

# Recent Elections in Georgia: At Long Last, Stability?

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Georgia held its fourth contested parliamentary elections 31 October 1999 (the fifth, if one includes the 1918 multiparty elections that produced a Social Democratic government that was forced into exile by the Red Army in 1921) and its fourth presidential election on 9 April 2000. Press reports emphasized the endorsement the elections provided to President Eduard Shevardnadze and his party, the Citizens' Union of Georgia, which won a clear majority in the parliament. At the same time, both the parliamentary and presidential elections were marred by heavy-handed manipulation of the political atmosphere preceding the balloting. The parliamentary elections also continued a troubling trend in Georgian politics: the exclusion of significant segments of the political spectrum from representation in the legislature.

Perhaps more than any other former Soviet republic, Georgia has emphasized the development of political parties. Party list voting is the chief method for choosing members of parliament: since 1992, 150 of 235 parliamentarians have been chosen by proportional voting.<sup>1</sup> The remainder, just over one-third, are chosen from single-member districts that correspond to Soviet-era administrative entities.<sup>2</sup> Each election, however, has taken place under a different set of rules, which has had a major impact on the composition of the parliament. The party list system was also employed in November 1998 to choose local councils.

In theory, a party list system should contribute to the formation of strong parties and a more stable party system. In practice, however, Georgian political parties remain highly personalized and organizationally weak. Like all other former Soviet republics that have moved to elections to select leaders, Georgia has faced the problem of building a party system virtually from nothing. Initially, many of the groups that sought a place in Georgian politics made a name for themselves based on their ability to turn out a few hundred or a few thousand supporters for rallies and demonstrations. In Georgia's first parliamentary elections in 1990, the

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party with the greatest institutional and material advantages, the Georgian Communist Party, made a feeble attempt to hold onto power and placed a distant second to the nationalist movement led by the anti-Soviet dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The Communist Party was later banned and never re-emerged as a significant force in Georgian politics.

Gamsakhurdia's victory and the discrediting of the Communist Party were in part a reaction to the events of 9 April 1989, when Soviet troops violently dispersed demonstrators who had occupied the main thoroughfare in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. Georgians were increasingly attracted to appeals that called for an end to Soviet power in Georgia, and Gamsakhurdia emerged as the most credible opponent to the Communists.

The 1990 elections marked the beginning of the pattern in which significant political groupings remained outside the parliament. Many parties, chief among them the Gia Tchanturia's National Democratic Party, boycotted the elections to protest their "soviet" nature and formed their own National Congress. The National Congress claimed legitimacy as a popularly elected body, although the minimum turnout set by the alternative election organizers appears to have been fraudulently achieved.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a substantial number of political movements, including many that were accomplished organizers of street protests, were outside the parliament. Gamsakhurdia's Round Table coalition participated in the elections and won overwhelmingly. In May 1991, Gamsakhurdia became the first popularly elected president in a Soviet republic, winning more than 86 percent of the vote.

The groups that remained outside parliament shifted from being Gamsakhurdia's rivals to being his enemies, and they were joined by a number of former allies of the increasingly erratic Georgian president. Antigovernment demonstrations culminated in late 1991 in an armed siege of the parliament building that forced Gamsakhurdia to flee. The parliament that had been elected in 1990 was disbanded, although a number of its members asserted that they were empowered to pass laws as a parliament in exile. Gamsakhurdia supporters continued to claim that, until his death in late 1993, Gamsakhurdia remained the legitimate president of Georgia.

In October 1992, a second set of parliamentary elections attempted to legitimize the so-called democratic revolution that ousted Gamsakhurdia and led to the return to power of Eduard Shevardnadze.<sup>4</sup> In these elections, groups that had supported the former president were banned from participating, and others boycotted the election. A complicated electoral system—this time with no threshold—was put in place that permitted a large number of very small parties to enter parliament. Shevardnadze enjoyed the broad support of most of the parties that competed in 1992, and he was reluctant to identify himself exclusively with any one party. The Peace Party, a short-lived electoral bloc, did well largely on the basis of the popular perception that it was "Shevardnadze's party," though he had in fact dropped his ties to it in the face of protests by other parties that supported him.

The 1992 elections marked the last time elections were held in the region of

**TABLE 1. Elections to the Georgian Parliament: 1990, 1992, and 1995**

Party or Electoral Bloc	Vote (%)	No. seats <sup>a</sup>	Seats (%)
<i>1990 elections (n = 246; 4% threshold)</i>			
Round Table/Free Georgia	54.0	155	63
Communist Party	29.6	64	26
9 other parties	16.4	18	7
Independents	n/a	9	4
<i>1992 elections (n = 225; no threshold)</i>			
Peace bloc	20.4	35	16
October 11 Bloc	10.7	19	9
National Democratic Party	8.2	14	6
Unity Bloc	7.4	15	7
Democratic Party	6.3	10	4
Union of Traditionalists	4.9	8	4
Greens	4.4	11	5
Charter 91	4.3	10	4
28 other parties	22.3	43	19
Independents	n/a	60	27
<i>1995 elections (n = 233; 5% threshold)</i>			
Citizens' Union	23.7	111	48
National-Democratic Party	8.0	36	16
Revival	6.8	32	14
50 other parties	61.5	15	7
Independents	n/a	39	17

<sup>a</sup>Includes seats from both party lists and single-member districts.

