts. Along with other international donors and lenders, IMF officials have been caustic about the level of corruption among officials of the Shevardnadze regime. These criticisms have been taken up by young reformers among the elite, especially ex-Justice Minister, Mikheil Saakashvili, who have used populist gestures like showing photographs of expensive new houses built by officials on low salaries to pinpoint the President's failure to reign in abuse of office.

An air of *fin de regime* hangs over Tbilisi. However, Shevardnadze's departure from the political scene will not necessarily improve the lives of Georgia's impoverished population if all that is going on at the moment is a battle between elites, reminiscent of power struggles that took place in the Communist era. Generational change will only lead to younger members of the Georgian elite replacing their older comrades, and the younger generation could easily adopt the practices of their displaced elders. After all, no-one can live decently even by Georgian standards on the official salaries alone.

'Timeline' of events in Georgia following 9/11

It is now commonplace to acknowledge that the 11th September terrorist attacks had repercussions way beyond the boundaries of the United States. Georgia seems to be no exception.

17th September 2001: Shevardnadze resigned as leader of the ruling party, the Citizens Union. Commentators predict that the party would splinter into different factions. This it has done.

18th September: Russia's rhetoric over what it saw as Georgian collusion with Chechen guerrillas in the Pankisi gorge intensified. The Foreign Ministry in Moscow demanded that Russia and the OSCE should be allowed to inspect the area for "terrorists".

19th September: Mikheil Saakashvili resigned as Minister of Justice. He appeared on independent Rustavi 2 TV saying it would be "immoral" for him to remain in a government that

was doing so little to combat corruption. He also announced that he would seek re-election to parliament.

3rd October: Russia accused Georgia of having spirited Chechen fighters to the Kodori gorge in order to spearhead an attack against the breakaway region of Abkhazia. Rustavi 2 follows the story closely although there seem to have been no pictures of the guerrillas in question.

8th October: Tensions rose further when a UN helicopter was shot down in the Kodori gorge.

21st October: Vake by-election; Mikheil Sakkashvili elected to parliament

30th October: 2 tax police raid the premises of independent TV Rustavi 2; demonstrators gather to protest the interference outside the TV station.

31st October: Minister of State Security, Vakhtang Kutateladze resigns after the Rustavi episode as do Interior Minister, Kakha Tagarmadze and Chief Prosecutor, General Gia Meparishvili.

1st November: Parliamentary Chairman Zurab Zhvania resigns followed by the resignation of the entire government.

10th November: Election of a new chairman . Parliament sets about confirming the new ministers many of whom were in the former administration.

BHHRG Mission to Georgia, 2001

British Helsinki Human Rights Group representatives have visited Georgia regularly since 1992 and interviewed human rights activists, doctors, prisoners and refugees from all over the country. Their conclusions about the state of Georgia's human rights record, presented in a series of published reports, has been consistently negative. In January, 1999, BHHRG's account of the appalling state of affairs in Georgia at every level was ignored by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe which voted to accept a country whose own officials admitted that **every** prisoner in the capital's central prison was infected with TB. [www.bhhr.org/georgia]

In the light of the above developments BHHRG sent a group of monitors to investigate the situation in the republic. While there they interviewed various politicians including Elena Tevdoradze, Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, members of the Revival group of deputies, Irakli Kadagishvili, spokesman for National Democratic Party, Georgi Arveladze, spokesman for Mikheil Saakashvili, Nika Tabatadze, director of Rustavi 2, Levan Kubareishvili, spokesman for Georgian state television, David Usupashvili, IRIS Georgia Rule of Law Programme, Levan Berdzenishvili, director of Georgia National Library and the Civic Rights Development Organization, Levan Urashidze (IECERHRG), Jaba Ioseliani, Vaso Kapanadadze, *Resonans* newspaper, students from Tbilisi university, former members of the Gamsakhurdia government. They also visited Tskinali, capital of the breakaway region of South Ossetia and observed the presidential election the first round of which took place on 18th November.

Background

Eduard Shevardnadze returned to Georgia in March, 1992 after the overthrow of the country's first democratically elected, post-Soviet president, Zviad Ghamsakhurdia in January, 1992. Shevardnadze's return was hailed in the West as something of a mission to save the newly-independent republic from the war and anarchy that had beset Ghamsakhurdia's presidency.

After elections in October, 1992, in which Shevardnadze was the only candidate, he became head of state as Chairman of the Georgian parliament. Only parties which had backed the coup against Gamsakhurdia took part in the poll, but splits between them became apparent as they struggled over the spoils of office. The rivalry between the para-military Mkhedrioni mafia group and Giorgi Chanturia's National Democratic Party who had spear-headed the uprising against Gamsakhurdia revolved around the control of the lucrative customs ministry. Murder became a routine way of resolving differences in what Western institutions like the OSCE and the U.S. State Department regarded as one of the most hopeful of post-Soviet states.

Despite allowing his Mkhedrioni allies to provoke and then lose two wars against regional separatists - in the coastal province of Abkhazia and the northern region of South Ossetia - Shevardnadze went on to be elected president in 1995 under a new constitution. His political supporters had formed a party in 1993 (the Citizens Union) that won a majority of seats in parliamentary elections also held that year (1995). Similarly, in 1999 the Citizens Union topped the poll and Shevardnadze himself was re-elected president in 2000 for the second time - or third, depending on one's understanding of his original role as Speaker. The Georgian constitution only permits a holder of the post to serve two terms. Nowadays even officials of the Georgian election commission at the time admit that these polls were deeply flawed by fraud (as reported by the BHHRG's observers though denied or glossed over by the OSCE and Council of Europe's observer missions).

