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Georgia: Basic Facts, 1992

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SUMMARY

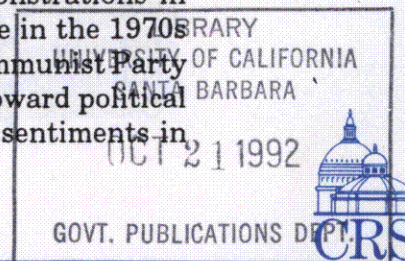
After seven decades of Soviet rule, Georgia declared independence in April 1991. The repressive policies of Georgia's first President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and fighting between his forces and opposition groups tarnished the country's image abroad. Former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze's selection as the head of Georgia's ruling body, has helped Georgia emerge from its international isolation and give greater attention to economic development.

BACKGROUND

Land Area and Population: Area: 26,872 sq. mi., 0.3 percent of the former U.S.S.R.; slightly larger than the state of West Virginia. Population: 5.4 million (1989 census); 1.9 percent of the total of the former U.S.S.R. Former U.S.S.R. administrative subdivisions included the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, the Adzharian Autonomous Republic, and the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast. The future of these autonomous areas has been in dispute since Georgia achieved independence.

History: Georgia was first settled by tribes engaged in herding and farming between the 12th and 7th centuries B.C. The area has been subjugated to waves of conquest by Romans, Iranians, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, and the hordes of Tamerlane. At the beginning of the 19th century, Russia began a step-by-step conquest of Georgia, which it completed in 1878. Georgia gained its independence from the Tsarist Empire in 1918. By 1921, Georgia had secured diplomatic recognition from 22 countries, including Soviet Russia. However, in February 1921, the Red Army invaded and conquered Georgia under the orders of Georgian Bolsheviks Sergo Ordzhonikidze and Joseph Stalin.

Despite Stalin's heritage and the fact that many of his henchmen in the security apparatus were Georgian, Georgia suffered greatly from Stalin's crimes. During the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods, the Georgian leadership was among the most corrupt in the Soviet Union. Nationalist demonstrations in 1956 in Tbilisi were crushed by Soviet troops. A purge took place in the 1970s under the leadership of Georgian KGB chief and later republic Communist Party boss Eduard Shevardnadze. Gorbachev's more tolerant policies toward political expression allowed the Republics to manifest their nationalistic sentiments in



the late 1980s. Georgia's drive for independence received a new impetus after the April 1989 massacre of peaceful demonstrators in Tbilisi by Soviet military forces.

Georgia's first multiparty elections were held in October 1990, and on March 31, 1991, independence was endorsed by almost 90 percent of the electorate in a referendum. Gamsakhurdia, then Chairman of the parliament, soon after proposed a formal declaration of independence, which was unanimously approved by the parliament on April 9, 1991. A month later, Gamsakhurdia was elected President of Georgia, with 87 percent of the popular vote.

Although elected by a popular mandate, Gamsakhurdia encountered increasing opposition to his policies. Gamsakhurdia's opponents accused him of establishing a dictatorship, citing the arrest and harassment of political opponents, censorship of the press, and his support of laws designed to give him almost unlimited power. Opposition forces launched a revolt on December 21, 1991, in Tbilisi. After three weeks of heavy fighting, Gamsakhurdia was expelled from a bunker in the parliament building. More than 100 people were killed and parts of Tbilisi were destroyed during the fighting. A provisional government was set up by Gamsakhurdia's opposition after his ouster. Former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze was invited in early March to head the provisional government.

Republic Ethnic Composition and Tensions: 3.8 million (70.1%) Georgian, 437,000 (8.1%) Armenian, 341,000 (6.3%) Russian, 308,000 (5.7%) Azerbaijani, 164,000 (3.0%) Ossetian, 100,000 (1.9%) Greek, 96,000 (1.8%) Abkhazian, and others.