Abkhazia.<sup>5</sup> After a bitterly fought war in 1992–93, Georgia lost control over the province and almost all Georgians fled the region. Eight deputies elected from Abkhaz single-member districts, most of whom were ethnically Georgian, and four chosen in the party list voting formed their own group within the parliament; their term in office was automatically extended for later elections. This provided at least nominal representation for the hundreds of thousands of refugees who were resettled throughout Georgia.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1995 parliamentary elections, another large segment of the political spectrum was excluded from parliament, this time because of a new set of electoral rules. Shevardnadze had by now entered party politics, heading a coalition called the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG). Georgian Greens, led by Zurab Zhvania, were the largest component of this party, but it also included a number of old Shevardnadze allies from his days as party first secretary.

Fifty-three parties competed in 1995, with a 5 percent threshold for gaining a place in the parliament on the party list voting. Given the number of parties and

the threshold, the results were predictable: only three parties passed the hurdle, and more than 60 percent of the votes were wasted because they went to parties that did not clear the threshold. This electoral system gave Shevardnadze's party almost half of the seats in the parliament, although his party won only 23.7 percent of the vote. The other parties that made it into the parliament included the National Democratic Party, led by Irina Sarishvili-Tchanturia (the widow of the party's founder, Gia Tchanturia, assassinated in December 1994), and the Revival Party, headed by the leader of the autonomous region of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze.

The new parliament was much easier to control, and Shevardnadze's ally, Zurab Zhvania, became the speaker of the parliament. The legislative productivity of the parliament increased substantially; it passed more laws in 1996 alone than the two previous parliaments had over the period 1990–95.<sup>7</sup>

### **Run-up to the 1999 Elections**

The new ruling party, the CUG, played an active role not only in legislative activity, but as a source for staffing key government ministries. In many ways, the party mirrored the direction of Georgian policies in the ensuing period. It was basically pro-Western and pro-reform, and some of its younger members have emerged as effective agents of change. Mikhail Saakashvili, an American-trained lawyer and current leader of the party's parliamentary faction, spearheaded one of the few successes—the reform of the legal system. Georgia has undertaken the wholesale replacement of judges through an examination system that is viewed as a model for postcommunist systems.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, young reformers are balanced within the party with communist-era allies of Shevardnadze who are more cautious or even hostile to systemic reform.

Based on its record as the governing party, the Citizens' Union had reason to fear voter resentment. A major issue was corruption, which is endemic in Georgia. Georgia appeared for the first time in the 1999 Corruption Perception Index compiled by Transparency International (the results of which were released during the election campaign) and was ranked as even more corrupt than Russia.<sup>9</sup> A recent survey by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development found that bribes in Georgia averaged over 8 percent of corporate revenues, the highest rate in Europe.<sup>10</sup> A public opinion poll conducted in Georgia in March 2000 showed fighting corruption as second only to improving economic conditions as most important for the president to address.<sup>11</sup> Of additional concern to Shevardnadze's strategists were allegations that corruption tainted not only most state institutions, but Shevardnadze's inner circle and family as well. The independent media raised a number of questions about the lucrative business dealings of Shevardnadze's son, Paata, his nephew, Nugzar, and his son-in-law.<sup>12</sup>

On a whole range of economic issues, the Georgian government has done little that could be labeled a success. Although the government supported privatization, including privatization of land, it advanced slowly. A law on private land ownership was passed in 1996, but the lack of a comprehensive survey of land holdings in most regions has held up implementation. Most Soviet-era industry is not operating, and GDP remains a fraction of what it was in the Soviet period.

Georgia combines a high rate of taxation with one of the lowest rates of tax collection in the world. In 1999, the tax collection rate was only about 9 percent of GDP, a record worse even than that of Pakistan. The rate of foreign direct investment is similarly dismal, about \$37 per capita; the only former Soviet republics with lower rates are Uzbekistan and war-torn Tajikistan.<sup>13</sup> A World Bank study estimated that in 1999 over 70 percent of the Georgian population was living in poverty.<sup>14</sup>

Poor economic performance has made Georgia heavily dependent on outside assistance. Shevardnadze's international connections, derived from his role in ending the cold war and unifying Germany, proved critical in obtaining economic assistance from the West. As is true elsewhere in the region, however, the role of the International Monetary Fund and other international agencies is controversial in Georgia, and the government is vulnerable to accusations that it has granted effective control over economic decisions to foreign institutions.

