LETTER FROM TBILISI

RAINY DAYS IN GEORGIA

Eduard Shevardnadze is a Western hero. What's gone wrong in his own country?

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

Late on the afternoon of August 29, 1995, Eduard A. Shevardnadze, the Georgian head of state, walked out of the Parliament Building, in the capital city of Tbilisi, and climbed into the back seat of his car for a long-awaited ride. He was about to sign a document that he had thought he might never see: a democratic constitution for his country. Georgia had become an independent nation just four years earlier, with the collapse of the Soviet Union; since then, it had endured a civil war (over the separatist region of Abkhazia) and two other serious uprisings. The nation's economy had virtually collapsed, violence was widespread, and relations with Russia were poisonous.

Yet by that summer Georgians had begun to hope for better times. The street fighting had ebbed, farmers were working again, and Russia seemed to be leaving its neighbor alone. Most of that progress was due to Shevardnadze, who by force of will, coupled with an uncanny ability to find consensus even among people who seemed to detest one another, governed Georgia then as he governs it today: decisively and alone.

The constitution ceremony was scheduled to begin at 7 P.M. But as Shevardnadze's car made its way from the Parliament Building, a man perched in a nearby apartment block detonated a remote-control bomb that set the vehicle on fire, sending shards of glass through the air. Shevardnadze stumbled into the street, stunned and bleeding. That night, Georgians watched on television as he spoke from the hospital. His face covered with cuts, Shevardnadze stared vacantly at the camera and told the nation, "They want the Mafia to run this country. They will not succeed. This is the last act of terrorism in Georgia. The whole nation will rise and raze them to the ground."

It was a remarkable performance, and much of what Shevardnadze promised has come to pass. Terrorism is no longer a daily threat. Parliament is run not by thugs but by a thirty-seven-year-old democrat named Zurab Zhvania, who made his mark as an environmental activist. What's more, Shevardnadze has fashioned a lucrative deal with the West to send oil from the Caspian Sea across Georgian territory, turning the country into a station along a new Silk Road. To achieve this success, Shevardnadze drew on the full and often contradictory arsenal of his political talents: he was pragmatic enough to negotiate with killers and ruthless enough to side with the most successful among them.

Georgia today is a more tranquil place than it was on that summer day when the bomb went off—in no small part because the country is, in a sense, a highly dependent duchy of the United States. American leaders, for both practical and sentimental reasons, revere Shevardnadze. Last year, the United States provided nearly a hundred and fifty million dollars in aid, almost a third of the Georgian budget. Over the past decade, only Israel has regularly received significantly more money per person from Washington. Despite Georgia's efforts to establish a democracy, in other respects its progress has been slight: tax revenues are anemic; and last year Transparency International, an independent monitor of international ethics, placed Georgia eighty-fifth out of a hundred on its list of the world's most corrupt countries. Nearly everything that should be earned in a free society through merit is blatantly for sale, from college diplomas and drivers' licenses to the right to vote.