Just as Georgia was moving toward independence from the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, Ossetians and Abkhazians were attempting to secede from Georgia. Enmity between Georgians and Ossetians dates back to 1918-1921 when the Ossetians sided with Soviet Russia as it conquered Georgia. Following the Bolshevik victory, South Ossetia was designated as an autonomous district of Georgia, despite language and cultural differences. Tensions between the Abkhazians (who comprise only 17.8 percent of the population in their autonomous republic) and the Georgians (who account for 45.7 percent of the population in Abkhazia) have existed for decades with each group convinced that it is discriminated against by the other. In 1978, the Abkhaz launched a campaign for the secession of their autonomous republic from Georgia which was rejected by Moscow. Religious differences between the Christian Georgians and Islamic minorities living in Georgia have also exacerbated the political tensions that already existed.

The South Ossetians, residing within a 1,600 square mile region, hope to unite with the North Ossetians in neighboring Russia (thus becoming a territorial unit within the Russian Federation), while the Abkhazians want independence. Recently, several minority groups have forged alliances to obtain greater autonomy. For example, the Abkhazians joined several other small North Caucasian groups located in Russia (Adigei, Abaza, Ingush, Kabardian, Cherkess

and Chechen) to establish the Assembly of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus in August 1989. Representatives from North and South Ossetia were admitted to the assembly in March 1990.

In August of 1990, the Abkhazians declared themselves a sovereign republic of the Soviet Union, equal in status to the Georgian republic. South Ossetia followed a month later with a similar declaration. Gamsakhurdia annulled both declarations and revoked South Ossetian autonomy, thus imposing harsher Georgian control over the regions. Fighting began in late 1990 between Georgian nationalist guerrillas and Ossetian rebels. South Ossetia has been practically cut off from the outside world as the few roads that connect South Ossetia to Georgia and North Ossetia are blockaded by Georgian rebels. South Ossetians voted overwhelmingly for independence in a January 19, 1992, referendum.

The damage from Georgia's ethnic tensions has been significant. Ossetians have been expelled from 104 villages, while an estimated 500 people have died in the fighting. At least 85,000 are now refugees in neighboring North Ossetia. Fighting intensified in April and May, forcing Shevardnadze to make an emergency trip May 13 to Tskhinavali (capital of South Ossetia), in order to hammer out a cease-fire agreement between Georgia and North and South Ossetia. While all parties agreed to improve cooperation, Georgian militants, most likely acting on their own initiative, killed 30 people (24 Ossetians and 6 Russians) in flight to North Ossetia on May 20, thus raising doubts about the durability of the cease fire agreement.

Another important factor has been the role of the former Soviet Union and Russia. Over 1,000 Soviet troops were deployed in South Ossetia in early 1991 to keep the fighting in check. Russia reversed an April 1992 decision to withdraw its troops at the request of the Georgian Government. Russia's contradictory policies toward the conflict reflect power struggles inside of Russia. Russian President Boris Yeltsin has attempted to mediate the conflict by urging all parties to come to a peaceful settlement. In late May, 1992, Russia sent weapons and armored vehicles to the Georgian Government thus lending support to Shevardnadze. But on May 28, Russian Vice-president Alexander Rutskoi, against the wishes of Yeltsin, voiced support for South Ossetian separatists. In addition, he backed a decision by North Ossetia to close a vital gas pipeline to Georgia and close the region's only major roadway in retaliation for the May 20 attack in South Ossetia.

Political Leaders: Provisional Chairman of the State Council of Georgia: Eduard Shevardnadze. Other State Council Chairmen: Tenghiz Kitovani, Dzhaba Ioseliani, and Tenghiz Sigua. Acting Defense Minister: Tenghiz Kitovani. Acting Foreign Minister: Aleksandr Chikvaidze.

Between 1972 and 1985, Shevardnadze was Georgia's Communist Party leader. His role with repressing dissidents during this time has made him unpopular with many Georgians. In 1985, he became Soviet foreign minister and acquired a reputation as a moderate and reformer. He resigned in late 1990 because of disagreements with Gorbachev and premonitions of a military coup.