But nearly ten years after Shevardnadze came to power there is very little to show for his time in office - other than a plethora of prizes and awards from foreign organizations and regular state visits to gracious and admiring hosts like Britain's Queen Elizabeth and all three US presidents in office at the same time. On 23rd September, 1999, President Shevardnadze received the W. Averill Harriman Democracy Award for the progress in building an independent, democratic state in Georgia from the U.S. National Democratic Institute. 1998's winner, President Clinton, eulogised Shevardnadze who "had taken to democracy with the zeal of a convert." "Once he decided to believe, he stayed hitched," Clinton said. "This man has stayed the course when the price was high." (Mrs Hilary Rodham Clinton also received an award at the same NDI ceremony emphasizing how closely Shevardnadze was associated with the First Family.) Not since Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu was lauded by the Queen and the residents of the White House in the 1970s and 1980s has the fulsome rhetoric of Western leaders about an Eastern ruler contrasted with the harsh realities of life in his own domain.

However, nearly ten years on, the breakaway regions are still out of Tbilisi's control with over c.250,000 refugees, mainly from Abkhazia, living in squalid, makeshift accommodation. The economy is in free-fall as factories and enterprises have long shut down. An energy crisis means vast swathes of the country are cut off from heat and light throughout the winter months. By the side of the main Tbilisi-Batumi highway there is evidence of the wholesale destruction of orchards and woods, cut down to provide fuel for local inhabitants. Running water is an intermittent luxury, even in the cities. Relations with Georgia's northern neighbour, Russia, are, to say the least, uncomfortable. Meanwhile, people gather in the lobby of parliament begging for help in a scene reminiscent of the middle ages when the King was petitioned to cure the suffering from scrofula.

As if in anticipation of further criticism, Shevardnadze appeared open to change. He talked about creating the post of prime minister and appointed an anti-corruption commission in the Spring, 2001 headed by the youthful minister of justice, Mikheil Saakashvili. BHHRG was told that the president had enjoyed a somewhat uncomfortable visit to Washington in October 2001 when he was tackled by administration officials for not doing enough to combat corruption in Georgia. Apparently, the Americans felt somewhat aggrieved as they had helped fund the anti-corruption activities of Saakashvili et al. without any noticeable results.

Straws in the Wind

There was a marked change in tone following the presidential election in 2000 even though Shevardnadze's Georgia had only recently received one of the West's marks of approval - accession to the Council of Europe with a seat for a Georgian judge on the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Suddenly, the OSCE's election monitors issued a report which was sharply critical of the poll which it claimed was unfairly skewed in Shevardnadze's favour [www.osce.org/odhir] BHHRG observers concurred with the charges but were puzzled by the fact that even though the same type of abuses were evident the year before in the 1999 Parliamentary elections and, in fact, in 1992 and 1995, when many of the same personnel were active in the OSCE mission, the OSCE had given positive assessments of equally flawed elections. After all, not only was the same candidate head of the poll but the same team was running the Central Election Commission. This suggests that something other than observable facts on the ground in Georgian polling stations was behind the OSCE's shift in attitude towards President Shevardnadze's democratic legitimacy.

During the same period, various key academics and journalists in the West began to criticize Georgia for its economic and social policies. At the top of their list of complaints was 'corruption' among the ruling elite around the president. Despite a decade of near universal approval, Georgia, it suddenly emerged, was a 'failed state'. However, direct criticism of Shevardnadze himself in the Western media is still qualified by expressions of gratitude for his past services. Interviewed by the *Christian Science Monitor*, Anatol Lieven of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace reminded readers that the president had "saved Georgia"¹ while Charles King in the *National Interest* was quick to point out "it is undeniable that Shevardnadze's return to Georgia helped save the country from ever greater tragedy".² However, BHHRG have always found that outside the magic circle of Tbilisi's Western-educated elite (often the children of powerful Soviet-era apparatchiks) ordinary Georgians regarded Shevardnadze's return to their country as a great tragedy.

It is probably true to say that Georgia's Western sponsors were becoming increasingly uneasy about the succession to Shevardnadze. The President is now in his early seventies. Should he suddenly die or become incapacitated a vacuum could appear that might be filled by politicians less helpful to the West's agenda. Confusion over the succession, whatever the much-flouted Georgian Constitution might say, could open the way to chaos or a non-Western sponsored candidate gaining power. The sea-change in Western attitudes to Shevardnadze now seen as a lame-duck is illustrated by the growing support among the international community for 'reformist' members of the parliament grouped around its Speaker (1995-2001), Zurab Zhvania, who has gone from Shevardnadze stalwart to dissident.

What underpins the West's agenda in Georgia, as elsewhere in the Caucasus and Central Asia, can be summed up in one word - energy. Early oil from the Caspian is already, albeit slowly, transiting Georgia to Western markets. Plans for a pipeline to take a heavier production load from Baku via Supsa (Georgia) to Ceyhan (Turkey) await strategic investments. However, a more promising energy source emerged in 1999 when a large gas deposit was found in the Caspian and became known as the Shah Deniz project. Plans soon developed for a pipeline to transit this along a route parallel to the still undeveloped Baku-Ceyhan route. If this scheme succeeded not only would Western markets, like Turkey, be less dependent on Russian gas but Georgia itself would (theoretically) benefit financially.

While there is little love lost between some elements of the Russian establishment and Shevardnadze Moscow has, until recently, kept an arms length relationship with Georgia.

¹ "A decade of graft and decline in post-Soviet Georgia" Scott Peterson *Christian Science Monitor*, 21st February, 2001

² "Potemkin Democracy: Four Myths about Post-Soviet Georgia", Charles King, *National Interest*, Summer 2001; Also see: "A Hero to the West, A Villain at Home", Peter Baker, *IHT*, 14 April, 2001; "Strength in Numbers" Wendell Stevenson, *Time Magazine*, 29th November, 2001

Although they helped the Abkhaz rebels defeat Georgia in a bloody war between 1992-3 the Russians have abided by their commitments to withdraw from their military bases there, including at Gdauti in Abkhazia itself. While Georgia has remained in the CIS it entered into a separate Western-sponsored security arrangement (GUUAM) with other ex-Soviet republics and President Shevardnadze had even talked about joining NATO in the near future in September, 1999, though in 2001 he has talked of “neutrality” as his preferred option for Georgia suggesting a shift away from the West.