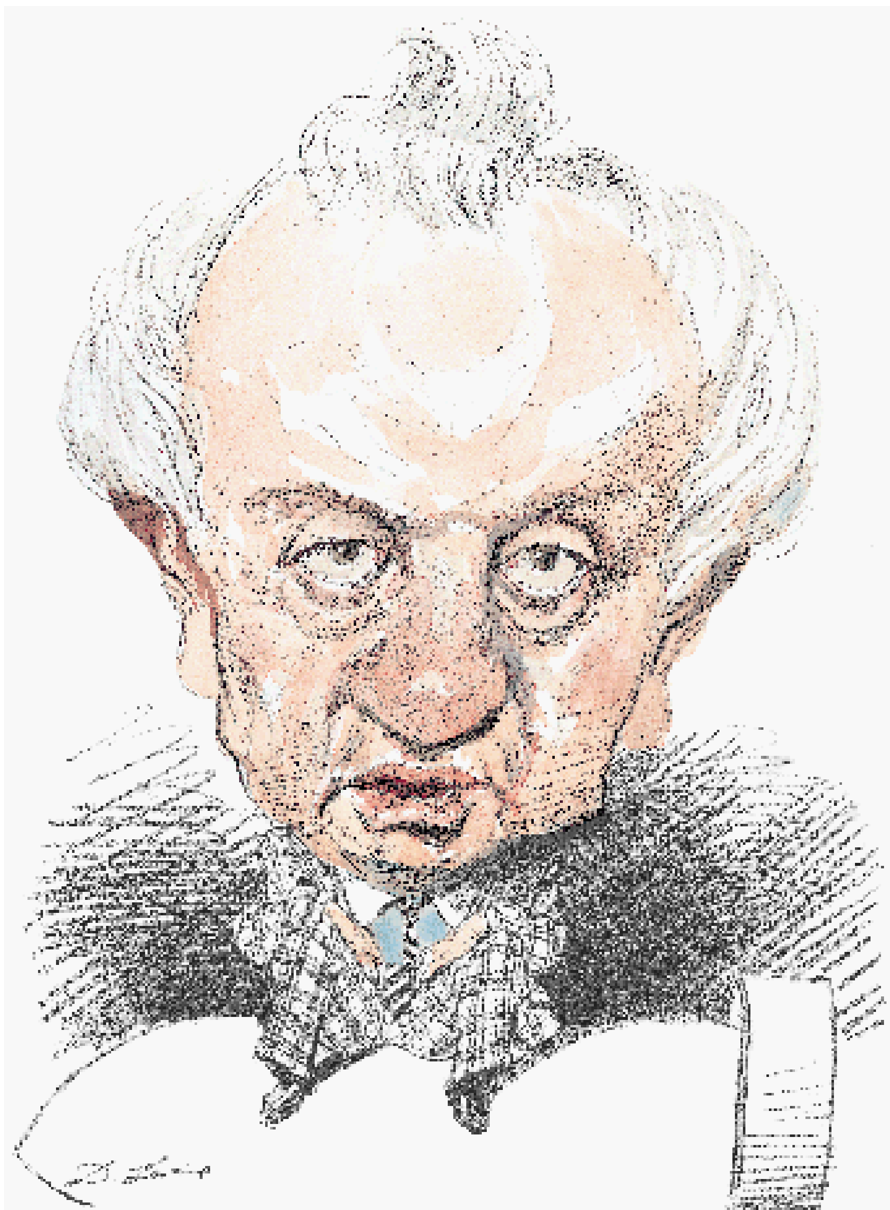
Not long ago, I asked former Secretary of State James A. Baker III why Georgia, with five million people, was so vital to American interests. Armenia has a far larger and more influential

DAVID LEVINE

American diaspora, and Azerbaijan has one of the world's great reserves of oil. Baker told me that by 1991 it had become clear to the Bush Administration that new institutions were about to form out of the wreckage of the Communist world, and that America had been handed a rare opportunity to influence them. "If there was one special place in that region, one country above all that we knew we needed to help, it was Georgia," Baker told me. "Getting the oil out matters, and so does Georgia's physical and cultural position in the world. But obviously you cannot think about that country without thinking about Eduard Shevardnadze. I am not sure that the Cold War could have ended peacefully without him. He changed all our lives. And when we thought about that part of the world we never forgot it. The man's a hero."

The world first became aware of Shevardnadze in 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev, the new leader of the Soviet Union, asked his old friend to replace Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, one of the last of the hard-line Soviets. One evening the previous winter, at Pitsunda, a resort on the Black Sea coast favored by the Soviet bosses, the two had spoken at length; and Gorbachev had said, "We cannot go on living like this"—in Soviet society. "Everything is rotten." Shevardnadze replied, "It has to be changed."

Shevardnadze, who is seventy-two, was an unlikely radical. He had grown up in the rural Georgian village of Mamati in the thirties, during the worst of the purge years. Yet his allegiance to Stalin never wavered, and by the time he was twenty, in 1948, he had joined the Party. Shevardnadze, the youngest of five children, was a talented student and his parents urged him to become a doctor. Instead, he chose politics. He advanced rapidly—by 1972, he had become the Georgian Party leader—not just because he shut down opponents but also because he ran a harsh public campaign against corruption.



