

## **Georgia: Local Elections, 2002**

*Local elections held in June 2002 were supposed to provide a clue to the troubled Caucasian republic of Georgia's political future. BHHRG monitored the poll.*

The OSCE and Council of Europe did not send full-scale observation missions to the 2<sup>nd</sup> June local elections in Georgia and, although the Council of Europe harshly criticized the election once results were in, the poll passed relatively uncommented upon in the Western media. Yet, the elections held great significance for the political future of the republic since they supposedly served as a "primary" in which Georgia's main political parties were able to "test their strength" in anticipation of elections to the national parliament in 2003.

### **Internal Affairs**

#### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM**

Georgia's local government bodies are divided into 3 tiers. The lowest level consists of approximately 1,300 municipal and local (village and rural settlement) councils, and all city mayors which are elected except those of Tbilisi and Poti, who are appointed by the president. The middle level of local government consists of 70 districts, which have both legislative organs (district councils) and executives (district governors). The highest level consists of 12 regions, each headed by a presidentially appointed regional governor.

In addition to the 12 regions, there are two autonomous republics: Abkhazia and Adjara. Abkhazia has been de facto independent from the rest of Georgia since a war of independence in the early 1990s. **Adjara was officially recognized as an autonomous republic under the post-Soviet Georgian constitution after the 2000 presidential election.** Although it enjoys greater control over its internal affairs than the 12 regions, its government has never made any claims to independence. A portion of north-central Georgia encompassing part of Gori region has been controlled by the separatist government of the self-proclaimed Republic of South Ossetia since a war in the early 1990s. This republic is home to about 60,000 people and seeks unification with North Ossetia in the Russian Federation.

At the lowest level of local government (villages and settlements), five candidates are elected from each ballot. These five elect one from among them to represent their jurisdiction at the next highest level (district), whose council then elects one of its members as chairman. The President has the power to appoint any district council member to be regional governor. A majoritarian or first-past-the-post system exists in all local electoral districts in Georgia except Tbilisi, which has one proportional representation ballot for the entire city.

#### **PARTIES**

The numbering of the 21 parties registered for the election did not range from 1 to 21, but as follows:

1. Citizens' Union of Georgia (SMK)
2. "Revival XXI" (Revival)
3. "Industry Will Save Georgia" (Industrialists)
4. Georgian Labour Party
5. National Democratic Party (NDP)
6. People's Party - Union of Traditionalists
7. United Stalinist Communist Party - Council of Workers
9. Green Party
10. Merab Kostava Society
11. Helsinki Revival - National Forum
24. National Unity Bloc

27. The Nationalists
31. "Solidarity" Political Union
32. League of the Intelligentsia
34. National Movement-Democratic Front (National Movement)
35. Constitutional Law Party
36. Christian Conservative Party ("Zhvania's Team")
37. Social-Democratic Party
38. "New Rightists" Party
39. Socialist Party
40. "Unity" Bloc

The reason for the gaps in the ballot order was that several groups not competing still enjoyed the status of parties in Georgia, and still retained their "number" under Georgian electoral law. The order of the first seven corresponded to the order in which parties in the last election (1999 parliamentary) finished. The last 7 parties had not been registered at the last election, and as is so often the case in ex-Soviet elections, most of the "parties" competing were unknown quantities (i.e., enjoying no significant membership or popular base). Throughout the country (except Tbilisi) there were usually four or five parties represented by majoritarian candidates, plus a few independents on the ballot papers. In Tbilisi, the ballot appeared in the form outlined above

### **THE OPPOSITION**

#### **The "Young Reformers": Saakashvili and Zhvania**

Georgia's domestic politics have taken on a new twist over the past year, as the West has grown more supportive of the "Young Reformers" vehemently opposed to President Shevardnadze [see BHHRG's Georgia 2001 report]. The West's "bright young stars" in Georgia are two former allies of the Georgian president: Mikheil Saakashvili and Zurab Zhvania. The 33-year-old Saakashvili an ex-member of Mr. Shevardnadze's Citizens' Union of Georgia (SMK) and a former justice minister is now Chairman of the Parliamentary Anti-corruption Committee. He frequently travels to Western capitals with his American wife where he is courted by the same politicians who once treated Mr. Shevardnadze with great respect. A few months before the election, a political grouping known as the "National Movement-Democratic Front" (abbreviated in Georgian as EMDP) materialised as the campaign vehicle for Mr. Saakashvili. Days before June 2nd, Mr. Saakashvili flew to Strasbourg to urge the Council of Europe to send observers, claiming that the poll would be falsified.

