

Shevardnadze made dictator of former Soviet Georgia

by Konstantin George

The former Soviet republic of Georgia became a dictatorship under its President, Eduard Shevardnadze, when the Georgian Parliament voted unanimously on the evening of Sept. 14 to grant him the state of emergency dictatorship he had demanded. Under the terms of the state of emergency which takes effect Sept. 20: 1) Parliament is dissolved for three months, 2) all public demonstrations, gatherings, and meetings are banned, 3) censorship is imposed on the media, and 4) the Georgian Security Council headed by Shevardnadze will rule by decree. In its last pre-dictatorship session, the morning of Sept. 15, Parliament dissolved itself by a vote of 150-6.

Shevardnadze's publicly stated motivation for his dictatorship was the expanding revolt in the western Georgian region of Mingrelia by supporters of former Georgian President and dictator, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was ousted in a coup in January 1992. Already before the vote for the state of emergency, the rebels had cut off the access of the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, to the Black Sea port of Poti. Then, a rebel advance on Sept. 15 captured the vital junction town of Yapani, 285 kilometers from Tbilisi, cutting off Tbilisi from Georgia's other Black Sea port, Batumi, as well. Such a crisis would appear to warrant a state of emergency, but the crisis, however real, was not the reason but the pretext for imposing it.

First let us examine Shevardnadze's climb to dictator, yet another story in the former U.S.S.R. of the comeback of the *Nomenklatura*, the Communist bureaucracy. It contains lessons that apply far beyond Georgia.

The rise of a dictator

The January 1992 coup that ousted Gamsakhurdia was led by the two most powerful heads of mafia-linked paramilitary groups in the country, Iosseliani and Kitovani. That coup

led to the imposition of Shevardnadze as President in March 1992. The presidency of Shevardnadze, who, before entering the Soviet Politburo and becoming Soviet foreign minister, had been the former head of the KGB (the dreaded secret police) and later of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Georgia, marked the first step in the Russian "reconquest" of Georgia. Since March 1992, Shevardnadze has moved craftily, with Russian covert backing, to develop his own armed power base at the expense of Iosseliani and Kitovani.

Moscow has aided Shevardnadze's rise to dictator above all through Russian military support for the secessionist movements in two northern Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, each with the proclaimed goal of annexation to Russia. Through this, above all in the case of the year-long war in Abkhazia (July 1992-August 1993), Shevardnadze was able to portray himself as the embattled patriotic leader of Georgia, making appearances at the front in Abkhazia, striving valiantly to save Georgia from dismemberment. Closer examination yields a very different picture.

The Russian-backed separatist war in Abkhazia broke out in July 1992. In that case, Shevardnadze was in no hurry to impose martial law over the breakaway region. For one year, under a high-publicity "patriotic" cover, he waged losing cabinet warfare against the Russian-backed separatists. In fact, he first imposed an utterly meaningless martial law on Abkhazia only in July 1993, one year after the war started, when Georgian forces controlled only about 10% of Abkhazia's territory. This sudden toughness, "five minutes after midnight," masked his real policy, which was to negotiate under the guise of "conflict settlement" the withdrawal of all Georgian forces from Abkhazia, all but completing its handover to Russia.

The same pattern reasserted itself with the rebellion in

western Georgia, which by mid-September has threatened to escalate into a civil war. The rebellion was already two weeks old when Parliament was convened Sept. 14 to vote up the nationwide state of emergency. As in the Abkhazian case, Shevardnadze was in no hurry to do the obvious, namely, proclaim at the onset of the rebellion a state of emergency for the Mingrelian region of western Georgia, and then send in the Army to crush the rebels, who then numbered a mere 400 armed men. Shevardnadze's two weeks of inaction transformed a regional emergency into a national crisis, as the do-nothing posture of the Army under his orders (or the lack thereof), enabled the rebels to advance and create a massive supply crisis for Tbilisi and the whole interior of Georgia.

