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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Flare-Up of Nationalist Sentiment  
in Soviet Transcaucasus

Summary

In an unusual concession to local nationalist sentiment, Soviet authorities made an abrupt about-face last month and restored the constitutional recognition of the Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani languages as the official state languages of their respective republics. The special status of the three major Caucasian languages had been eliminated from the drafts of the new republic constitutions in an apparent attempt to bring them into line with the constitutions of the other non-Russian republics. In doing so, however, the drafters evidently seriously miscalculated the sensitivity of the language issue, particularly among the volatile Georgians.

During the public discussion of the draft constitutions, complaints about the proposed change were later reported to have been widely voiced, at least in Armenia and Georgia, and culminated in a mass

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student demonstration in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Soviet authorities had apparently already made the decision to rescind the change--probably at the prompting of Georgian party boss Shevardnadze. But the speed with which the news of the protest carried beyond Georgia and to the West made a quiet retreat impossible and the appearance of capitulation under open pressure hard to erase.

The outcome was a considerable victory for the three Caucasian peoples. While it will probably have little practical consequences for language usage in the republic--native languages are widely used anyway--it is of considerable symbolic significance. At the national level, however, this apparent victory for nationalist sentiment sets a precedent that could haunt the conduct of nationality affairs in years to come. The image of irresolution projected by Moscow may well encourage other ethnic groups to press their causes more boldly.

#### The Controversial Changes

The draft constitutions of the 15 union republics were released for public discussion in late March, with ratification to take place at special Supreme Soviet sessions scheduled for the last half of April. Closely modeled on the new all-union constitution adopted last October, the republic drafts varied little. The only significant change was the elimination of the privileged status of the Caucasian languages.

This special status dated back to the 1920s when the conditions for the incorporation of the Transcaucasian republics into the Soviet state were worked out. None of the constitutions of the other republics (old or new) contains clauses listing the native language as the official language of the republic. The new constitutions merely guarantee the right to education in the "native language" and include a provision for the "free" use of both Russian and the native language in public life.

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Although Armenian and Georgian had lost their former status as official languages in the draft constitutions published in March, they still retained a more privileged standing than native languages in the other republics. The Georgian draft included a clause, which was evidently intended to mollify local opinion, assuring the use of Georgian in state and public agencies and other institutions. The Armenian draft constitution contained the same wording.

In both Georgia and Armenia, however, the drafts vitiated this clause by guaranteeing free use of Russian and prohibiting any "privileges or limitations in the use of this or any language." The Azerbaijan draft constitution contained no such attempt at compromise, probably because no significant opposition to the downgrading of the Azerbaijani language was encountered or anticipated.

These changes in the status of the native languages of the Transcaucasus were probably worked out on instructions from the All-Union Constitutional Commission, which was given the task of coordinating the various republic drafts, and possibly reflects the influence of senior Soviet ideologist Mikhail Suslov. Brezhnev as chairman of the Constitutional Commission was probably also involved, but probably not all members of the Politburo were. Because of the unpopularity of the issue on the local level, it seems very unlikely that the initiative for the change came from any of the regional leaders in the Caucasus.

There was no public hint of any adverse reaction to the draft until the day Georgian students demonstrated in Tbilisi as the Georgian Supreme Soviet convened to ratify the draft. According to a number of reports, the students gathered outside the Supreme Soviet building to demand the restoration of Georgian as the official language. Accounts vary as to the number of students involved (from 500 to 5,000), but all agree that the demonstration was peaceful, that the police stood by good-naturedly, and that Georgian party boss Shevardnadze assured them that their demands would be met. Several days later there were no reports of arrests having been made. In sum, it turned out to be a remarkably placid and seemingly successful affair.

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The evidence strongly suggests that the decision to retain the earlier constitutional provisions was made before the student demonstration took place and that this may account for the relatively relaxed reaction of the Georgian authorities. One [ ] maintained to [ ] that the students had "overreacted" since their cause was already won.

[ ] claimed that the decision was made by the drafting commission prior to the demonstration, and although this was a self-serving position, the sequence of events seems to confirm it.

Thus, the students protested on the afternoon of 14 April, when Shevardadze was presenting the commission's report to the Supreme Soviet on the draft constitution. In his presentation, as carried in the local paper the next morning, Shevardadze announced the commission's formal recommendation that the Supreme Soviet restore the article from the old constitution and explained at length the reason for the decision. The Supreme Soviet acted on the commission's report on 15 April.

Meanwhile, the Armenian constitution had been fully discussed and ratified by 14 April, and the text, as published in the press on 15 April, declared Armenian the official language of the republic. It seems unlikely that a reversal of such magnitude, which must have involved three-way communication between Georgian, Armenian, and Moscow officials and probably the approval of Brezhnev himself, would have been made in both Armenia and Georgia in the space of a few hours following the Georgian student demonstration.