Saakashvili has staged demonstrations in the streets of Tbilisi over the last several months under the slogan "Georgia Without Shevardnadze," harking back to the "Ukraine Without Kuchma" movement in early 2001 that accompanied calls from Western capitals for the Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma to step down. Although the demonstrations have been sparsely attended (like those against Kuchma), Mr. Saakashvili still enjoys Western support. His biography, published with the help of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is sold in bookstores on Rustaveli Street, Tbilisi's main thoroughfare, and features photos of Mr. Saakashvili meeting top American and other Western politicians.

Like Mr. Saakashvili, former Parliamentary Speaker Zurab Zhvania also hails from the SMK, and went to great lengths to contest the rights to the SMK party name for the local elections. Upon losing in court, Mr. Zhvania's public anger at forfeiting the right to campaign as head of the SMK may at first have struck the average foreign observer as odd from an electoral perspective, since the SMK party name is inextricably linked to a politician Mr. Zhvania claims is reviled by Georgians (i.e., Mr. Shevardnadze). But evidently Mr. Zhvania still regarded the remnants of the SMK party "apparat" (the original SMK has already split into several factions) as valuable enough to serve his electoral purposes.

Ultimately, Mr. Zhvania ran at the head of a party called the "Christian Conservative" Party. After losing the battle over the SMK rights, the leader of the Christian Conservative Party (Shota Malashkia) approached Mr. Zhvania and offered him the rights to use that party's

name. Mr. Malashkia, said he was so appalled by the “injustice” perpetrated against Mr. Zhvania that he simply handed over his party’s name to the ex-speaker without asking for anything in return. What is more likely, of course, is that the Christian Conservative Party is another example of a bogus party in an ex-Soviet election. It was clearly convenient for Mr. Zhvania to have had a “party” ready “in reserve” to be his electoral vehicle when he failed to run under the titular SMK umbrella.

### **Georgian Labour Party**

In a post-election interview with a representative of the Georgian Labour Party (whose name was also Zurab Zhvania), BHHRG was told that the party had actually received 18% in the 1999 parliamentary elections, but due to falsification had failed to pass the 7% threshold and had applied to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, from which they were now awaiting a decision. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> June election, Dr. Zhvania told BHHRG his party’s actual share of the vote was 35-37% (as opposed to 26%) in the Tbilisi City Soviet.

Describing his party as the “real opposition” to Mr. Shevardnadze, Dr. Zhvania characterized Saakashvili’s National Movement and “Zhvania’s Team” as less authentic because of their past ties to the President, and described Mr. Saakashvili and Mr. Zhvania as the “best professionals” at falsifying elections by virtue of their careers in the SMK. Dr. Zhvania had worked closely with the Carter Centre at Emory University in Atlanta, from which, coincidentally, Mr. Shevardnadze holds an honorary doctorate. He also claimed his party had “no money” compared to Saakashvili’s National Movement and “Zhvania’s Team,” but some Georgians said the Labour Party had received substantial support from Great Britain. Its headquarters in Tbilisi appeared to be well endowed.

BHHRG was told that the party was “New Labour” – a “left-of-centre” party that adhered to “Blair’s ideology” and supported “a market economy” with “strict social guarantees.” Dr. Zhvania described his party as in favour of “democratic order,” and added: “Democracy is a very big responsibility both from the side of power and from the side of the citizens” [emphasis added]. He also said that the Labour Party had attracted all the “leftist voters” in the republic, and that Saakashvili and Zhvania, in an attempt to win votes, had recently been appropriating all the leftist slogans Labour had consistently and traditionally used.