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The difficult economic situation and lack of progress in regaining control over the break-away provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia led many political observers to question the electoral potential of the Citizens' Union. It appeared to be in danger of losing its parliamentary majority. The Labor Party had strong support in elections for assemblies at the district and local levels in November 1998, held on a party list basis where the number of eligible voters exceeded 2,000 (see table 2). The Labor Party, which did not take part in the 1995 elections (it was founded that year), ran on an antigovernment program that sought to tap discontent arising from Georgia's economic collapse. It advocated a program of protectionism and state support for industry, along with free health care for the unemployed. In the 1998 local elections, the Labor Party placed second in more regions than any other party. Labor was particularly strong in urban areas, and it took the chairmanships of the city councils in Georgia's three largest cities (not including Batumi): Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Rustavi.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Ajarian Factor in Georgian Politics**

The other major threat to the dominance of the Citizens' Union arose from the autonomous republic of Ajaria. Unlike Abkhazia, Ajaria never attempted to secede from Georgia. Nevertheless, it achieved de facto political and administrative separation. This was facilitated by the severity of problems facing Shevardnadze in Abkhazia and western Georgia (where supporters of Gamsakhurdia were still strong) and the maneuvering required to establish control over the instruments of power in Tbilisi. In effect, there was an unstated compromise allowing

**TABLE 2. Results of Elections to 125 Georgian Local Assemblies, November 1998**

Party	First place	Second place	Affiliation of chair
Citizens' Union	94	17	69
Labor Party	2	30	8
Revival	12	12	14
Socialist Party	5	16	10
National Democratic Party	6	15	8
People's Party	1	13	3
Union of Traditionalists	3	4	6
Other parties	5	5	9

*Source:* Compiled on the basis of data presented in *Political Parties of Georgia: Directory 1999*, prepared by the International Centre for Civic Culture (Tbilisi, 1999), 121–52.

the Ajarian leader, Aslan Abashidze, to do as he pleased in exchange for remaining part of Georgia. Abashidze came to power with Gamsakhurdia's support and has controlled the region since 1991.<sup>16</sup> In the 1992 parliamentary elections, Abashidze's newly formed political movement, the Union for the Revival of Ajaria, even joined the Peace Bloc, an all-Georgian, pro-Shevardnadze coalition. However, apparently because of fears for his personal safety, Abashidze has not set foot in Tbilisi since 1991 (even though he was a member of the Georgian parliament from 1992 until he gave up his seat in March 2000).

Aslan Abashidze dominated virtually all appointments in the region, even in ministries nominally under the control of the central government. Information on the internal political situation in Ajaria is sketchy, and what follows is based on reports in the pro-Shevardnadze Georgian press, which tend to show Abashidze in the worst possible light. If Georgian press reports are accurate, however, there are few, if any, comparably sized administrative entities in the world that are so heavily dominated by clan ties and outright nepotism. Forty-three of eighty deputies in the Ajarian Supreme Soviet are said to be members or relatives of the Abashidze family. The Ajarian prime minister and finance minister are Abashidze's nephews. The security minister is Abashidze's brother-in-law, as is the deputy minister of internal affairs, and the minister of internal affairs is his cousin. The region's minister of culture and minister of communications are both married to daughters of Abashidze. The head of the tax service and the minister of health are his cousins. The administrative heads of two districts (Kobuleti and Keda) are also relatives. Seven of eleven members of the auditing chamber are reportedly Abashidze's relatives, and twelve of fifteen officials in the customs service are said to be relatives of his wife. Abashidze's son is the manager of one of the region's most profitable construction enterprises, Revival-M.<sup>17</sup> Such a pattern of appointments would be consistent with high rates of corruption, and a recent

poll found that among respondents in Ajaria “*virtually everyone . . .* believes that there is at least a fair amount of corruption in the police force, courts, customs service, regional administration, and universities.”<sup>18</sup>

Abashidze has ruled Ajaria with an iron hand. The last truly multiparty elections were those to the regional Supreme Soviet in 1991. In every election since then, opposition political activity has been severely circumscribed. The number of election law violations in Ajaria has far exceeded that in other Georgian regions.<sup>19</sup> When a second set of elections to the Ajarian Supreme Soviet were held in 1996, international observers and even observers from other parts of Georgia were prevented from monitoring the vote. The results of the November 1998 local elections show the extent of Abashidze’s political monopoly in the region. Parties other than Revival were absent in all of the elections, and the councils were completely dominated by Revival. Of the 125 district and city elections held in Georgia in November 1998, single-party victories were registered in only twelve. Of these, ten were in Ajaria, and they included every town and district including the capital, Batumi.<sup>20</sup> The press is very tightly controlled, and access to media from Tbilisi is limited.<sup>21</sup>

As the level of conflict between Ajaria and Tbilisi intensified, Abashidze began to show pretensions to power at the national level, and he announced that he would run against Shevardnadze in the April 2000 elections. Much like Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, Abashidze has presented himself as a potential national leader on the basis of his region’s supposed achievements. Like Moscow, Ajaria benefits from a favorable economic position, which has given Abashidze the resources needed to finance highly visible construction projects. Ajaria is the richest of Georgia’s regions primarily because of its location bordering Turkey on the Black Sea. Since the end of the Soviet Union, Georgia’s trade with Turkey has supplanted that with Russia, and it is now the primary source of consumer goods sold in Georgia. Batumi is also the site of Georgia’s major oil refinery and a Black Sea port.