Master of theater

The Sept. 14 state of emergency vote was preceded by well-orchestrated crisis proceedings in the Parliament that day. This began in the morning when several MPs, including the paramilitary warlord leaders, Iosseliani, and Kitovani, accused Shevardnadze of wanting to become a "Communist dictator." At that point Shevardnadze demonstrated his right to be called a master of theater. He rose and declared that this was "the last time" he would stand for such "insult and humiliation," and he then announced his "resignation." He then went off to a back room, not to retire, but to hold a long meeting with his ministers of defense and security.

While this was going on, the allegedly hostile Parliament voted 149-0 with one abstention to reject his resignation, appealing for him to stay on. To prevent the play from ending after Act I, Shevardnadze said that his decision was "final."

Act II began in the late afternoon with a battery of phone calls from leading western personalities, such as former German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, and governments expressing their concern over the situation and supporting Shevardnadze. Domestically, the Parliament was being prepared for an evening vote endorsing the state of emergency. To make sure this happened, security forces acting on orders from the resigned President surrounded the Parliament to prevent any deputies from leaving.

Act III began outside the Parliament, where a crowd of several tens of thousands assembled to shout support for Shevardnadze. This part was not only theater. After all, Shevardnadze had maneuvered the situation to a choice between himself as dictator or total chaos, and this fear of chaos, which is real among the population, produced the crowd. Then, with the crowd nervously waiting outside Parliament, the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilya II, was brought to the Parliament and asked Shevardnadze to stay on. Shevardnadze agreed on the basis of Parliament voting for the state of emergency and dissolving itself. Parliament did so.

The next phase

In the two weeks that preceded the vote for the state of emergency, the Shevardnadze do-nothing posture was not

confined to the revolt in Mingrelia. Timed with the start of that revolt, one group of several hundred armed Gamsakhurdia followers went into Abkhazia. Acting as agents provocateurs, they began a militarily worthless series of small attacks against the Russian-"Abkhazian" forces. No national leader could be so blind as to not see that the intent of this operation was to provide the pretext for the Russian-"Abkhazian" forces to respond by completing the conquest of the remains of Abkhazia still in Georgian hands. Shevardnadze, however, said nothing and did nothing, while letting the rebellion in western Georgia grow until it was impossible to quash through any quick action.

Shevardnadze knew that the Georgian rebel provocations would ensure the renewal of war in Abkhazia, and this combined with the civil war in western Georgia would enable him to get away with finalizing the surrender of the Black Sea coastal region of Abkhazia to Russia. On the morning of Sept. 16, the Russian-"Abkhazian" forces, citing the "repeated cease-fire violations" by the Georgian rebels, began a massive final offensive in Abkhazia. The "Abkhazians" and Moscow were most considerate in this regard, beginning their final offensive only after Shevardnadze had been crowned dictator.

The controlled Georgian media are already talking about the impossible situation of a "two-front war." The next posture of Shevardnadze will be to declare that Georgia must concentrate all its efforts to fight in West Georgia to save the Georgian heartland, having "no choice" but to lose Abkhazia. Through an expected prolongation of the war in West Georgia by "cabinet warfare," timed with the approach of winter—Georgia's second without heating fuel—Shevardnadze will attempt to maneuver the desperate population to support, or at least not to oppose, Georgia's entry into the CIS and the Russian-led "Economic Union," in exchange for Russian-supplied fuel and other essentials to prevent a winter of freezing and hunger.

Who is Shevardnadze?

When Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze became known during the Gorbymania era as the most pro-western cosmopolitan in the Soviet government, he was an eloquent spokesman for the post-industrial "new world order." In a September 1988 address at the United Nations, he called for a U.N.-managed global system of "ecological security." He stated that "in the absence of any global control, man's so-called peaceful constructive activity is turning into a global aggression against the very foundations of life on Earth. . . . The biosphere recognizes no division into blocs, alliances, or systems. . . ."

On Dec. 20, 1990, Shevardnadze, sniffing the winds of change in the U.S.S.R. which later led to Gorbachov's ouster in August 1991, suddenly tendered his resignation. Ironically, Shevardnadze said that he was leaving because of an impending "dictatorship" in Moscow.