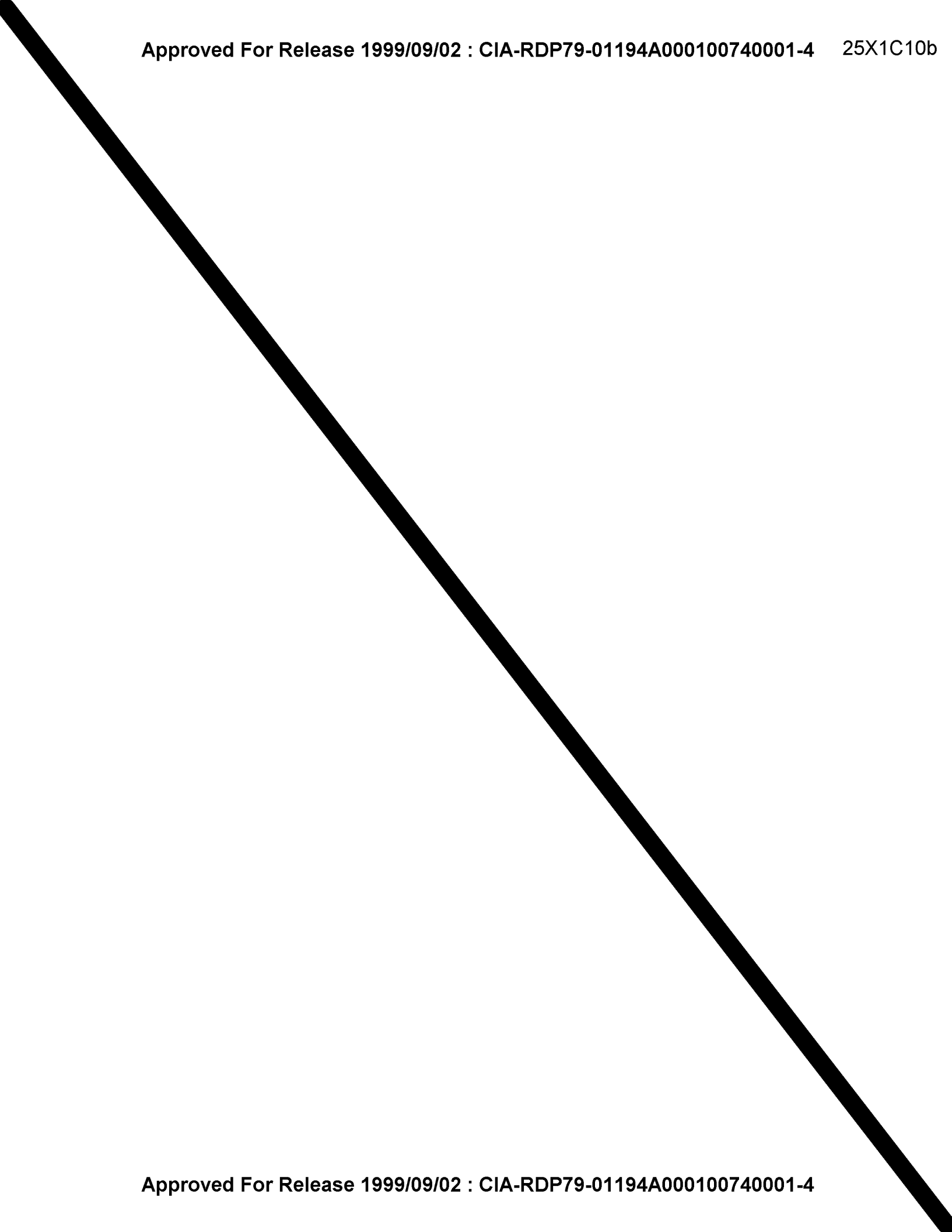

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The Kremlin Cracks Down on a Maverick

Fed up with Georgia's freewheeling brand of socialism, the politburo is reining in its balky Black Sea republic.

by Christopher Ogden

Tbilisi, USSR

For nineteen years after the death of Josef V. Stalin, the Kremlin put up with legendary excesses of corruption in his home state—the fiercely individualistic and freewheeling Republic of Georgia, on the Turkish border. In mid-1972 Moscow's Marxists ran out of patience. They moved the head of the Georgian police department up to run the party apparatus and gave him free rein to Sovietize the maverick republic fully. Nearly two years later he's still trying. So are those who want to make certain, sometimes with guns and bombs, that he doesn't succeed.