This course correction may have a lot to do with the souring of Georgia’s relationship with the Russian government which has criticized Georgia for allowing Chechen rebels to train and regroup in the northern Pankisi Gorge region close to the Chechen border since the resumption of war between the Kremlin and Chechnya in September, 1999. Shevardnadze has responded by claiming that any Chechens in the region are refugees and that no one in Georgia is supporting guerrillas. As the summer of 2001 wore on the tone from Moscow began to sharpen considerably and Russian demands that its two other military bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki should be kept open for another 14 years began to receive a more sympathetic hearing in Tbilisi than was previously the case. At the end of November 2001 the Georgian side alleged that Russian aircraft had bombed villages in the Pankisi gorge region.

The energy factor: AES Telasi

Georgia has been crippled by energy shortages and cuts in supply since independence. Gas comes from Russia but the eventual owners of distribution networks within Georgia remains to be settled with US and Russian companies jockeying for power. US electrical company AES Telasi already distributes electricity to the Tbilisi area where it operates in an uncertain and unsatisfactory environment, partly because of interruptions to the supply of Russian gas to its generators (though other problems have repeatedly hit electricity generation by the company).

Evidence of the unsatisfactory provision of electricity to the capital came ironically in a supplement to the *Financial Times* dedicated to Georgia.³ Writing about the “Microfinance “Bank of Georgia (MBG)”, Anthony Robinson noted, “Typically.... borrowers need about \$1,000 to buy a generator to ensure light and heat during frequent power cuts.”

Nonetheless, Anthony Robinson could write about the “US-based energy company” AES: “For Georgia, AES stands out as one of the small number of successful strategic investors. In Tbilisi it is prominent enough to have direct access to the political leadership, *an important element in its success*. Throughout the post-Soviet world, modernising the power distribution and generation industries is a vital task requiring large investment. In most places the task has hardly begun. In Georgia it is well on its way.”⁴ Despite the article’s title, “US investor helps warm the nation”, it quoted Michael Scholey, the man running AES-Telasi, as saying: “I’m afraid winter will be hard again... and we won’t be able to guarantee full supply, even though *metering will cut demand*.”⁵

AES-Telasi has required consumers in Tbilisi to buy new meters, which many cannot afford, but, according to the *Financial Times*, these “new meters make it... easy for Telasi to recognise and cut off non-payers.

As a result, Mr Scholey counts himself among the most hated men in Tbilisi.”⁶

Difficulties over non-payment and the sudden unwillingness of the Georgian government to sell further franchises to AES-Telasi to operate the electricity system in other parts of the country, apparently led the U.S. corporation headquarters to consider abandoning the Georgian operation.

³ *Financial Times*, 27th November 2000

⁴ *ibid* “Profile AES-Telasi: US investor helps warm the nation”

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

However, US State Department pressure encouraged the company not to abandon energy generation in Georgia to Russian or local companies. Georgian observers also told BHHRG that the US government had extended \$5m. to AES Telasi to encourage it to remain in the country.

Moreover, a source familiar with the operations of AES Telasi told the BHHRG observers that because of the wide profit margin guaranteed by the original agreement between the Georgian regime and the Arlington-based corporation, AES-Telasi ought to be profitable provided it can cut off non-payers who may number 70% of the population. In practice, because of the arcane nature of the Soviet wiring system very often even subscribers who have paid their bills are cut off because it is impossible for AES-Telasi to distinguish between payers and non-payers in many apartment complexes.

AES-Telasi's "direct access to the political leadership" which ignored its impoverished electorate's inability by and large to pay a market-price for electricity has led to a whispering campaign against the company and the politicians who agreed to the original contract. If Georgia underwent political upheaval, a popular and populist measure would be for a new government to abrogate the deal.

The AES advertisement on page I of the *FT* supplement⁷ claims, "The ultimate test of AES's purpose is to serve the world's need for electricity, for light and maybe even a little hope..." Naturally when it comes to choosing between its shareholders and its impoverished customer base, AES-Telasi prefers to cut electricity to its customers rather than its dividend.

The major personalities and groups in the present crisis are:

Eduard Shevardnadze: Members of BHHRG have occasionally mulled over the possibility that the West might fall out of love with the president of Georgia one day. After all, several statesmen, once feted in Washington, have eventually found themselves cold-shouldered. For example, Albania's former president, Sali Berisha was promoted as a strong ally of the US until 1996 when his downfall was actively sought by the State Department. Leonid Kuchma was referred to as the "Bismark of the Ukraine" by one Western sycophant, a description that, nevertheless, once reflected Kuchma's reputation in the US. And, in 1998, several months after having been called "the soaring eagle of freedom" by Richard Armitage, (now deputy US Secretary of State) , Azerbaijan's president Haidar Aliyev faced a hostile international community in his re-election bid that October.

But Shevardnadze was different. American politicians from both parties have counted him not only as a reliable partner but also as something of a personal friend despite the fact that none of those involved can speak to one another in the same language. In the early nineties Shevardnadze was already involved in business arrangements with former Secretary of State, George Schultz. His many international prizes will also have netted him a large sum of money.