Conflicts between Tbilisi and Ajaria grew in the period before the elections over a number of issues. Part of the difficulty resulted from a legal vacuum: because of the loss of control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the 1995 Georgian constitution left out provisions on relations between autonomous regions and the center. As a result, the Ajarian Supreme Soviet has acted as if its laws took precedence over those passed in Tbilisi.<sup>22</sup> One instance occurred just before the 1999 elections. Shevardnadze signed an amnesty covering a wide range of crimes, but Ajarian officials refused to release one of the prisoners, the former mayor of Batumi and director of a tobacco factory, who is a political enemy of Abashidze.<sup>23</sup>

A whole series of claims and counterclaims heightened tensions between Tbilisi and Batumi. In 1997, Abashidze accused Georgian officials, including parliament speaker Zurab Zhvania, of sponsoring fourteen attempts on his life.<sup>24</sup> Economic and financial issues are at the heart of several conflicts between Ajaria and the center. The Revival faction in the Georgian parliament, upset at the rejection of a proposed free economic zone for Ajaria, boycotted parliamentary sessions for almost a year in 1998–99. Ajaria has kept a large portion of tax receipts and

customs duties for its own purposes and has interfered with attempts to audit the use of those funds. Another conflict arose over customs offices in Ajaria. To curtail rampant corruption, Georgia took the step of contracting out its customs service to the British firm ITS in 1999. In August, Abashidze announced that ITS would not be permitted to take over the customs points in Ajaria.<sup>25</sup> A conflict also developed between Tbilisi and Batumi over who would guard the Turkish border. Until 1999, Russian border guards continued to patrol the area. Shevardnadze negotiated their withdrawal over the opposition of Abashidze, who attempted to make a deal of his own to keep the Russians in place.<sup>26</sup> Even though Shevardnadze prevailed, it was not clear that Abashidze would allow forces loyal to Tbilisi to patrol the border. Finally, a conflict developed over Abashidze's attempts to ally himself with Armenian nationalists in the neighboring Georgian regions of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda; he proposed that the borders be redrawn to attach the Armenian-populated districts to Ajaria.<sup>27</sup>

In July 1999, Abashidze hosted a conference that produced a new electoral bloc called Georgian Revival. The coalition's main unifying principle was its anti-Shevardnadze stance. Informally called the "Batumi alliance," it comprised a disparate group of parties and individuals, with Abashidze and his Revival Party as the core. The number-two spot on the party list was taken by Jumber Patiashvili, the Communist Party first secretary who took over in 1985 after Shevardnadze became Soviet foreign minister. (It was Patiashvili who was in charge during the April 1989 attack on demonstrators, and he was forced to resign shortly afterward.) Other parties that joined the bloc included the Socialist Party, headed by Vakhtang Rcheulishvili, and the monarchist Union of Georgian Traditionalists led by Akaki Asatiani, who served as speaker in Gamsakhurdia's parliament. A party of Gamsakhurdia supporters, XXI Century (also known as the Gamsakhurdia Society) joined the bloc as well. Though disparate in other respects, the groups making up Georgian Revival shared a foreign policy orientation: rather than emphasizing a pro-Western policy, parties in the Revival bloc sought a realignment on a North-South basis.<sup>28</sup> They favored improving relations with Russia, in particular, as a way to restore control over Abkhazia and re-establish traditional trade ties. They also saw relations with Turkey as more important than those with the West.

### **The 7 Percent Solution: The 1999 Parliamentary Elections**

The October 1999 vote gave an overwhelming victory to Shevardnadze's party (see table 3). The Citizens' Union increased its share of the party list vote to 41 percent compared with 24 percent in 1995. The CUG also won 47 single-member districts, which when combined with eighty-five seats from the party list vote gave it a working majority in the parliament. At the first session, Zurab Zhvania was re-elected speaker, and all heads of committees were from the CUG.

Aided by its near-total control over voting in Ajaria, the bloc Georgian Revival placed second. Revival improved on its 1995 showing from 7 percent to 25 percent by becoming a national party that attracted the disaffected. As was widely anticipated, however, the Revival bloc split as soon as the first session of the par-

**TABLE 3. Elections to the Georgian Parliament, October–November 1999**  
(*n* = 233; 7% threshold)

	Party vote (%)	Total seats	Seats (%)
Citizens' Union	41.2	132	57
Georgia's Revival:	25.2	56	24
Union of Dem. Revival	n/a	13	
Union of Traditionalists	n/a	10	
Socialist Party	n/a	12	
Gamsakhurdia Society	n/a	3	
Industry Will Save Georgia	7.1	16	7
30 other parties and blocs:	26.0	1	0
Labor Party	6.6	1	0.4
National Democratic Alliance	4.5	0	0
People's Party–Didgori	4.1	0	0
United Communist Party (Stalinist)	1.4	0	0
Abkhazia faction	n/a	12	5
Independents	n/a	16	7

*Sources:* Georgian Central Election Commission. Revival bloc subgroup membership determined from party list on Web site <[www.geocities.com/fair\\_elect/partiebi.html](http://www.geocities.com/fair_elect/partiebi.html)>.

liament was held. Separate deputy factions were formed by bloc components: Revival, United Georgia (led by Patiashvili), the Socialists, the Traditionalists, and XXI Century (the Gamsakhurdia Society).