Shevardnadze returned to Georgia in March 1992 to bring Georgia out of its isolation and restore unity after the fighting in January and February.

Political Parties and Groups: A heterogeneous coalition of political parties and paramilitary groups assumed power after overthrowing Gamsakhurdia. Many are now represented in the ruling State Council and provisional government. These include the National Democratic Party, the National Independence Party, Charter 91 (newly formed), the All-Georgian Merab Kostava Society (formerly allied with Round Table-Free Georgia), the Green Party and others. Military Council Co-Chairman Dzhaba Ioseliani is leader of a paramilitary group called Mkhedrioni. The Communist Party plays almost no role in Georgian politics. Communist deputies were banned from the legislature on October 8, 1991.

Although Gamsakhurdia is currently in exile, he maintains a strong base of support in western Georgia among rural, less educated, and nationalistic Georgians. Gamsakhurdia's supporters charge Shevardnadze and Sigua with being ex-Communists and spies from Moscow. Leaders of the State Council charge that Gamsakhurdia embezzled state funds during the brief period in which he was president of Georgia. While it is unlikely that Gamsakhurdia will return to power, his supporters are a destabilizing element in Georgian politics. Shevardnadze has put his emphasis on rebuilding the Georgian economy as the best way to ameliorate ethnic and political tensions within Georgia.

Political Institutions and Policies: After Gamsakhurdia was overthrown, a "Military Council" was set up and co-chaired by a leader of the Mkhedrioni paramilitary group and the leader of a dissident faction of the government's own National Guard. In late January, 1992, the Council dissolved the Georgian Supreme Soviet. The victorious opposition groups set up a provisional government, headed by Sigua, who was Georgia's Prime Minister until Gamsakhurdia forced him to resign in August 1991. In March, 1992, the leaders of Georgia's Military Council established a new State Council and appointed Shevardnadze as its leader. The State Council was given executive and legislative powers until new elections are held. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 11, 1992.

The new leadership is hampered by differences between moderate political parties and more radical paramilitary groups, as well as among the paramilitary groups themselves. Within the ruling State Council, tensions exist between Shevardnadze and Ioseliani who generally support diplomatic solutions for solving Georgia's ethnic and political problems, and Kitovani and Sigua who lean toward using military force as a way of solving these problems. Shevardnadze's leadership within the State Council is for the foreseeable future stable because of the international prestige and legitimacy that he lends to the ruling body.

Human Rights and Freedoms: Gamsakhurdia dealt harshly with those who criticized him by jailing and labelling his opponents as "spies" and agents of Moscow, and by closing opposition newspapers. Georgia's new leaders say they want to restore human rights trampled by Gamsakhurdia. They have revoked laws on press censorship and have reinstated a law guaranteeing political pluralism. On the other hand, opposition paramilitary militiamen supporting

the State Council fired on a peaceful pro-Gamsakhurdia rally in Tbilisi on January 3, killing several demonstrators.

Atrocities have been committed by Ossetian and Georgian nationalists against each other. It is very difficult to place particular blame on specific government policies (since the fall of Gamsakhurdia) that have exacerbated the ethnic tensions.

Relations with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS): Aside from the Baltic states, Georgia was the only former Soviet republic to refuse to join the CIS. Gamsakhurdia condemned the CIS as an attempt to establish a new "center" that would threaten Georgia's independence. While more sympathetic to the CIS than Gamsakhurdia, the new provisional government has said that any decision to join the CIS will have to wait until a new government is in place after parliamentary elections in October. Georgia's desire for membership in the CIS may have diminished because of the recent discord among CIS members and the dim prospects for significant CIS cooperation. Shevardnadze has said that he would like to improve bilateral relations between Georgia and other members of the CIS. Georgia has also asked to be included in the talks regarding the Black Sea fleet that is in dispute between Russia and the Ukraine and has been allowed to participate in meetings in late May on this issue. Georgia has agreed, along with other former Soviet republics, to bear joint responsibility for its part of the U.S.S.R.'s foreign debt. Georgia's share of the \$65 billion former Soviet debt is 1.62 percent which is approximately \$1 billion.