Therefore, it comes as something of a shock to find Western-educated members of the Georgian political elite now in opposition to Mr. Shevardnadze criticizing him for being too pro-Russian. Giorgi Arveladze, Mikheil Saakashvili's advisor, told BHHRG that the president was now too old to be an effective leader and that members of his corrupt family/clan were suffocating him and preventing him from taking rational decisions. He also said that fugitive businessman, Badri Patarkatsishvili a right-hand man of Boris Berezovski, was active in Georgia trying to buy up the media and gain influence in parliament.

⁷ *ibid*

Shevardnadze, according to Arveladze, supported men like Citizens Union MP, Vazha Lortkipanidze, former Georgian ambassador to Moscow. It was "Russian intelligence services" that came up with the candidature of Lortkipanidze for chairman of parliament during November's election to the post. Patarkatsishvili financed his campaign offering bribes to members of parliament for their votes. Arveladze also named former Interior Minister, Kakha Tergamadze and Ajarian leader, Aslan Abashidze as having Russian intelligence connections and helping the Russians gain influence in the country.

Arveladze also criticized the president for "lobbying" on behalf of the Russian gas company ITERA against the wishes of the US. Various people claimed that Shevardnadze had appeared on Georgian TV acting as a lobbyist for ITERA. However, interviewed by BHHRG, Levan Kubaneishvili head of information for channels 1 and 2 at Georgian state TV said that the president had made no such claims. Arveladze said that the US energy company, AES Telasi "the only large US investor in Georgia" was opposed to buying its supplies from the Russians.

The conclusion of all this was obvious: Shevardnadze was leaning more in the direction of corrupt, pro-Russian ministers which has led the West to start promoting "the young democrats". It should be stated that Arveladze's views were at the extreme poll of the forces opposing Mr. Shevardnadze. David Usupashvili and Elena Tevdoradze, head of the Parliamentary Human Rights Commission, were both more nuanced in their approach to the president. Usupashvili was exercised about the constitutional problems of moving beyond the Shevardnadze era - he thought the local elections scheduled for next spring would be a suitable time to bring things to a head. Mrs. Tevdoradze too wanted to see constitutional norms abided by. But, all the reformers seemed to be united in their belief that the president's days are probably numbered and that Georgia should move towards reconstituting itself as a parliamentary republic.

The Opposition to Shevardnadze's regime: This consists of groups both in and outside parliament. The Citizens Union has split into 3 factions, the main group consists of 47 'reformers' who followed Zurab Zhvania into opposition after he resigned as Chairman of Parliament on 1st November. Mikheil Saakashvili is, nominally independent (according to some sources) but leans towards Zhvania's group. His advisor Georgi Arveladze says he plans to set up his own political party in the future. The other two groups - Support and Alliance for Georgia - still back the president. The reformist members of the Citizens Union want to change Georgia's constitution and make the country a parliamentary republic with a figurehead president.

They still lack the two third majority necessary for parliament to bring about changes to the constitution. However, the reformers can probably rely on two other parties in the parliament for support. Both the Traditionalists and Industrialists voted with Zhvania's group to elect the new parliamentary Chairman, Nino Burjunadze with 190 votes on 10th November. Nino Burjunadze has a familiar 'reformer's' pedigree: her father was a senior Komsomol official and city and regional party committee head for many years before becoming Soviet Georgia's Minister of Bread Production.

Leading opposition figures all agree that there must be change and that the president should go, but there seems to be some disagreement about how and when. Some people want a change brought about by 'people power' others want constitutional niceties abided by. Yet others point to the local elections scheduled for the coming Spring as the time to act.

The Russians: As this report is written, opposition to the regime in Tbilisi also includes, although in a different, non-domestic context, Russia whose rhetoric and provocative statements have intensified since 11th September. In spite of Georgi Arveladze's allegations that Eduard Shevardnadze had become too cosy with politicians connected to Russian oligarchs the press in Moscow accuses him of giving aid and comfort to Chechen guerrillas. The president compounded the problem by apparently saying on Rustavi 2 TV that Ruslan Gelaev a leading Chechen commander, allegedly 'protected' by Shevardnadze, was "an intelligent man".

This would all, no doubt, be explained as perfectly logical by the Saakashvili camp as Shevardnadze and his cohorts are dealing with those members of the Russian oligarchy out of favour with the Kremlin i.e. Berezovski and co. But that may not entirely explain the hostility, which seems to intensify by the day. In a provocative article published in the Russian journal *Argumenti i Fakti* at the end of November Shevardnadze was castigated for his 'treacherous' relations with the West, pre-dating the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Zviadists: For the past 10 years the most dedicated group of oppositionists to the Shevardnadze regime have been followers of former president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. However, these people have never posed any serious threat to the authorities in Georgia for a variety of reasons. Firstly, although they lack arms and foreign sponsors, they have regularly been accused by the authorities of participating in various plots to overthrow the regime. This has led to the frequent imprisonment of Zviadist activists, and, in many cases, they have been tortured and maltreated. In recent months many of these people have been released although reportedly c. 200 still remain in custody.

Since the mysterious death of Zviad Gamsakhurdia on New Year's Eve, 1993, there has been much quarreling between the various Zviadist groups often ending with expulsions from this or that faction. The return to Tbilisi of Gamsakhurdia's widow, Manana in 1998 has only served to polarize the followers of her husband even further because she has assumed his mantle but many of the surviving politicians who supported him do not regard her as the appropriate successor.

This in-fighting became even more intense when some Zviadists decided to contest the parliamentary elections in 1995 which purists regarded as illegal and therefore as a betrayal of the former president's ideals. In the election held in 2000 there was more controversy as some of them joined forces with the Adjara based party of Aslan Abashidze (Revival) and on the coat tails of his party list gained seats in parliament.