Shevardnadze is increasingly seen as a cause of Georgia's problems, not the solution.

Georgians prospered during Soviet times, but they did so by playing angles, avoiding rules, and breaking laws. (Almost invariably, in Soviet films the mobsters were Georgian.) Their produce, their wine, and even their mineral water were prized in Moscow, which opened up many opportunities for bribery. Shevardnadze, however, realized that an economy based on theft was bound to fail. Not long after taking over as Party boss, he called a meeting of his deputies and asked them to raise their hands if they agreed that he should launch a war on corrupt officials. Every hand shot into the air. Then Shevardnadze asked the deputies to keep their arms raised as he circled the room checking wrists. Anyone wearing something better than a cheap Soviet timepiece was fired.

Shevardnadze supported intellectuals when other Communist leaders tried to put them in prison. During the Brezhnev era, films that one could never see in Moscow were routinely—if discreetly—on view in Tbilisi. The filmmaker Tengiz Abuladze, who began writing his anti-Stalinist epic "Repentance" in 1981, never considered making the film until Shevardnadze encouraged him to proceed.

"This is a Shakespearean sort of country," Georgia's best-known director, Robert Sturua, said when I spoke with him one evening in Tbilisi. "And our leader is the most Shakespearean among us, with all his flaws and all the gifts. Shevardnadze supported us when it was impossible for him to do it. You can't imagine how rare it was—a Communist with respect for free speech."

When Shevardnadze was named Foreign Minister, he had rarely been out of the Soviet Union, and many diplo-

"You should go and talk to Santa, dear, even though you feel he screwed you last year."

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mats were shocked. He asserted himself immediately, though, leading the reformist wing of Gorbachev's politburo; and in the period between 1988 and 1990 he travelled frequently between Moscow and Washington, entering into a remarkably open personal relationship with his American counterpart, James Baker.

"I decided by May of '89 that this was somebody whose word was good, whom you could trust completely," Baker said. "He felt like something dramatic was going to come, and that they ought to make it happen in an orderly and peaceful way."

But by December of 1990, Gorbachev's most passionate idealist had had enough of the reactionary intrigue in the Kremlin. He appeared before the Congress of People's Deputies and announced that a "dictatorship is coming," and that he had no choice but to resign. The warning seemed alarmist, but it presaged the coup attempt of August, 1991. "Let this be my protest against what is happening," Shevardnadze told the startled deputies before walking out of the hall. The speech marked the end of Gorbachev's most progressive period of leadership. Within two years, Shevardnadze would return to Georgia, and find himself in charge of a government so medieval and divided that legislators had to be forbidden to carry guns into Parliament. Yet by 1995—when the car bomb exploded in Tbilisi—Shevardnadze, by negotiating, compromising with gangsters, doing everything but actually waging another war, had managed to pull Georgia back from the edge of anarchy.

Except for the protruding, burning hazel eyes and the occasionally errant wisps of white hair—which give him a haunted look—Eduard Shevardnadze is an open and unassuming man. He is quiet and reflective, and I couldn't find an aide who remembered the last time he had raised his voice. He always seems to be alone, even when he is not. In Tbilisi, his routine seldom varies: each morning at eight-thirty, he settles into an armor-plated Mercedes that the German government donated after the first attempt on his life (there was another, in 1998). Shevardnadze rarely gets home before 10 P.M. His friends are his colleagues. He sometimes attends the opening of a play or a concert with his wife, Nanuli. But he does almost nothing but work. (I asked one of his closest aides, Peter Mamradze, if I could spend some time with Shevardnadze outside the office. He looked at me, smiled, and said, "Not unless you plan to sleep with him.")