### **The “New Rightists”**

BHHRG also spoke to Tea Kentchadze, chief of the “New Rightists” Party’s department of foreign relations, and learned that this new opposition party – like Mikheil Saakashvili’s National Movement and “Zhvania’s Team” – had split away from Mr. Shevardnadze’s Citizens’ Union several months before the 2002 election. Ms. Kentchadze described the party as a “constructive opposition.”

The party has glitzy offices in central Tbilisi called “centres of social contact,” into which citizens can walk off the street to speak to party representatives about their problems. A representative in one such office told BHHRG that the party had been very active in providing aid to victims of a recent earthquake in Georgia, and had also materially assisted refugees and the dispossessed. The representative boasted that the party had afforded material assistance to over two hundred citizens since the centres were set up a few months earlier.

The party’s plush headquarters were located inside a walled compound on the outskirts of the city, reminiscent of the wall in front of the US Embassy that has come to be colloquially labelled the “Berlin Wall” by many Tbilisi residents. Ms. Kentchadze refused BHHRG’s request to take a photograph of the interior of the building after the election, saying “I don’t think so” because party officials were “still working.” Her office featured a large poster of Cuban Communist revolutionary Che Guevara next to a poster produced by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and USAID.

### **Revival**

In the 1999 parliamentary elections, the Revival Democratic Union Bloc came second under conditions of widespread disruption and violence allegedly committed by Citizens' Union representatives. The Revival bloc was made up of four parties: the Revival Party of Aslan Abashidze, President of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria; Vakhtang Rcheulishvili's Socialist Party; Akaki Asatiani's Union of Traditionalists; and the Konstantin Gamsakhurdia Society led by Vakhtang Bochorishvili. Also in the alliance was former Georgian SSR First Secretary, Jumber Patiashvili.

Of these, only Mr. Bochorishvili of the Konstantin Gamsakhurdia Society ran within the Revival party for the 2<sup>nd</sup> June election. Akaki Asatiani had already broken away from the Revival faction in parliament before the election, but the Socialist Party and Jumber Patiashvili – while remaining in Revival in the national parliament – decided to run separately in the local elections in a scenario they explained as “tactics.” Neither Rcheulishvili nor Patiashvili had distanced himself from Mr. Abashidze in any way other than to run in their own parties for the local election. This mirrored the tendency of pro-Western opposition parties such as Saakashvili's National Movement and “Zhvania's Team” to run in separate parties even though they had exactly the same policy objectives and ideology, and always portrayed themselves as allies.

Abashidze, Rcheulishvili and Patiashvili all represent what can tentatively be described as a “pro-Russian” opposition, since all favour improved relations between Tbilisi and Moscow, and all have expressed opposition to the Georgian government policy of permitting an increased US military presence in the republic. In November of last year, Mr. Abashidze went so far as to say that “only the unity with Russia will save us, help us to preserve what we have, and advance,” and he warned of a potentially “revolutionary” situation in Georgia if the current economic and social crisis continued. Mr. Patiashvili formed a party called the “Unity” Bloc and, together with Mr. Rcheulishvili and Mr. Abashidze, campaigned in opposition to Georgia's unconditionally pro-Western orientation.

### **Demonstrations**

Although demonstrations against President Shevardnadze might have once garnered large crowds, this is not the case today. For example, a group calling itself “Victor” which has held a permanent demonstration in front of the parliament since April has never attracted more than tiny handfuls of spectators. Organisers of this demonstration explained to BHHRG that Georgians were not refraining from participation out of fear but rather apathy and exhaustion.

The “Victor” representatives told BHHRG they had gathered 1,700,000 signatures in support of a petition to force Shevardnadze's resignation. They claimed Mr. Shevardnadze was violating the constitution by remaining in office because – constitutionally – the President had to resign if more than fifty percent of the population called for it. Since, “Victor” said, Georgia's official population of 5 million had shrunk by a third because of the flight of citizens abroad, the constitutional provisions for forcing the head of state from power had been met. However, they said that Georgians did not care about their demonstration, and that the mood of resignation had made them indifferent about the local election.