However, the Zviadists for all their integrity (even because of it) have never stood a chance of unseating the regime. The propaganda that labelled the late president as a 'nationalist' and 'fascist' - even bizarrely as a Russian agent - meant that no Western support or funding was ever directed to his supporters. The approval of Washington and the European Union has been essential to success in Georgian public life because without it access to the honey pots of IMF, EBRD and general Western aid (the only real sources of wealth in Georgia) has been impossible. To a great extent, therefore the real opposition - to judge by its number of political prisoners - has been marginalized by Western "democrats", not least because Western human rights NGOs are generally funded by the same governmental sources as provide aid to states like Georgia.

While some former supporters now take a pragmatic view that since the death of Gamsakhurdia they must confront the regime officially by taking part in elections and forming a united opposition party, if only to reveal the fraudulent nature of elections in Georgia, others still sit in cold, dirty offices rejecting the iniquities of Mr. Shevardnadze and any participation in his system. Such have been the sufferings and isolation of ordinary Georgians, including the opposition since 1991, that their psyche has been distorted by their fate and now their hostility to the president is so all-encompassing that they could lend their support to any challenger to his regime without thinking through in whose interests such opposition might lie.

BHHRG interviewed several members of the Zviadist movement in November 2001. They said that socio-economic conditions in Georgia today were so bad that more than half the population were nostalgic for the days when they had jobs, pensions and electricity under Soviet rule. They suggested that the anti-Shevardnadze demonstrations were carefully staged and calibrated to avoid genuine popular participation because the population at large could easily move beyond the approved reformist slogans to denounce old and young reformers alike. Western media ignore the pro-Russian opposition, but even lifelong nationalists like many Zviadists admit that the

“objective” effect of the degradation of life since 1992 has been to promote support for re-union with Russia (something they see as Mr. Shevardnadze’s long term goal.

Aslan Abashidze and the Revival Party: BHHRG visited Adjara in 1999 and interviewed its president, Aslan Abashidze. Mr. Abashidze comes from a distinguished Adjaran family and enjoys a great deal of local respect because of his background which has enabled him to entrench himself as the region’s political boss with a finger in every pie, political and economic. Abashidze surrounds himself with bodyguards but explains these measures by arguing that he is only defending himself as attempts have been made on his life by the Shevardnadze apparat. Certainly it is true that whatever charges have thrown against Abashidze by Shevardnadze’s admirers in the West, there is a stark contrast between the cleanliness, order and relative prosperity of Adjara and its capital, Batumi compared with the environmental and social disaster that is today’s Georgia. Anyone driving for six to eight hours from Tbilisi to Batumi cannot help being struck by the number of electricity-free towns and villages before arriving in Adjara where street lights greet the weary traveller from Tbilisi.

Abashidze's achievements are recognized by ordinary Georgians and his party, Revival gained 25.18% of the vote in the 1999 elections in spite of the fact that it received next to no media access outside Adjara itself. [see www.bhhr.org/georgia] However, OSCE and Council of Europe monitors alleged that election arrangements in Adjara were the one 'black spot' in the conduct of the poll. BHHRG found the complete opposite: order and transparency in Adjara; chaos in polling stations in Georgia proper.

Even if criticism of Shevardnadze has grown over the past 18 months, Western commentators and politicians have echoed the voices of “official” reformers in Tbilisi stating that Mr. Abashidze will have no part to play in any future change of regime in Georgia. He is allegedly close to Russia which is presented as a “bad thing” for Georgia though recently senior Westerners like NATO Secretary-General Lord George Robertson have praised Putin’s Russia and Tony Blair’s official spokesman called the Russian President “a very close friend.” It seems acceptable for President Bush to call Vladimir Putin his 'close friend' while the West expects everyone else to be anti-Russian.

Under pressure from his former protégées in the reform camp, Mr. Shevardnadze has been making overtures to his previous enemies. There was alarm in Tbilisi when the president visited Abashidze in Batumi early in November and suggested he mediate in the Abkhaz dispute. There was even more alarm when it was rumoured that Abashidze had been offered the job of prime minister should the post be created in the near future. In fact, the main effect of these rumours was to promote unease and suspicion of Abashidze's motives. Quite probably they undercut his support (even if untrue) and certainly any move to the capital would undermine his natural power base in Adjara and could mean that the authorities could arrange for Revival to lose many of its seats in the Georgian parliament if or when early elections are held. This would not necessarily reflect the wishes of ordinary Georgians, of course.

The 'Young Reformer' - Mikheil Saakashvili:



The reformers supported by the West are all former members of Shevardnadze's Citizens Union. For some time, the favourite among them and the preferred successor seemed to be Zurab Zhvania who was Speaker of Parliament until his resignation on 1st November. Zhvania has been visiting the US and Europe for several years now trumpeting the virtues of Georgia's democratic progress which he has claimed in the past relied heavily on Mr. Shevardnadze's "decisive leadership".⁸ For some reason, Zhvania does not seem to have been marked down as the heir apparent to the president. Perhaps this is because there are rumours of corruption even in his case. Also, if the aim is to get the former Zviadist groups 'on message' his participation in the militia activities that overthrew the former president would count against him.

However, in the course of the past year another, more telegenic candidate, has emerged as the crown prince: 33 year-old Mikheil Saakashvili. Saakashvili, like many young Georgian politicians, has been groomed in the US where he worked for the New York law firm Patterson, Belknap, Webb & Tyler. In 1998 *New York Times* journalist Stephen Kinzer obligingly wrote a fawning

⁸ "Georgia embraces democracy" Zhurab Zhvania, CIS LawNotes, June 1997

profile of the Wunderkind⁹: "he is a superstar of Georgian politics", "while managing to be a "completely Western-orientated guy" who, "after nightfall ... is more likely to be found either at the Metropolitan Opera or cheering for the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden," Saakashvili is "hugely admired". And, best of all, Saakashvili "often rates as the second most popular person in Georgia, *trailing only Shevardnadze*" [our emphasis]. This assessment of public standings in Georgia shows how out of touch public opinion polling (usually by Western-sponsored agencies) has become with real opinion. Of course, ordinary Georgians know what Westerners and Western-backed agencies want to hear and understand that it is wise to repeat what they are expected to say, or face the consequences in their corrupt and violent system.