After Shevardnadze resigned and the Soviet Union collapsed, he could have embarked on an entirely new life. He was invited to lecture for handsome fees at universities around the world; he was offered foundation jobs. None of it appealed to him. He spent most of 1991 at a Moscow think tank that he had founded and then returned, briefly, to his position at the Foreign Ministry. By then, though, the chemistry between him and Gorbachev was gone, and he soon left for good. After that, for whatever reason—patriotism, ego, pride, or, more likely, a mixture of them all—Shevardnadze felt that he had only one choice. "I thought about what I would do next," he told his longtime aide and interpreter, Pavel Palezchenko. "Return to Georgia? Well, a different kind of people are in charge there now, and the attitude toward me has changed. But I cannot retire and do nothing."

Georgia's first post-Soviet President, the mystical nationalist fanatic Zviad Gamsakhurdia, had driven the nation into civil war. By the fall of 1991, he couldn't control the fighting on the streets of his own capital; eventually, a Mafia dandy named Jaba Ioseliani, who ran a gang called the Mkhedrioni—Horsemen—overcame Gamsakhurdia, who fled in January, 1992, to the Chechen capital, Grozny, across the mountain pass that serves as the border between Georgia and Russia. By New Year's Eve in 1993, under circumstances that have never been fully explained, Gamsa-

khurdia either committed suicide or was killed. By then, Ioseliani and his gang were in charge.

Even in the rich tradition of Caucasian bandits, Ioseliani stands out: he had spent much of his life in prison, dressed like an industrial baron, and was a playwright, novelist, and former drama teacher. He is known in Tbilisi as both a Mafia leader and a politician, and, in his case, it is impossible to separate the two. In 1991, many people had tried to persuade Shevardnadze to return to Georgia, but while Gamsakhurdia remained in office he didn't want to appear to be planning a coup. A year later, when Shevardnadze arrived in Tbilisi, Ioseliani became his chief confidant and emissary to international meetings. Ioseliani and his crew may have been venal, but they provided the force that Shevardnadze needed to defeat gangs that were more dangerous.

By then, Georgia was falling apart. Warfare had taken hold in the province of South Ossetia. It was worse in Abkhazia, where Muslim separatists had expelled two hundred thousand ethnic Georgians. The battle there continued for nearly two years, and Shevardnadze found himself in the middle of it. When the Abkhazian capital, Sukhumi, finally fell, in the autumn of 1993, Shevardnadze, who not long before had had millions of men and thousands of nuclear weapons at his disposal, stood sweating in muddied combat fatigues and watched helplessly as young Georgian soldiers bled to death beside him. When I asked him how he felt about returning from Moscow, he replied, "It felt like I had been dipped in boiling tar."

Shevardnadze has often spoken about what he had to do to end Georgia's civil war, and his relationship with Ioseliani was his most obvious compromise. It was an alliance that was destined to unravel. Shevardnadze tried to disband the Mkhedrioni as early as 1993, but he wasn't successful until after the first assassination attempt, in 1995. At that point, Ioseliani was sent to prison, although no evidence of his involvement was ever produced.