### **THE TBILISI CITY COUNCIL**

The importance of Georgia's 2002 local elections primarily centred around the opportunity to take control of the Tbilisi City Council (Sakrebulo). The Sakrebulo consists of 49 seats, including that of the Chairman. According to most observers of the election with whom BHHRG spoke both before and after polling day, Mr. Saakashvili had planned for his National Movement to win a large enough share of seats together with “Zhvania's Team” to take over the chairmanship of the Sakrebulo. Mr. Saakashvili would then have left his seat in the national parliament in order to use the Sakrebulo chairmanship as the platform for his presidential bid in 2004, while Mr. Zhvania would retain his seat in parliament. The Sakrebulo chairmanship would also have put Mr. Saakashvili in a better position from which to agitate in favour of his National Movement for the parliamentary elections next year.

At first glance, the Sakrebulo may seem a step down from the national parliament, but it is believed that at present Tbilisi represents as much as half the population of the entire republic - perhaps more. This is a result of : (1) the influx of Georgians to the capital from the destitute smaller cities, towns and villages over the last several years; and (2) mass emigration from Georgia altogether. Furthermore, although Tbilisi's economic situation is critical, it is less depressed than anywhere else in Georgia, apart from the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, whose standard of living has remained relatively high. Hence, Tbilisi serves as the economic "heart" of Georgia.

## **Polling Day**

### **VOTING**

BHHRG visited polling stations in eastern Georgia's Kakheti Region, and observed the count in Tbilisi. On the whole, polling stations were reasonably well organized under the circumstances (there had recently been an earthquake in the area in which BHHRG observed) and there were no instances of crowds bunched up against the tables where commission workers were registering people to vote, as BHHRG has witnessed in previous Georgian elections. Although several polling stations were noisy, not a single observer for any party registered any complaints to BHHRG about the actual voting process the entire day. However, there were cases in which polling booths did not offer adequate privacy, and often access to the polling station would have been difficult for the elderly or disabled. Furthermore, because BHHRG was observing in the region of the recent earthquake, there was damage to some of the buildings, including cracked walls and smashed windows.

In the Akhmeta district in north-eastern Georgia, a small crowd was huddled against the door outside Polling Station No. 12 in the village of Matani (18th Electoral District), trying to shelter from the rain as they waited to get in. However, this must have been a sudden rush not typical of the day, since by 1:20 p.m. only 550 people had voted out of a total of 2,029 on the voter list. The voter list was in a dark corridor, and BHHRG watched voters trying hopelessly to find their names in the poor light.

Parties with candidates on the ballot here were Revival (5), the Industrialists (5), National Movement (2), the New Rightists (5), and the Socialists (5). There were neither any candidates from President Shevardnadze's SMK on the list, nor any SMK observers, although – as everywhere – there was one observer from the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, a Soros-funded group. Ballots were signed and stamped in an orderly manner by commission members, as were the envelopes into which voters placed their ballots in the voting booths. Voting booths were not closed, however, and "observers" frequently poked their heads into the booths and said something to voters over their shoulders. Two large men stood over the clear, plexiglass ballot box, watching voters when they dropped their envelopes in. BHHRG was told that the other polling station in the village was approximately the same size as this one, meaning that the electorate was slightly over 4,000. From the looks of the village, it seemed doubtful there could have been more than a few hundred people living there.

The situation in Matani generally conformed to the state of affairs in many rural areas. In only one out of ten polling stations visited outside Tbilisi was there an SMK candidate on the ballot, making claims that the elections were manipulated in favour of the pro-presidential party of power hard to believe. Polling stations were often crowded, but rarely with voters. In most cases, election commission workers admitted that the first vote of the day had not been cast until at least half an hour after the polls opened.