Saakashvili entered parliament in 1999 as a Citizens Union deputy but resigned a year later, in October 2000, when Shevardnadze named him Minister of Justice, an appointment widely praised for its boldness. Saakashvili had already started to complain about corruption in the higher echelons of Georgian public life. In Spring 2001, the president approved the formation of a corruption commission to examine allegations like these and Saakashvili seems to have become something of a hero in the Georgian parliament, even among some opposition Revival members, for raising sensitive matters like the illegal purchasing of houses, flats etc. by government employees. However, on 14th August, 2001 Shevardnadze expressed his disapproval of Saakashvili's bill which demanded that officials account for their financial circumstances saying that it "offended against the presumption of innocence".

Saakashvili resigned as Minister of Justice on 19th September claiming that the corruption investigation had stalled and that he considered it "immoral" to remain in the government. He cited the stalling over his corruption bill - even though Shevardnadze's misgivings had been reported a month earlier and, anyway, no bill had at that stage been introduced into parliament. His decision to resign was also broadcast to the public in a live interview on Rustavi 2 TV during which he also announced that he was going to seek re-election to parliament in the Vake district of Tbilisi.

Strangely enough, for such a vibrant democracy, the seat had remained unfilled after Saakashvili's move to the Ministry of Justice in October 2000. Irakli Kadagishvili spokesman for Irina Sarashvili-Chanturia who was another candidate in the Vake by-election, pointed out to BHHRG that no satisfactory explanation had been put forward for this gap between Mr Saakashvili's resigning his seat and his decision to re-fight it a year later.

Mr. Kadagishvili made accusations about electoral fraud. However, during their visit to Tbilisi in November, 2001 BHHRG representatives did not hear the same account of the election from Vake residents. It is perfectly reasonable for Saakashvili to have won the seat as the district in question covers one of the most desirable residential areas in central Tbilisi, inhabited by many members of the nomenklatura. Saakashvili seems to have received substantial funding for his election campaign either from moneyed interests in Georgia, the West or probably a mixture of both. Large glossy posters were still evident around the Vake district several weeks after the campaign ended.

No doubt, Saakashvili was being groomed for stardom - at least, by Georgia's most important Western friend, the United States. A biography was published with photographs of him meeting the great and good including George Soros and Senators John McCain and Edward Kennedy, as well as Attorney-General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Louis Freeh There were also a few nods in the direction of the locals with a sprinkling of pictures of the Patriach, Ilya II, as well as various members of the public - old and young - paying homage. Also included, to add to the allure, is a photograph of Mr. Saakashvili's attractive, Dutch-born wife, Sandra.

However, it is not clear exactly when the push to install him in higher office was going to be made. What seems clear from the chronology of events is that it suddenly became urgent for

⁹ "Modern Georgia's Young Founding Fathers" Stephen Kinzer, *New York Times*, 4th June 1998

Mikheil Saakashvili to be thrust into the limelight within days of the 11th September attacks in New York.

Attack on the media: the events of 30th October at Rustavi 2 television station

Rustavi 2 TV Georgia's leading independent television station was founded originally in 1997 in the town bearing its name. It is also an internet and international call provider. The company operates from the 14th floor of a high rise building on the outskirts of Tbilisi and appears to be well-funded. It is a slick operation transmitting between 16-18 hours per day and far outshines Georgian state television in the quality of presentation and programming. Rustavi's director, 26-year-old Nika Tabatadze, explained that the station is funded by advertising although its finances are also underpinned by the more profitable internet side of the business.

He also told BHHRG that in the summer 2001 an associate of Boris Berezovski, Badri Patarkatsishvili, had tried to buy Rustavi but the directors had turned down the deal. A lot is made of the role of Patarkatsishvili in Georgian public life - the insinuation being that he is connected with politicians close to the president, like Vazha Lortkipanidze. However, Berezovski has fallen out with the Putin administration and a warrant is out for his arrest. It is, therefore, unlikely that official circles in Moscow support Patarkatsishvili. On 11 November Russia demanded his extradition from Tbilisi.

Rustavi 2 has become renowned in Georgia for its investigative work, in particular the programme "60 Minutes" which has exposed wrongdoing and corruption in the highest echelons in Georgian political circles as well as Georgia's involvement with Chechen guerrillas in the Kodori Gorge at the Abkhaz border. The station was the first to report the story that Chechen guerrillas were being transferred there by units of the Ministry of Interior. According to Tabatadze the station has received threats after these and other exposes were transmitted. In July 2001, Georgi Sanaia, one of Rustavi's leading journalists and a presenter of 60 Minutes was killed allegedly for his exposes of the connection between the state security organs and criminal activities, including drug smuggling in the Pankisi region. Tabatadze went as far as claiming that "the government was involved in the murder of Sanaia"

Tabatadze claims that Georgia's economy is in the hands of 3 or 4 families (including the Shevardnadzes) which control everything: energy, telecommunications and transit of oil. Meanwhile, the Ministry of the Interior controls all profitable businesses including cigarettes, oil and banks.

On the afternoon of 30th October security officers came to Rustavi's offices with a court order accusing the station of tax evasion and of having sold \$600,000 of advertising space in May alone. The station had only recently had a tax inspection which had revealed no wrongdoing but the inspectors demanded to examine the records and take documents away for examination. Tabatadze refused.

It was 3.00 pm in the afternoon and the whole incident was broadcast live on Rustavi. Soon afterwards anything between 5,000 and 10,000 people according to Takabadze started to gather outside the building to demonstrate against what was seen to be an attack on media freedom - including various political figures, actors, sportsmen and students. Next day, the demonstrators moved to the parliament demanding the resignation of the Minister of Security Kotateladze. He resigned the following day as did the entire government.