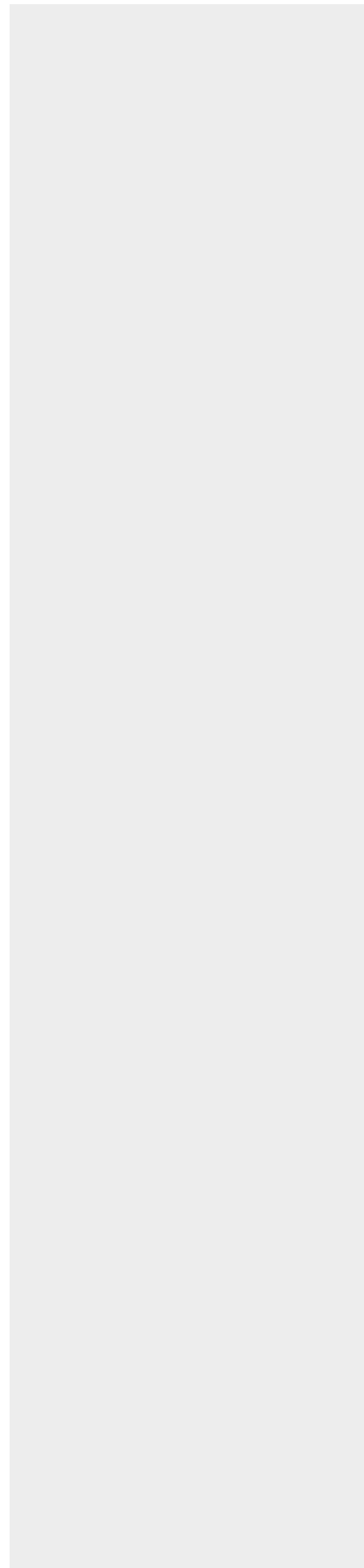
Ioseliani, who is in his early seventies, was released after Shevardnadze's reëlection this spring, and not long ago I went to visit him at his sporty new clubhouse, which was built in the middle of one of Tbilisi's most popular parks. He wore a double-breasted linen jacket over a fashionable shirt with no collar; his gray hair was perfectly trimmed, as were his fingernails. I asked him if he had anything to do with the 1995 assassination attempt. He spat on the floor, focussed his eyes on me, and said, "Believe me, I wouldn't have missed."

Georgia's appeal to the West is obvious: it is a Christian enclave in a largely Muslim part of the world, and, because it is able to accommodate pipelines running from Baku to Turkey, it can help the West diversify its oil supply while increasing its influence in Central Asia. Turning the country into a buffer to keep Russia from asserting imperialistic ambitions would be an extra benefit. Shevardnadze works hard at the task; Georgia has gained entry to the Council of Europe, and Shevardnadze has said that in a few years he will "knock on NATO's door," a goal that even he realizes Georgia is unlikely to achieve.

Georgia belongs more to the West than any other Asian country, yet it takes more of its heritage from the steppes than any Western nation. As Rezo Gabriadze, a prominent director and screenwriter, said to me one night as we sipped Turkish coffee in the café that he owns in Tbilisi's old town, "Georgia is not Asia and it's not Europe. It is part of a Mediterranean culture that begins in Gibraltar and ends in my café."

The Western presence, however, is growing rapidly. The streets of Tbilisi are crammed with S.U.V.s driven by international officials, both American and European; there are also representatives of many humanitarian-aid groups and various agencies of the United Nations, as well as a full complement of oilmen, hustlers, development experts, communications specialists, and spies. At nearly every meal, the dining room at Betsy's—Tbilisi's best guesthouse—is filled with the sounds of Americans cutting deals.

Five years ago, it was often hard to book a call to Moscow. Now there are cell phones in backpacks, on bicycles, and in cars. FedEx delivers. Georgian cuisine remains popular, but there are also French, Chinese, and Central Asian restaurants in the capital. When I was



in town, performances of ballet, opera, and several plays sold out each night, including Robert Sturua's production of "Hamlet," in the Rustaveli Theatre. A puppet-theatre group that Gabriadze directs staged a lyrical version of "The Battle of Stalingrad" in a tiny theatre that he and his troupe built themselves. Earlier this month, the group brought the show—a metaphor for the death of the Soviet Union—to the Kennedy Center in Washington.