Foreign Policy and Defense: Most countries recognized Georgia's independence but were reluctant to establish formal diplomatic relations because of the domestic turmoil. Now that the civil war has ended and Shevardnadze has assumed leadership of the State Council, many nations have moved to establish diplomatic relations. These include the United States, EC, Turkey, and other CIS countries. On a May 21 visit from Turkish foreign minister Hikmet Cetin to Georgia, both countries agreed to cooperate on bilateral political and economic relations and on regional issues such as the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey has offered to grant Georgia 50,000 tones of wheat and substantial credits as a goodwill gesture. Shevardnadze has also been able to secure Georgian membership in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

Georgia announced plans, in September 1991, to establish a border guard force, composed of paratroopers and motorized infantry. In January 1992, Georgia planned to start recruiting soldiers for a national army. In April, the ruling Military Council issued a decree that would require 18 months of military service and create an armed force of 20,000 soldiers. Shevardnadze is cautious about the ambitions of a Georgian army, mainly because of economic concerns about the cost.

Economy: Georgia's GNP is about 1.3 percent of the total for the former U.S.S.R. (1991 estimate). In terms of per capita income, Georgia ranks seventh among the twelve former Soviet republics, below Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, but higher than most of the Central Asian republics. On October 17, 1991, the Government imposed a ban on the export of virtually all foodstuffs, consumer goods, and raw materials. While Georgia is a primary producer of tea and citrus fruits, which are generally not grown elsewhere in the U.S.S.R., it relies on cheap Russian imports

of raw materials and on access to Russia's markets. Georgia imports 96 percent of its oil, 100 percent of its natural gas, 93 percent of its steel, 76 percent of its milk, and 94 percent of its grain. The steep price increases of these raw materials accompanied by the breakdown of intra-Commonwealth trade has had devastating effects on Georgia's economy, which is now in a deep slump. Estimates of the decline in national income in 1991 range from 2.3 percent to 16.7 percent; production is down an estimated 40 percent; and the inflation rate is 80 percent. Eighty percent of enterprises were at a standstill during the winter because of energy shortages. Continued fighting has aggravated the decline and delayed critical economic reforms.

Shevardnadze has promised to move quickly on privatization of land and housing and to establish stable economic and trading relations with neighboring Ukraine, Turkey, Armenia and Russia. He is also looking for various forms of aid and credits from the United States, European Community, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank. He warned that in the short term, Georgia desperately needs to import grain to avoid severe rationing during the summer.

U.S. POLICY

Although the United States recognized Georgia's independence on December 25, 1991, it did not establish diplomatic relations until April 23, 1992, because of Georgia's poor human rights record and raging civil war. It was only after Shevardnadze took over that the United States decided to improve bilateral relations. Georgia was the last former Soviet republic to receive American diplomatic recognition. In late April, the U.S. sent 150,000 pounds of vaccines and medical supplies to Georgia as part of an overall aid package to the CIS that was announced in February.

On May 25, Secretary of State James Baker made a two day visit to his "old friend" Shevardnadze in Tbilisi as a signal of U.S. support for Georgia's efforts to deal with its ethnic, political, and economic problems by working toward democracy, respect for minorities' rights, and free markets. Baker added that the U.S. is confident Georgia will remain on the course of reform "as long as Eduard Shevardnadze is in a high capacity." Baker announced an additional 500 tons of bulk food rations and 33 tons of medical supplies would be made available as an emergency aid package to Georgia. In addition, both countries are working on an agreement on trade, investment and taxes.