According to Takabadze, In its early days Rustavi had received some funding (about £30,000) from USAID and the Open Society but that has since ceased. However, some people say that the station is supported - albeit discretely - by Western money. Takabadze admitted that Western diplomats, who he meets on a regular basis, have a "good understanding" of what is going on in Georgia. Presumably, he is echoing their sentiments when he says that "young reformers" are

needed and that Shevardnadze won't last until the next election. Takabadze himself looks forward to the day when these things come to pass and he is able to go to England where he has been awarded one of the UK Foreign Office's most prestigious award, a Chevening Scholarship, to read law at London University.

Human Rights Groups:



Levan Berdzenishvili, Director of the National Library

Levan Berdzenishvili, Director of the National Library: Mr. Berdzenishvili runs the **Civic Rights Development Organization** from his offices in the National Library, a building whose faded glory is best expressed by the overall stench of urine that pervades the whole building from its unlit, subterranean lavatories.

Berdzenishvili praised Rustavi 2 for its independence and the quality of its programming. He drew the Group's attention to the Sanaia Case. He said that Giorgi Sanaia was "the best representative of Rustavi 2... He could talk to all parties." He thought it was dangerous to broadcast programmes like Sanaia's "60 Minutes" because such investigative reporting could lead to reprisal killings by unhappy subjects. Sanaia had been shot at close range in his apartment on the morning of 27th July, 2001, by someone Berdzenishvili took to be a "professional killer". At the time Sanaia was reporting on events in Pankisi Gorge "on links between the police in Tbilisi, the Georgian government and Pankisi"

Berdzenishvili also said that rumours were circulating about the existence of a cassette with information about connections between Chechens and the Georgian government with names of employees in the Ministry of the Interior and connections to the drug trade. He also said that Elena Tevdoradze had a copy of the tape which would be available in a few weeks.

Mr. Berdzenishvili echoed Nika Takabadze in predicting that Mr. Shevardnadze had only "2 or 3 months to go" and that "big demonstrations will take place.

After the interview BHHRG joined Mr. Berdzenishvili at a meeting held in the basement of the Library by local human rights NGOs, chaired by the **Institute of Liberty**. It was pointed out to BHHRG that one member of the three man panel had worked for the Mkhedrioni paramilitary group at one time and that another participant in the meeting (Irakli Melaschvili) was a lobbyist for the US energy firm, AES Telasi. He, and others who addressed the meeting, updated the audience on the latest human rights violations in the country. They were particularly exercised by reports of a shooting incident involving pro-regime MP, Levan Pirveli in a Tbilisi restaurant on the night of 10th November. BHHRG saw Melaschvili interviewed about the incident later that evening on Rustavi TV. It later came to light that Pirveli had led the opposition in parliament to the appointment of Davit Mirtskhulava as energy minister in the new government because of his perceived conflict of interest as a lobbyist himself for AES.¹⁰ Perhaps the incident involving Pirveli had not been as straightforward as first reported.

Student Groups

During their previous visits to Georgia, BHHRG representatives have seen no public expression of student unrest. Public demonstrations that have taken place over the past 10 years have tended to be organized by disaffected Zviadist groups. These demonstrations have often been broken up violently by the police and, no doubt, for that reason as well as the general hopelessness of the cause, such gatherings are never well - attended. However, the events at Rustavi 2 may have changed all that. Students from various campuses attached to Tbilisi University were quick to rally to the beleaguered station's cause.

In order to find out if this marked the beginning of a more active stance BHHRG interviewed several students from Tbilisi University who have been instrumental in organizing protests. The students had their own gripes about the problem of corruption in Georgia, namely, the bribes demanded by faculty members for admission, to Tbilisi university - \$10,000 for a place at the international law faculty, for instance - and the further payments of money demanded by corrupt professors to ensure a student passed his/her exams with acceptable grades. They claimed that there was a shortage of books for their courses which, anyway, needed to be modernized: they wanted to abandon the study of "irrelevant" subjects - like aesthetics and ethics - in favour of business studies.

Shevardnadze had visited the university after the demonstrations in an attempt to regain the students' trust but "he didn't answer any of their questions". They "preferred Saakashvili", someone of "our generation", and felt that if they extended their protests "Westerners living in Tbilisi would support them". Although there was little activity in their office that day, we were assured that they would mobilize and demonstrate in large numbers again if and when the moment arose.

It was disappointing to note that none of these students showed any interest in the human rights violations that had taken place in their country over the past ten years or in the plight of the poor and homeless, not least, the thousands of refugees many of whom live on their doorstep in squalid hotel accommodation in central Tbilisi. Other refugees compete with out of Tbilisi students for accommodation in the university's grim halls of residence while the children of the capital's elite can live relatively comfortably at home with their parents. While those students themselves who were interviewed may have gained access to Tbilisi university through their own hard work it is likely that they are the children/grandchildren of the Georgian nomenklatura (and, in fact, one admitted that his father worked for the Ministry of Interior).

A heartless attitude to the suffering population in Georgia was also displayed by Elena Tevdoradze, a leading Citizens Union deputy and Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Commission. Mrs. Tevdoradze had gained a reputation in the past for her sensitive attitude to

¹⁰ Georgian Television, Tbilisi 18th November 2001

issues concerning prisoners in Georgia, including political prisoners. She had even intervened to try to help the families of high-profile Zviadist prisoners, like Petre Gelbakhiani and Irakle Dokvadze, who remain in labour camps. In 1999 she also told BHHRG that Georgia was not yet fit to join the Council of Europe.