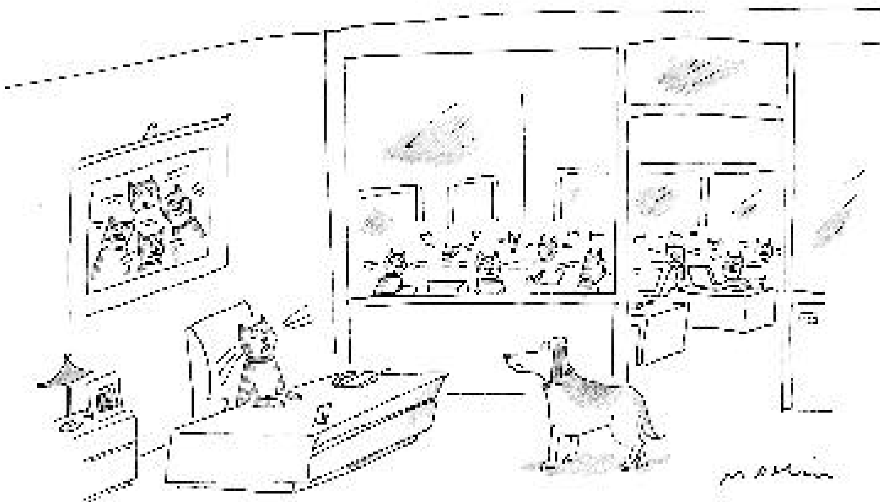
Just as Georgia's wars of separatism and identity were ending, in 1994, Chechnya—which shares Georgia's only border with Russia and has unhappily been a part of its empire for three hundred years—asserted its independence. Chechen rebels fought the Russian Army for two years before driving forty thousand weary soldiers from their territory, and the war often threatened to spill over the mountains and into Georgia. The conflict was a reminder of how fragile peace was in the Caucasus, and of the extent to which Russia still seeks to control the region. Moscow has helped start two of Georgia's civil wars in the past ten years, and the Russian military maintains four bases on Georgian territory.

Georgia managed to remain aloof during the previous Chechen conflict, but it has been harder this time. Last year, when the war started again, the Russians tried to station troops in the Pankisi Gorge, a narrow valley that leads to the mountain pass where Georgia ends and Chechnya begins. The Russians were quickly rebuffed by Shevardnadze, who understands that neutrality is his only hope of staving off a full-blown war throughout the Caucasus. But the Russian generals have kept up the pressure, and at least twice in the past year bombs have fallen on Georgian villages.

"It is literally the case that no high-level meeting takes place between American and Russian officials without the word 'Georgia' being mentioned," Strobe Talbott, the Deputy Secretary of State, told me recently. "When we talk to Russia, we talk about red lines. Those are lines it must not cross. Well, the brightest of the red lines that exist is the border between Chechnya and Georgia."

The gorge has long been a transit point for drugs and arms on their way from Afghanistan to Chechnya and beyond. Many of the people who live there immigrated from Chechnya decades ago and, egged on by local warlords, they resent the humanitarian aid that is available for the new Chechen refugees.

I drove up from Tbilisi one morning, arriving after a shoot-out in which eight gang members had died. People were on edge. Although the refugee camps are supposed to admit only women, children, and old men, the first thing that caught my eye along the dusty trails—just thirty miles from the battlefields—was two groups of young men cruising around in Mercedes S600s, with smoked mirrors and Chechen flags pasted on the back. The scene in the gorge was much like what you saw in Grozny, in 1994, on the eve of the first war: markets full of bright-red plastic buckets, wheels of cheese the size of tires, rusted tools, ancient spare parts—all spread out on tables as if they were Swiss watches. There were pictures of the late Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev and enough wolf insignias—the sign of the Chechen fighter—to outfit an army. The gorge was like Grozny in another way, too: you could sense the violence.



"Let's face it: you and this organization have never been a good fit."

I had last been in those mountains in 1996, right after the Russians had been chased out. I had driven from Grozny through the peaks to Itum-Kale, fifteen miles from the Georgian border. There I watched Chechen elders prostrate themselves toward Mecca, thanking God for helping to destroy their enemy. It was a late-fall day, and after the prayers several sheep were boiled in huge cauldrons on the open fields.

By the fall of 1999, the Russian generals had adopted the tactics of General Baratinsky, who in defeating the Chechen leader Imam Shamil, in 1859, instructed his soldiers to level every hamlet, village, and lean-to they could find. Russian paratroopers have now dug in throughout the mountains. On the Georgian side of the border, particularly at night, one can listen as SU 25s attempt to incinerate the last few thousand rebels.