The volume of names on supplementary lists was sometimes large in proportion to the number on the original list. In Polling Station No. 4 in Akhmeta (18th Electoral Dist.), of the 600 who had voted by 1:45, 211 were supplementary list voters. In Polling Station No. 9 in Khodasheni, about 600 had voted out of 1,652 by 2:25 p.m. In sharp contrast to the previous cases, only 8 names were on the supplementary list. At polling station No. 22 in Vardisubani, all the windows were either broken or missing altogether. It was raining very heavily, and the

temperature had dropped considerably. Commission workers sat shivering at their tables in the nearly empty hall, as wind blew water inside the building. The commission chairman said that the sight of the exterior of the building could not but be discouraging to voters, but that this was the only building in the village where voting could be held. Black-clad youths were putting their heads inside the holes in the glass and making fun of the whole scene.

Polling Station No. 11 in the city of Telavi (17th Electoral District) was orderly and calm. At 3:35 p.m., 318 people had voted out of a total of 729. Although the number on the supplementary list was rather high (69), 3 observers were conducting their own count of the votes, and none registered any complaints. This was the only polling station BHHRG visited where a representative of the SMK was on the ballot, together with Revival, the Labour Party, the Traditionalists, National Movement, New Rightists and Socialists. The Chairman complained to BHHRG that the booklet published by the US National Democratic Institute (NDI) containing the Georgian electoral code was full of errors, and that therefore his commission referred exclusively to the Georgian-published version. He gave his only copy of the NDI booklet to BHHRG, saying it was useless.

This situation in Telavi contrasted with that in the village of Akura. At polling station No. 15 at 4:35 p.m., 782 people had voted out of a total of 1,878 on the original list. The supplementary list had 40 names on it, and 89 "ill" residents had made use of the mobile ballot box. Although there were only six parties competing on the ballot, BHHRG was told that there were no fewer than 17 observers. A large number of people were assembled outside, including the usual contingent of young men with Mercedes and BMW cars in the midst of abject poverty. At No. 3 in Shashiani (12th Electoral Dist.), 400 people had voted out of 1,223 by 4:55.

There were supposedly 25 "observers" in polling station No. 7-12 in Sagarejo (11th Electoral Dist.), where 720 out of 1,284 had voted by 7:00 p.m. 3 elections were taking place here at once: local soviet, mayor, and by-election for a national parliament seat. One of the observers identified herself as being from the Fair Elections Society, which she described as an "American organization." She was conducting a parallel count. There were 21 independent candidates running for the local soviet, plus candidates from Revival (2), Industrialists, Labour, NDP, Traditionalists, National Movement, New Rightists, and Socialists. There was only one candidate for the national parliament by-election, former Procurator-General Jamlet Babilashvili. The 7 candidates for mayor included Revival, Labour, National Movement, Socialists, and 3 independents.

## THE COUNT

BHHRG observed the count at Polling Station No. 32 in the Vakeh-Saburtalo District of Tbilisi), where Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement took first place with the Labour Party coming a close second. By the time the polling station closed, 728 people were recorded as having voted out of 1,793 on the original list. BHHRG was told that all parties had observers in the polling station, but that only the top three were represented on the commission because only they had passed the threshold in the last election in 1999. However, shortly after this BHHRG was informed that there was a member of the New Rightists on the commission, even though in 1999 only the SMK, Revival and the Industrialists had made it into parliament.

The count of unused ballots went very quickly. 15 ballots were declared invalid. When all were counted, however, the commission workers sat around for a couple of hours going over the voter lists. This process seemed intentionally drawn out, and BHHRG was unable to work out exactly what was happening. Observers for Saakashvili's National Movement and "Zhvania's Team" repeatedly invited BHHRG's representative to go into a back room to eat and drink while this "post-count" process was going on, at which stage it became fairly clear that the commission members were hoping BHHRG would either cease paying attention or else become tired and leave. But because there was only one ballot (for the Tbilisi City Soviet), there was only a limited amount of time that the commission could reasonably devote to drawing the process out, so BHHRG decided to stay. It soon became clear what the problem was.