However, her attitude to the disadvantaged in Georgian society has markedly changed. When BHHRG representatives told her they had been approached by a group of teachers in the lobby of the parliament complaining about unpaid wages and the appalling conditions in which they work - lack of heating, etc. Mrs Tevdoradze said that she knew them and they were not teachers but "provocateurs and beggars". When this was relayed to the group of women (who looked haggard and unhealthy) they all produced their documents proving that they were, in fact, teachers.

The Gongadze Effect: A Journalist's murder and the incriminating cassette

Running like a leitmotiv through the recent events in Georgia has been the blowback from the murder of Rustavi 2 journalist Giorgi Sanaia and the existence of a video cassette which, allegedly, shows the connection between senior Georgian officials and the drugs trade in the Pankisi Gorge. Sanaia had access to the cassette two days before he died.

The death of Sanaia recalls a similar incident in Ukraine last year when Internet journalist, Heorhiy Gongadze, went missing. A long dispute ensued over whether or not a headless body found outside Kiev was his. At the same time a tape recording emerged of discussions conducted by president Kuchma with security officials, including Nikolai Melnichenko, which showed the Ukrainian president in an extremely bad light. [www.bhhrg.org/ukraine]

The Gongadze affair was obviously aimed at unseating President Kuchma, something which (to date) it has still failed to do. Should the contents of the Georgian cassette (which is a video not audio cassette as was the case in Ukraine) be made public the same pressures could be expected to build up on Shevardnadze, if only because of guilt by association. Mrs Tevdoradze would not say exactly what she had seen or heard on the tape but made clear it would implicate senior people.



Elena Tevdoradze in her office in the non-smoking Georgian parliament

BHHRG interviewed Elena Tevdoradze in her office in the parliament building. She has emerged as a central figure in the affair concerning the cassette and the death of journalist Georgi Sanaia. She told BHHRG that she had come into possession of the tape before anyone else. It had been given to her by the son of a Lebanese businessman since kidnapped and in the Pankisi Gorge. He claimed it contained evidence of high officials of the Ministry of the Interior involved in the drug trade; Mrs Tevdoradze admitted to having seen the tape. According to her there are allegedly 7 copies in existence. The former Minister of the Interior, Kokha Targamadze, had one as did the former Prosecutor. When they told her that there was nothing of interest in the tapes she offered it to Georgi Sanaia to see what he as a leading investigative journalist thought. Sanaia was given two days to look at the cassette, however when Mrs. Tevdoradze rang his mobile phone to arrange to collect it there was no answer. It soon emerged that Sanaia was dead, killed at close range in his flat by an anonymous gunman.

Mrs Tevdoradze says that she has always been prepared to discuss the contents of the cassette with the prosecutors office and, for the first time, she had been called in for an interview . However, she seemed unnerved by the whole incident and a great deal less composed than she had done on previous occasions when she interviewed by BHHRG.

Everyone talked to about the cassette agreed that at some time in the near future its contents would be made public and expected that revelation to be the cause of more upheaval in Georgia, possibly on the streets.

Conclusion

BHHRG's observers in Georgia concluded that a powerful movement was now underway to remove Eduard Shevardnadze from power before his term of office ends in 2005. The official reason for this change of heart is his alleged closeness to Russian-backed politicians who are mired in corruption and involved in criminal activities, like drug dealing. As BHHRG has noted on numerous occasions, allegations of corruption always goes down well with the local population particularly in an impoverished place like Georgia. This is not to say that corruption does not take place: Georgia is a 'Mobutuized' society where cold and hunger marches hand in hand with large Mercedes , casinos and expensive restaurants. In August 2001 the head of the local Red Cross was fired for fraud. This Group long ago pointed to the scandalous theft of humanitarian aid by the authorities.

Allegations that Mr. Shevardnadze and other Georgian politicians are pursuing a pro-Russian policy should be treated with caution. The president and his team have long been under the influence of Washington. It seems that Russia has begun to flex its muscles in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in New York, but there is, as yet, no evidence that they support any particular group of politicians to succeed Shevardnadze. However , the fear that they might, no doubt led to rush to promote Mikheil Saakashvili as the new saviour of Georgia in the weeks that followed.

Therefore, it would be naïve for ordinary Georgians to think the reasons behind the latest events in their country are honourable and straightforward. The history of the Soviet Union is littered with campaigns to liquidate one set of 'corrupt' officials and replace them with, what soon turn out to be, people cut from the same cloth. (Mr. Shevardnadze came to prominence as the local scourge of corruption in the late 1960s and early 1970s when he was the protégé of Leonid Brezhnev's infamous "stagnant" regime in the Kremlin.) Serious social change will never take place unless ordinary Georgians are allowed to take political matters back into their own hands. Right now, political parties have no existence at the grassroots - they are empty vessels run from the top for the enrichment of a small group of cadres most of whom are directed and influenced by Western policy concerns.

The 'young reformers' in Georgia tend to be Western-educated types who have suddenly, as in places like Serbia and Slovakia, come to have the vocal backing of a well-funded, compliant media outlet, Rustavi 2, to further their interests. None of those interviewed by BHHRG

expressed any serious concern for the appalling conditions under which most people in Georgia live and their embrace of the discredited nostrums of post-Soviet economic reform gives little room for hope that conditions in Georgia will change should they come to power. It is difficult to believe that human rights will improve under their watch either when the chairman of the parliamentary human rights commission can refer to Georgia's poor as "provocateurs and beggars".

It is even conceivable that post-Shevardnadze things in Georgia could actually get worse. During its decade of transition, the ex-Soviet republic has slipped from the Second to the Third World. The West's record in choosing "reformers" who actually do good for their people is cruelly poor. If the chorus of Western diplomats, "experts" and journalists demand change and strike up a hymn of praise for Shevardnadze's successor, then pity poor Georgia because they will have discovered that the worst is yet to come.