One of the most fateful steps taken in the run-up to the election was the parliament's decision to adopt the first amendment to the 1995 Georgian constitution. The constitution had specified a 5 percent threshold for party list voting. Despite the fact that the 5 percent barrier had produced an extremely unrepresentative parliament in 1995, the main parties, all confident of future electoral success, moved to increase the barrier to 7 percent in July 1999. Ironically, the change was proposed by Irina Sarishvili-Tchanturia of the National Democratic Party. In 1999, her party and the People's Party, which split off from the NDP just after the 1995 elections, received 4.5 percent and 4.1 percent, respectively, excluding them from the new parliament. The 7 percent limit also prevented the Labor Party from taking seats in parliament; according to the official results, it won 6.6 percent of the vote. Labor Party leaders claimed, with some justification, that they failed to reach the threshold only because the CEC overstated the size of the electorate and threw out results from two districts in which Labor did well.<sup>29</sup>

Thanks to the 7 percent threshold, only one party other than CUG and Revival won party list seats—a new party, “Industry Will Save Georgia.” Also known as the “Industrialists,” this movement was founded in 1998 by Giorgi Topadze, a well-known entrepreneur who owns Georgia's most successful brewery, Kazbegi.<sup>30</sup>

The party advocates tax liberalization that would facilitate the development of small and medium-sized businesses. Topadze has had numerous run-ins with tax authorities; rates on domestic production were so high that his beer became more expensive than some imports. The party attracted the support of a number of other entrepreneurs and managers as well as reform-oriented intellectuals, including one of the chief drafters of the Georgian constitution, Vakhtang Khmaladze.

Compared with those in other states in the region, Georgian elections have been relatively free from vote fraud. However, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe observation mission refused to label the Georgian elections “free and fair,” noting a number of violations in areas where the CUG was

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in control, and finding (consistent with past elections) that the worst and most systematic abuses occurred in Ajaria.<sup>31</sup>

The Central Election Commission adopted a new measure on the eve of the elections in an attempt to reduce fraud—the use of hologram stickers that were allocated to each precinct to be fixed to the ballots. Use of the holograms

made it difficult for outsiders to alter the results.<sup>32</sup> But it did not significantly hinder those with the greatest incentive to commit fraud—members of the election commissions themselves. One of the weaknesses of Georgian electoral legislation was the ability of the dominant party (Revival in Ajaria and CUG in most of the rest of Georgia) to designate election officials.<sup>33</sup> Packed with representatives of the ruling parties, the election commissions were often under enormous pressure from local administrators to produce a desired result. The Central Election Commission was no exception. A change in the election law in mid-1999 strengthened the ability of the Citizens’ Union to control the commission, giving it at least ten of nineteen seats.<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, party representatives operated on the basis of how any decision would affect of their respective parties. In one bizarre incident on election night, the Revival representative on the CEC was caught allegedly attempting to alter the computer program used to tally the results.

Although fraud might change the results by only a few percentage points, it could have eliminated a party close to the threshold, such as the Labor Party. Any fraud that took place accrued almost entirely to the benefit of the two “ruling” parties, the Citizens’ Union and Revival.

In the final analysis, however, more important than fraud in determining the outcome was the relentless campaign to polarize the election, turning it into a contest between Shevardnadze and Revival as “the” opposition. A major public opinion poll conducted about six weeks before the election found support for CUG at 28 percent and for Revival at 10 percent, with 18 percent not supporting any party and 19 percent undecided.<sup>35</sup> Rather than “waste” votes on smaller par-

ties, voters were encouraged in the final weeks to turn the election into a referendum on Shevardnadze. This, along with the new 7 percent threshold, appears to have had a decisive impact on voter behavior and resulted in the elimination of several relatively popular parties from the parliament.<sup>36</sup>

The state-controlled media and most independent media played the role of cheerleader for Shevardnadze, broadcasting at length every speech and public appearance, all considered separately from the free television time allocated the Citizens' Union. In a speech a few weeks before the balloting, Shevardnadze argued that a victory by the Revival party would mean "human rights will be violated, spy-mania will reign, and there will be a complete destruction of democratic accomplishments."<sup>37</sup> Government control over television, particularly the only channel whose broadcast is received across the entire republic, was an important asset that unfairly influenced the voting. Control by Abashidze over local broadcasts in Ajaria had at least as much impact on voters there.

It is apparent that the nature of the campaign polarized the single-member district races as well. One tendency that was reinforced by the 1999 elections was the near-elimination of deputies elected from districts listed as "independents," meaning those without a party affiliation. Their share of the total has declined from 27 percent in 1992 to 17 percent in 1995 and 7 percent in 1999.

The results of the election, in sum, were "democratic" but in a highly manipulated setting. The parliament that emerged will likely be more an instrument of power than an institution for shaping a national consensus on the major policy dilemmas facing Georgia. Although the electoral rules and institutions have created an approximation of a two-party system, in reality the parties remain dependent on the political dominance of two individuals, Shevardnadze at the national level and Abashidze in Ajaria.

### Presidential Elections

The aftermath of the parliamentary elections set the stage for the next confrontation between Shevardnadze and his opponents—the presidential elections set for 9 April 2000.<sup>38</sup> Given the outcome of the parliamentary elections, there was little reason to doubt that Shevardnadze would win once again. The only question was by how much and whether it would be in the first or second round.