Although the original voter list contained 1,793 names, only 140 of the 728 people who voted at this polling station were from this list. The remaining 588 were supplementary voters – over 80%. When BHHRG inquired about this, the answer received was that the difficulty of finding people’s names on the original list had made it necessary to create a new list. Because so many people had not received their election notices, there had been no way to look them up “by number.” Their commission therefore verified their address by looking at their passports and writing them in. A commission member was insistent to BHHRG that, at a minimum, 400 of the 588 supplementary voters were actually located somewhere on the original list, but that either it had been too difficult to find them within a reasonable amount of time or else their “details differed” (meaning that the data in their passports conflicted with that on the list), and so the supplementary list had been formed.

However, this did not accord with the explanation of an observer from “Development of the Regions of Tskhinvali,” an NGO supporting “Zhvania’s Team.” He told BHHRG the 1,793 number was simply a population figure provided to the polling station by the Central Election Commission, and that the polling station had only received a list of a few hundred names. He also seemed to think that this was perfectly normal. Indeed, the voter list on the wall of the polling station was only about 300 names long, so that if there had been a list of 1,793 names provided to this polling station by the CEC, 1,500 voters supposedly eligible to vote here would have been unable to look up their names themselves.

BHHRG was allowed to look at the lists, and noticed that the original list did not contain birth dates. Only a number and a name were entered (all handwritten), and the address did not feature specific apartment numbers, only street names and the numbers of apartment block. Yet – in spite of post-election accusations against the government by outside observer groups such as the Council of Europe – this polling station, at least, did not appear to be under the control of the SMK or anyone connected to “pro-government” forces. In fact, while Saakashvili’s National Movement, “Zhvania’s Team,” and the Fair Elections Society were very assertive at all times, there was only one observer for SMK – an old man nodding off in the corner. Labour Party and New Rightist observers did not make their presence heavily felt, and observers for Revival, the Socialists and former Georgian SSR First Secretary Jumber Patiashvili’s “Unity” party were likewise so quiet and unassuming that one had to repeatedly check to make sure they were still there.

## RESULTS

Final results from this polling station for the parties that ultimately made it into the Tbilisi City Soviet were:

**Revival:** 56 (7.7%); **Industrialists:** 45 (6.2%); **Labour Party:** 197 (27.1%); **National Movement:** 196 (26.9%); **“Zhvania’s Team”:** 55 (7.6%); **New Rightists:** 69 (9.5%); **Unity:** 15 (2.1%)

During the week following Election Day, BHHRG’s representative repeatedly visited the Central Election Commission to obtain up-to-date results or locate representatives of the various parties. Almost invariably a meeting was taking place behind closed doors between representatives of the CEC and the political parties, and screaming and shouting could be heard from outside. Occasionally, the door opened to reveal people yelling at CEC Chairman Jumber Lominadze.

What was perhaps significant about the publication of the results in this election was that, as in the past, percentages for each party were broadcast on state television a couple of hours after the polls closed. This has been standard practice in Georgian elections under Mr. Shevardnadze’s presidency. However, in the past, the parties passing the minimum threshold as displayed on these televised bar charts remained the only ones making it in, even if the actual percentages may have varied by a hundredth of a percent or so. This time, a day or two after the initial percentages were published, Jumber Patiashvili’s “Unity” Bloc suddenly appeared on the graph – as if the election authorities were unable to suppress altogether this party’s share of the vote, which was in fact much larger than official figures indicated. Indeed,

in 1999 when the Revival Bloc claimed roughly half as much of the vote as Mr. Shevardnadze's Citizens' Union, several Georgians expressed the view to BHHRG that the CEC had simply taken the actual figures for these two parties and reversed them, giving the SMK twice as many seats as it should have had at the expense of Revival.

## **Conclusion**

### **WESTERN ACCUSATIONS**

The 2002 local elections in Georgia set a precedent of sorts. First, they were the first elections during Shevardnadze's presidency that the Western observer community has harshly criticised. Second, they were the first in BHHRG's observation where no undue influence was exercised by forces openly allied to Mr. Shevardnadze, either in Tbilisi or in the smaller towns and villages of Georgia's regions. Any culpability for the "chaos" described by the Council of Europe could not credibly be laid at the feet of the pro-Shevardnadze forces.