Now, as the gorge fills with the detritus of war, the pressure on Georgia has grown intense. Moscow's military leaders have accused Tbilisi of, among other things, providing training camps for rebels, hiding members of Osama bin Laden's terrorist group, transporting Taliban fighters to help the Chechens, and supplying the Chechens with guns. The charges have been refuted by every official observer who has visited, yet Moscow persists.

"When they accuse us of using helicopters to ferry rebels to the Chechen battle zone," Shevardnadze told me, "the Russians apparently believe I am too proud to admit that I am the leader of a country that does not have a single helicopter that works well enough to do any such thing."

Last April, Shevardnadze was elected to a second term with more than eighty per cent of the vote. There was no real opposition, and surely he would have won a fair and open election. But

the contest was neither fair nor open. Western and local observers complained loudly about tampering; and they found that many polling places in contested regions were closed illegally and that at least some votes were faked by supporters of the President.

A story soon circulated that says much about the disheartening journey of the leader who once ripped watches from the arms of his Communist colleagues. The day after the election, Shevardnadze was approached by Peter Mamradze, who is the closest thing he has to a chief of staff.

"There is good news and there is bad news," Mamradze told him. "The good news is that you won in a landslide."

"And the bad news?" Shevardnadze asked.

"Nobody voted for you," Mamradze replied. (I assumed that the story was apocryphal, but I asked the extremely good-natured Mamradze about it anyway. He laughed and said, "Come on, you know he got *some* votes.")

It is perhaps unfair to ask any single person to carry the weight of a nation, but for more than a decade Shevardnadze has been widely seen as the solution to all of Georgia's problems. Increasingly, however, and perhaps inevitably, many people also regard him as a principal cause. To achieve peace, he traded the idealism of his Gorbachev years for the pragmatism needed to bargain with warlords. If the warlords no longer run the country, a small group of wealthy and dishonest plutocrats do. Pensions average seven dollars a month and are infrequently paid. There is no real public sector. The government has made it easy for a few well-connected businessmen to snap up valuable state properties for almost nothing. Shevardnadze's son-in-law received a license to run one of Georgia's mobile-phone companies for fifteen dollars—far less than it would have cost him to buy a telephone. "Under Georgian law, you cannot say that the sale of a mobile-phone license for fifteen dollars is technically illegal," Christopher Lane, the International Monetary Fund representative in Tbilisi, told me. "It's terribly imprudent, but it's not a crime."

There are as many police officers on the streets of Tbilisi as there are in New York, which has at least eight

"Isn't it about time we tell the trophy wife about the trophy concubine?"

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nearly everywhere he went. No longer. "The man saved Georgia, and I doubt that anyone else could have done it," Ghia Nodia, who runs a think tank called the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, told me. "But it's time already to say the truth. Eduard Shevardnadze has lost touch completely with this country. He is an old power addict, and his reputation is at the lowest it has ever been."

"The truth is that Georgia is as corrupt as any place you will ever see," Gela Charkviani told me when I went to see him one morning at the State Chancellery. Charkviani, no critic of the regime, is one of Shevardnadze's oldest allies and his senior adviser on foreign affairs. He is a former sociology professor, with thick eyebrows and thinning hair; his father, Kandida, was a loyal aide to Lavrenty Beria, Stalin's K.G.B. chief. "Nobody ever had democracy in this part of the world," Charkviani said. "It doesn't come naturally to us."

times the population of Tbilisi. Policemen are paid almost nothing, so they attempt to scratch out a living by shaking down motorists; they are squeegee men with badges. I was pulled over three times in ten days. "I don't get paid, and I have four children," one officer explained. "Just give me five laris"—about two and a half dollars—"and you can go." To get into university one has to pay a bribe, to get into the best courses you pay again. Then there are fees for the tests (to take them and to pass them) and fees to graduate.

Shevardnadze knows all this. When I sat down with him at a large oval table in the anteroom outside his office, he said gravely, "We are facing a situation of intolerable corruption. It is not connected with or dependent upon one or two ministers or even the whole government of Georgia. . . . The entire system was created full of corruption. They are flourishing, and they are sucking blood from the rest of society. They are killing this nation." He pounded the table hard enough to rattle the tea glasses.