The leaders of the three largest parties making up the "Batumi alliance" during the parliamentary race, Revival, United Georgia, and the Traditionalists, all contemplated running for the presidency. This was not entirely a reflection of the egos of party leaders; the strategy would be to appeal to a wide variety of opposition voters in the hope of denying Shevardnadze a victory in the first round. In the end, both Patiashvili (the former Communist leader) and Abashidze announced their candidacies, along with a number of lesser-known candidates. At the same time, many "outsider" parties, including Labor and the National Independence Party, that had not been in parliament since 1995 announced plans to boycott or force a delay of the elections.

Shevardnadze was potentially vulnerable on the same issues that threatened the ruling party in the parliamentary elections: corruption, Abkhazia, and a disastrous

economic situation. Shevardnadze's government was unable to account for a substantial portion of the 1999 budget that seemingly disappeared. Economic mismanagement was experienced firsthand by the electorate: only two days after the parliamentary elections, electrical power was cut off in the city of Tbilisi after a long period of reliable service, and the government announced that electricity would be provided only a few hours each day through the rest of the winter.<sup>39</sup>

Shevardnadze campaigned vigorously in all parts of Georgia, again with the full support of most of the news media. Negative campaigning also played a role in the outcome. Efforts to discredit Patiashvili included the disclosure of more details about the events of 9 April 1989, including two boxes of archival material sent a few days before his death by Anatoly Sobchak.<sup>40</sup>

The other major opponent to Shevardnadze was Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze, who refrained from active campaigning. Three days before the voting, Shevardnadze and parliament speaker Zurab Zhvania went to Batumi for lengthy talks with Abashidze. The day before the elections, Abashidze withdrew his candidacy for president. Shevardnadze later claimed that the subject of the elections never came up in their discussions, and that he "regretted" Abashidze's withdrawal.<sup>41</sup>

The results of the election were a massive show of support for Shevardnadze (table 4). International observers were once again highly critical of the conduct of the election campaign, especially the role of the media, and vote-counting procedures.<sup>42</sup> Patiashvili promised that he would contest the outcome, claiming massive vote fraud.

### Political Consolidation on the Horizon?

After the elections, Shevardnadze—having nearly totally vanquished the opposition—took a number of steps to effect a national reconciliation. In his first speech to the parliament after the elections, Shevardnadze announced a far-reaching amnesty of political opponents who had been imprisoned for using violence

**TABLE 4. Results of the Georgia Presidential Elections, 9 April 2000**

Candidate	No. of votes	% of total
Eduard Shevardnadze	1,870,311	79.8
Jumber Patiashvili	390,486	16.7
Karlos Garibashvili	7,863	0.3
Avtandil Joglidze	5,942	0.3
Vazha Jgenti	3,363	0.1
Tengiz Asanidze	2,793	0.1

*Source:* Georgian Central Election Commission.

*Note:* Total ballots cast, 2,343,176 (75.9% turnout).

against the state.<sup>43</sup> Included in the amnesty were many Gamsakhurdia supporters who had fought government forces in Western Georgia in 1992–93. The rehabilitation of Gamsakhurdia himself, as the key figure behind Georgian independence, is to be considered by the parliament. Also amnestied were members of the armed formation Mkhedrioni who had been implicated in the 1995 attempt on Shevardnadze's life, including their leader, Jaba Ioseliani.<sup>44</sup>

The steps toward reconciliation also included Ajaria. In their talks with Abashidze prior to the election, Shevardnadze and Zhvania had raised the issue of a change in the constitution to codify Ajarian autonomy. Once elected, Shevardnadze presented parliament with a law making Ajaria Georgia's first republic, partly in the hope that this "ideal model of autonomy" would be attractive to the Abkhaz and Ossetians. He also indicated that he "would have nothing against" Abashidze's re-election as Ajarian leader.<sup>45</sup> Although still to be formulated in legislation and the constitution, it appears that the concessions to Abashidze would institutionalize Ajaria's virtual autonomy in a way comparable to the status of republics such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the Russian Federation under Yeltsin. This would give Abashidze legitimate control over most revenue collected in the region and perhaps create a free-trade zone. Given the length of time that Abashidze has had to entrench himself in Ajaria, this may be the only workable solution that preserves a united Georgia without further bloodshed. Reforms and anticorruption measures would, of course, be postponed until the political situation gives Tbilisi greater leverage over Ajarian politics.

Postelection developments also revealed that Shevardnadze's victories were not going to be used to push for radical reforms in the economic sphere, nor would there be a wholesale replacement of government ministers widely perceived as corrupt. The government formed after Shevardnadze's re-election was packed with holdovers (fourteen of eighteen) from the previous government. The newly appointed minister of state (the equivalent of prime minister), Gia Arsenishvili, was an apparent compromise choice that would offend none of the factions in the ruling party who viewed the post as a potential path to the post-Shevardnadze succession. Arsenishvili, who served five years as administrator of the quiescent eastern region of Kakheti, is a little-known former mathematics professor, with no clearly defined program.<sup>46</sup>

Shevardnadze's emphasis on harmony and consolidation is understandable in the aftermath of secessionist wars and a bitter, often violent, struggle for political power. These steps may be effective in overcoming many political groupings' feelings of disenfranchisement, induced by a series of elections since 1995 that have been shamelessly manipulated by Shevardnadze's team. But Shevardnadze has opted for peace and harmony at a time when the country needs a new stimulus to reform its economy, to straighten out its finances, and to fight corruption.