On 4<sup>th</sup> June, "LINKS" (a British NGO) declared that the elections represented "the lowest point in Georgia's political evolution since the adoption of the country's constitution in 1995." "LINKS" claimed that, "the organisation of the electoral process was abysmal and fell far below even the standards of previous elections held in Georgia since 1995. Since the only loud complaints from within Georgia arose from the camps of Mr. Saakashvili and Mr. Zhvania, therefore, it can reasonably be concluded that the Council of Europe and "LINKS" were concerned primarily with what they saw as a disappointing share of the vote claimed by these two groups (even in coalition Mr. Saakashvili and Mr. Zhvania proved unable to assume control of the Sakrebulo), and not with the question of who bore chief responsibility for violations. From BHHRG's observation, Saakashvili and Zhvania's official share of the vote in the 2<sup>nd</sup> June election was inexplicably large.

As Mr. Shevardnadze correctly pointed out in his weekly radio address on 4<sup>th</sup> June, if his government had participated in malpractice, the pro-government SMK would have garnered at least 4%, instead of the 2.54% of the vote it received in Tbilisi. But, evidently even the 2.45% was too much for the Western observers. If accusations of infringements occurred in an election in which forces loyal to Mr. Shevardnadze exercised a "hands-off" approach, then presumably the West expected the Georgian president to exercise greater control over the electoral process to facilitate the absolute victory of the anti-Shevardnadze forces anointed by the West. The message coming from the West seemed to be that no one but the "Young Reformers" could be allowed to succeed Mr. Shevardnadze. This is a message that,

### **DIM PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY**

Most Georgians spoken to by BHHRG said ordinary people were too tired and busy trying to survive to take to the streets in response to demands and promises by "oppositionist" politicians once closely allied with the President but now claiming to his principled adversaries. During his now-frequent appearances in front of parliament, Mr. Saakashvili's bleating through a megaphone to small gatherings attracts little or no attention from pedestrians or from occupants of vehicles passing by on Rustaveli Street.

Yet, apparently, the West – which consistently ignored the police suppression of large-scale demonstrations against Mr. Shevardnadze in previous years – now favours this form of opposition in Georgia. In their campaigns to unseat Mr. Shevardnadze, Saakashvili and Zhvania – both rising stars in the Soviet Communist Youth League (Komsomol) before the break-up of the USSR – now enjoy the support of various Western-funded NGOs in Georgia, such as the Eurasia Foundation, the Young Lawyers' Association, the Liberty Institute, Former Political Prisoners for Human Rights, IRIS, and the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy & Development. While there is plenty of evidence that the Georgian population is fed up with Mr. Shevardnadze, it seems that just as Georgia tries to consolidate a semblance of economic and political stability after a decade that has witnessed separatist wars, energy



crises and inflation, the West wants to destabilize Georgia once again, undoubtedly to the great detriment of ordinary Georgians. As a result, the future of Georgian democracy looks bleaker than ever. If Georgians ever had faith in Western-style democracy as a vehicle for the representation of their popular will, they must surely have lost it many years ago.

Mr. Shevardnadze's departure may come sooner than presidential elections scheduled for 2005, as BHHRG suggested last year. Of all the leaders in the CIS, Mr. Shevardnadze has so far been the most gratifying toward the West – actively pushing for integration with NATO and other “Euro-Atlantic structures” while continuing to defend the presence in Georgia of the American AES Telasi corporation – and he will probably leave quietly when the West finally lets him know unambiguously that his time is up.

Sadly, for Georgia under its current political dynamic, Mr. Shevardnadze's exit would almost certainly not improve Georgia's sorry state, and would probably only see a worsening of the conditions that have developed under him. Those the West has lined up to replace the President and his government are poised to continue – under the banner of “reform” – the same policies that have led Georgia to ruin. This will be of little concern to Mr. Shevardnadze, who can look forward to a comfortable honorary chair at the USA's Jimmy Carter Center or some other esteemed Western academic establishment upon his retirement from politics. Ordinary Georgians can look forward to the further degradation – and perhaps even de facto extinction – of their state.

(5406 words)