I asked him if he ever looked back with longing at his time away from Tbilisi. "I remember those years with the greatest pride," he said. "But my position today, being President of Georgia, is the highest post I have ever held. And it is the post that I want to define me."

When Gorbachev was in power, he loved to talk during interviews. Shevardnadze is far less voluble, but one walks away feeling that he has shared his deepest thoughts and doubts. He is so skilled at creating this impression that a visitor can be dazzled. Shevardnadze decries the corruption that threatens to ruin Georgia, but in important ways he *is* Georgia. If corruption is rampant, who else could possibly stop it? Apart from complaining, Shevardnadze has in fact done little. Plans are released and ignored. Speeches are delivered and forgotten. No senior officials have gone to jail, and only a few have been fired. Breaking the law is acceptable. When a landlord shows a prospective tenant an apartment in Tbilisi, he will always point out the electrical meter, the phone connection, and the "illegal line," for stealing electricity when there is a blackout, as there has been every day this winter, or when the bill has gone unpaid.

For many years, Shevardnadze managed to avoid the fate of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, who were regarded abroad as visionaries but were detested at home. Shevardnadze used to be met with cries of *"Nas Eduard"*—"Our Eduard"—

Not long ago, a young television correspondent named Akaki Gogichaishvili began his broadcast this way: "International experts have concluded that, owing to corruption, the state budget is losing an annual one billion laris from customs. This sum is equal to the official state budget, which means that Georgia has two budgets—the official one, which is applied to five million citizens, and an unofficial budget, which is exploited by fewer than a hundred high-ranking officials."

That report—and others that the thirty-four-year-old correspondent presents each week on his show, which is called "60 Minutes"—has startled the country. Gogichaishvili is Georgia's first true investigative television journalist, and he regularly infuriates Shevardnadze. In fact, last summer he called a news conference to announce that several government officials had told him to run for his life, and in July the chairman of the Helsinki Commission met with Gogichaishvili in Washington and denounced the government's efforts at intimidation.

Akaki—as he is called by everyone—looks a bit like a thin, intellectual Andre Agassi. His head is shaved and his black eyes are the size of walnuts. He studied geology at the university in Tbilisi and

then won a scholarship to study journalism and politics at Duke University, before working for a while in Washington. Each week he and his colleagues attack various privileged groups, usually in great detail, and with supporting documents in hand. The show sometimes feels breathless, but it never roams far from the facts.

Recently, Akaki went after one of Shevardnadze's favorite groups, the union of professional writers, which he accused of embezzlement. Within weeks, the security establishment of Georgia—including the Interior Ministry and the office of the general prosecutor—were ordered to investigate Akaki's work and his life.

"My bosses have been amazing," Akaki told me. "I made it clear to everyone on the show that if they leave I will understand. Not one has gone. Old ladies come up on the street and kiss me."

The only time I saw Shevardnadze at a loss for words was when I asked him about "60 Minutes." For a long while, he was silent. "Please believe me," he said finally. "It was I who created the atmosphere for the newly emerged free press. I have fixed meetings every Monday with the press. Does your President do that? Everyone is invited, and anyone can ask any question."

He took a sip of tea and went on, "My popularity is not what I would desire. This hungry population, with arrears in wages, pensions, unemployment—it's terrible. How can I betray these people and go home? For me, of course, the best thing would be to go home, sit silently, write my memoirs, and remember the great events that I have seen in my life." I suggested that might bore him. "Oh no, it would be wonderful. My life is hell. It's a nightmare. Every day I am burned again. When I came to Tbilisi, I had the feeling that I had dropped myself into an inferno. Even now I feel that I am swimming in water that is far too hot. It is hard, it is always hard, and it always will be." ♦

RAISED EYEBROWS DEPARTMENT

From an advertisement in the Farmington (Maine) Community Advertiser.

Volunteers at The Theater At Monmouth earn credit towards tickets for the summer season, and nearly endless gratification from members of the company.