Compared with neighboring republics, Georgia has a mixed record of successes and failures. It has a more open political system and freer press than either Armenia or Azerbaijan. The lack of exportable raw materials places it in a worse economic situation than either Russia or Azerbaijan. Economic reforms, although inadequate and poorly conceived everywhere in the region, are perhaps less

advanced in Georgia than in Armenia and Russia. Georgia's problems in creating a unified state and a workable federal structure are at least as intractable as those faced by Russia and Azerbaijan. Much of Georgia's recent progress, as well as some of its shortcomings, can be attributed to one person—Eduard Shevardnadze. Given that Shevardnadze was seventy-two years old at the time of the elections and has been the target of at least two serious assassination attempts (in 1995 and 1998), how Georgia will fare in the post-Shevardnadze period is a question that may have to be addressed before the end of his five-year term.

## NOTES

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1. In the 1990 election, half of 250 deputies were chosen by party list.

2. In the 1999 election, a modified first-past-the-post system was used: the leading candidate had to receive at least one-third of the votes cast to avoid a run-off.

3. For more on Georgian political history from 1989 to 1995, see Darrell Slider, "Democratization in Georgia," in *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, ed. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 156–98, and Stephen F. Jones, "Georgia: A Failed Democratic Transition," in *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, ed. Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 505–43.

4. Shevardnadze had been first secretary of the Communist Party of Georgia from 1972 until 1995, when Mikhail Gorbachev brought him to Moscow as foreign minister. He served as foreign minister until late 1990.

5. Even in the 1990 elections, Abkhaz officials prevented elections from being held in districts under their control at the time. (The author served as an election observer in Abkhazia for the 1990 elections.) Also, since 1990, no Georgian elections have been conducted in the breakaway region of South Ossetia. Thus, in the 1999 elections, single-member district elections were held in only 75 of 85 districts and 146 instead of 150 seats were filled from the proportional (party list) voting. The two single-member district seats from South Ossetia have remained empty, leaving the total number of deputies at 233 instead of 235.

6. The number of refugees is estimated to be over 200,000. In subsequent elections, refugees were not allowed to vote for single-member district representatives in the regions to which they had been "temporarily" relocated.

7. A list of laws passed by year is on the Georgian parliament's Web site [www.parliament.ge/governance/parl/L\\_A/kanon\\_en](http://www.parliament.ge/governance/parl/L_A/kanon_en).

8. Around 90 percent of Georgian judges were replaced. See the interview with Gia Meparishvili in *Svobodnaia Gruzia*, 6 April 2000. Stephen Kinzer, "Georgia, Judging That Most Judges Shouldn't, Readies Replacements," *New York Times*, 9 April 1999. Saakashvili took over leadership of the CUG faction in parliament in 1999.

9. Georgia was ranked 84 of 99, tied with Kazakhstan and Albania, and less corrupt than Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The survey results are reported at [www.transparency.de](http://www.transparency.de).

10. *Financial Times* (London), special supplement on Georgia, 22 November 1999.

11. The poll showed that a majority of the population believes that corruption charac-

terizes the following institutions either “a fair amount” or “a great deal”: the police (90 percent), customs (88 percent), the courts (83 percent), the national government (80 percent), regional authorities (80 percent), parliament (79 percent), the armed forces (70 percent), higher education (64 percent), banks (63 percent), and the mass media (51 percent). The smallest percentage (17 percent) considered the Georgian Orthodox church to be corrupt. The survey of 1,000 Georgian adults was sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, Office of Research, “Georgians Fear a Possible Spill-Over from the Fighting in Chechnya,” *Opinion Analysis*, 3 April 2000. Richard Dobson prepared the analysis of results.

12. Detailed summaries of Georgian press reports on corruption are available at the website of the Georgian NGO, the Corruption Research Center, <http://crc.iberiapac.ge>.

13. *Financial Times*, 22 November 1999.

14. *Financial Times*, 8–9 April 2000.

15. In each of these cities, Labor came in second to the CUG, but won the chairmanship with the support of other parties on the councils.

16. On the origins of Abashidze’s rule, see Elizabeth Fuller, “Georgia’s Adzhar Crisis,” *Report on the USSR*, 9 August 1991. Prior to this, Abashidze had been a deputy minister of consumer services in Tbilisi. Alexei Dem’ianov, “Provintsial’naia diktatura Abashidze,” *Novye izvestiya*, 2 October 1999.

17. Tamaz Lomsadze, “Marazmy vozdušnogo zamka,” *Svobodnaia Gruzia*, 12 October 1999, and press release dated 6 October 1999 at the Fair Elections Committee website, [www.geocities.com/fair\\_elect/newsevents](http://www.geocities.com/fair_elect/newsevents).

18. From the March 2000 poll cited earlier, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, Office of Research; emphasis in the original.