A more likely time for such consultations was a few days earlier, when the Georgian constitution commission met to consider amendments to the draft. The scheduling of the final steps in working out and adopting the republic constitutions followed a uniform pattern in all the republics except Georgia. Here the commission meeting apparently dragged on longer than

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expected, reportedly because of the large volume of complaints it had received on the language issue. This left little time to hold the required Georgian Central Committee plenum prior to the opening of the Supreme Soviet session, which had been scheduled to convene on 14 April. In the event, the plenum was held on the morning of 14 April, and the opening of the Supreme Soviet was delayed until the afternoon.

### Shevardnadze Correctly Gauges the Public Mood

The evidence further suggests that Shevardnadze played a key role in gauging public reaction to the language issue and taking the lead in working out a shift in tactics with Moscow authorities. Shevardnadze was the only one of the three Caucasian party leaders to provide any public explanation for the reversal in the language section of the draft (article 75 in the Georgian draft) and personally associate himself with the action.

Shevardnadze's public explanation, as reported in the local press, noted that much concern had been expressed on the rewording of article 75 and that after "carefully studying public opinion" and much consultation with various groups, the Georgian leadership had decided that it would be "expedient" to allow the language provisions of the old constitution to remain in force. He said that the leadership was guided in its deliberations by the "democratic nature" of socialist society and by the concept of continuity. He added somewhat proudly that the proclamation of Georgian as the state language had been "enshrined in our constitutional practice since 1922 when the first constitution was adopted." In general, Shevardnadze seemed neither defensive nor particularly distressed with the turn of events, although he was careful to stress the value and importance of the Russian language and to warn against any discrimination toward it.

Such a position on Shevardnadze's part regarding the constitutional issue is not totally out of character. When he first became Georgian party boss in 1972 he had the local reputation of being a tough crime-fighter but a "Georgian patriot" nonetheless. This positive image

has been blurred over the years as his relentless campaign against local corruption met with increasing public hostility, and he has been repeatedly forced to take unpopular actions. But in his tolerant attitude to the demonstrating students and in his speech on the constitution he again appeared to be attempting to make a clear distinction--not easy to do in Georgia--between corruption and other illegal practices and genuine Georgian pride. His actions suggest an awareness that to tramp on the latter too heavily is to make the fight against crime all the more difficult.

Shevardnadze has been quite pragmatic, as well as slightly nationalistic, in his approach to solving local problems. In his constitution speech he touted the work of one of his more innovative institutions--the Georgian Central Committee's Council on Public Opinion--giving it credit for assisting the leadership in reaching the right decision on the language issue. He noted that concrete sociological studies--a methodology still viewed with suspicion by many orthodox ideologists--carried out in connection with the discussion of the draft constitution, had demonstrated the great importance of studying public opinion by scientific means. Shevardnadze has been effusive in all his public tributes to Brezhnev, suggesting that he is counting on the Soviet party boss to support his relative pragmatism in running Georgian affairs.

From Shevardnadze's point of view, therefore, the outcome of the constitutional controversy was probably welcome. It undoubtedly has won him a measure of popular approval that he badly needs to make headway in his battle against the corrupt business practices and lifestyle of many Georgians. But there must be some misgivings in Moscow about the possible long-term reverberations of the about-face.

#### Possible Spill-over

The central authorities can rationalize the action to some extent, on the grounds of historic precedent and the special character of the Transcaucasian republics.

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Thus, they can reassure themselves that they were responding to a special set of circumstances. Armenia occupies a unique position as the seat of the Armenian church and the homeland for Armenians in the diaspora. In addition Armenia is ethnically homogeneous and has, by far, the smallest percent of Russians among its population of any of the republics--only 3 percent as compared, for example, to 24 percent in Estonia or 42 percent in Kazakhstan. And the Georgians' passionate attachment to their cultural heritage, although obviously disturbing to Moscow, has become something of a national joke rather than a model for emulation.

The rationalization for restoring Azerbaijani as the official language is more difficult to comprehend. The decision was announced without comment by Azerbaijan party boss Aliyev at the Supreme Soviet session on 20 April, several days after the Georgian and Armenian constitutions were adopted. There have been no reports that the decision on the Azerbaijani language was made in response to popular agitation on the question. It may be that the decision was taken mostly for the sake of consistency and possibly to draw attention away from the highly publicized events in Georgia.

This may be short-sighted. The Azerbaijanis are numerous. They are closely related to other Turkic and Moslem peoples in Soviet Central Asia and across the border in Iran and Turkey. The danger of reemergent Pan-Turkism or Pan-Islamism is an ever-present one and one to which Soviet authorities have traditionally been acutely sensitive.

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