19. The author served as head of the National Democratic Institute observation team in Ajaria for the 1992 parliamentary elections. Abashidze, in a meeting with the observers the day after the election, justified his own violations of the election law (including a televised speech on election eve) as a necessary response to the actions of his opponents, whom he labeled “terrorists.”

20. Based on material presented in International Centre for Civic Culture, *Political Parties of Georgia* (Tbilisi, 1999). The other two single party victories were by the Citizens’ Union in the predominately Armenian towns of Ninotsminda and Tsalka.

21. Dem’ianov, “Provintsial’naia diktatura Abashidze.”

22. Mikhail Aidinov, “Chestoiubivaia avtonomiia,” *Vek*, 17–23 April 1998.

23. The former mayor, Tengiz Asanidze, had been convicted of economic crimes. Black Sea Press, 21 October 1999. Asanidze ran for the Georgian presidency in April 2000, partly to draw votes from Abashidze in Ajaria.

24. See the interview with Abashidze, “Lider Adzharii obviniaet Tbilisi v provokatsiih,” *Segodnia*, 17 December 1997.

25. Nodar Broladze, “Novyi demarsh Batumi,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 5 August 1999.

26. Fedor Olegov, “V poiskakh kompromisa,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 21 April 1999.

27. Nodar Broladze, “Batumi versus Tbilisi,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 20 October 1998.

28. Ia Antadze, “At the Crossroads,” *IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service*, 7 October 1999.

29. The OSCE reported that, in determining the 7 percent threshold, the CEC used the larger number of voters signing the registers instead of valid votes cast; it also included voters in districts and precincts where the results were nullified. OSCE Final Report, 7 February 2000. See [www.osce.org/inst/odhr/election/geo99-3](http://www.osce.org/inst/odhr/election/geo99-3).

30. The party grew out of an existing lobbying group, the Union of Industrialists. For more on this, see Stephen F. Jones, “Democracy from Below? Interest Groups in Georgian Society,” *Slavic Review* 59, no. 1 (spring 2000): 42–73.

31. OSCE Final Report.

32. In one district, Martvili, the election had to be rerun because a Labor Party candidate who was losing (former communications minister Fridon Injiia, who was dismissed following corruption allegations) reportedly incited a mob to break into the election com-

mission, where they seized the ballots and set them on fire. The CEC threw out the results for the party list voting, prompting an appeal to the courts by the Labor Party.

33. The election law was changed in February 2000, giving added representation to opposition parties in election commissions at all levels. This occurred too late to have much impact on the April presidential elections, however.

34. Five members each are appointed by the president and parliament, seven by parties that won in local elections, and one each from Ajaria and the Abkhaz deputies. *Shvidi Dge*, reported in *Georgian Digest*, 25 June 1999.

35. The poll of 1,010 adults was conducted across Georgia by a research firm contracted by the U.S. Department of State Office of Research (formerly USIA). Richard Dobson, "Georgians Hope for Better Days Ahead," *Opinion Analysis*, 22 November 1999.

36. One of the major empirical studies in the field of electoral systems confirms the importance of changes in the threshold in determining the number of parties represented in parliament. Arend Lijphart, *Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A Study of Twenty-seven Democracies, 1945-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). By Lijphart's criteria, Georgia since 1990 has had four different electoral systems for each of its four parliamentary elections.

37. *Svobodnaia Gruziiia*, 12 October 1999.

38. The elections were scheduled to coincide with Georgian independence day, which is also the anniversary of the 9 April 1989 events.

39. The reason for the cuts was a lack of money to pay suppliers. Many suspected that the money had gone to support the Citizen Union's election campaign. The Soviet-era centralized heating system had fallen into disrepair, and Tbilisi residents relied for the most part on electric space heaters. On the power shortages, see Sozar Subeliani and Giorgi Topouria, "Georgia's Winter of Discontent," *IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service* 26, 7 April 2000.

40. Sobchak, former mayor of St. Petersburg, headed the USSR Supreme Soviet commission that investigated the events in 1989. The materials were sent after negotiations conducted by the Georgian consul in St. Petersburg. See Mikhail Vignanskii, "Arkhiv Sobchaka-kozyrnaia karta na prezidentskikh vyborakh v Gruzii," *Segodnya*, 14 March 2000.

41. Shevardnadze press conference reported in *Svobodnaia Gruziiia*, 11 April 2000.

42. "Presidential Elections in Georgia: OSCE Statement on Preliminary Findings and Conclusions," 10 April 2000, at [www.osce.org](http://www.osce.org).

43. Two hundred seventy-nine prisoners were ordered released. The text of Shevardnadze's speech appeared in *Svobodnaia Gruziiia*, 22 April 2000.

44. Ioseliani, who is the same age as Shevardnadze, was instrumental in the armed overthrow of Gamsakhurdia and in inviting Shevardnadze to return to Georgia.

45. Shevardnadze indicated that, as Georgian president, he "had no right to interfere in such questions" even if he saw that there was a better candidate. Text of press conference, *Svobodnaia Gruziiia*, 11 April 2000.

46. Ia Antadze, "Georgia's Nomenclature Still Sitting Pretty," *IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service* 32, 19 May 2000, and Liz Fuller, "Georgian President Proposes New State Minister," *RFE/RL Caucasus Report* 3, no. 19, 11 May 2000.