* * *

When Eduard Shevardnadze took over as first secretary of the Georgian Communist party in the summer of 1972, he ended his first cabinet meeting by asking all his ministers to vote with their left hands on a procedural issue. "Keep them up a minute," he said, pushing back his chair. He slowly circled the polished conference table, peering at wrists. Rolex, Seiko, Jaeger-le Coultre, Omega—everyone except Shevardnadze, who wore a Russian-made Slava, had on a foreign wristwatch.

"For a start," he said, "let's turn all these over to charity."

Charity has always begun at home in Georgia, known through the centuries for its hospitality to its friends (who, moments before, may have been strangers) and for its attention to the good life: food, drink, songs, fine clothes, and, more recently, fancy cars. Today in Tbilisi, the women's coats are trimmer, the skirts and blouses brighter, and the men's suits more fashionable than in Moscow. Billboards, which in Moscow read Our Goal—Communism, push a different line in the Georgian capital: Put Your Money in a Savings Bank. Keep it Safe. Earn More. Georgians love flaunting that kind of refinement at Muscovites. "There's no class in Moscow," they say. "No traditions, no real culture."

Beyond such tree-lined boulevards as Rustaveli Avenue, where Georgians stroll interminably, Tbilisi is a treasure house of ancient churches, a palace, and fortress ruins. Twisting cobblestone alleys in the old city wind below enclosed balconies jutting out from second and third stories and past the only active Hebrew school in the Soviet Union. Grottolike courtyards with outside staircases that climb nearly to pink-tile roofs remind visitors of North Africa. Tenements balance on the sheer cliffs slicing down to the mud-colored Kura River, which splits the town in two. Across the Kura, Vakhtang Gorgasali sits in stone on horseback and watches the city he founded in 458 A.D. He stares at a mountainside statue of Mother Georgia, who carries a sword in one hand for meeting enemies, a wine goblet in the other for greeting friends. (The symbolism is particularly apt. Anyone ever met by a Georgian with a wineglass—and this is how the Georgians meet almost everyone—usually wakes up feeling the entire militia of the republic has goose-stepped over him.)

The city between the two statues sports a twenty-one-story hotel furnished in Finnish modern, a new subway, and more automobiles per capita than in any other Soviet region, including Moscow. "We Georgians know how to acquire things," one mustachioed fellow said, leaning out the window of his 1962 Chevrolet Bel-Air.

The 4 million Georgians, only 20 percent of whom speak Russian fluently, have long been a law unto themselves. The republic, less than twenty-seven thousand square miles and about half the size of the American state of Georgia, was conquered by Romans, Macedonians, Persians, Mongols, Arabs, and Turks before it was incorporated into Imperial Russia in 1801. So many defeats have made the Georgians a philosophical lot who prefer to name their streets for poets rather than politicians and tend to thumb their ample noses at any ruler.

The Georgians have worked at preserving their culture and language (there are Georgian translations of most Shakespearean plays). They also have become Byzantine-style entrepreneurs who even today can be counted on to produce—for the right price—anything from a mid-field seat for a national championship soccer match to a basket of peaches in February.

Favored by Stalin, who was born in 1879 in Gori, about thirty miles from Tbilisi, and by Lavrenti Beria, his secret-police chief and fellow Georgian, the republic went its merry way throughout the dictator's thirty-year rule. It could ignore Kremlin directives that sucked away the autonomy of other republics, because it was "Soso's [Joe's] special case." Stalin's death in 1953 intensified, rather than changed, the local attitude, especially when the de-Stalinization campaign of his successor, Nikita S. Khrushchev, began chopping at its underpinnings three years later.

From Brest to Khabarovsk, statues of Stalin came tumbling down. Streets, town squares, whole cities, were renamed. But not in Georgia, where news of the demotion and Khrushchev's criticisms sparked bloody riots. In Georgia the Kremlin backed down. The attitude was, Let things cool a bit—there are other things to do; we'll come back to this. Moscow did not really come back until 1972. The interim was a busy time—opening the virgin lands, industrializing after the war cleanup, the anti-China campaign, the test-ban treaty, the Khrushchev overthrow, and the subsequent consolidation of the Brezhnev, Podgorny, Kosygin troika.

During those years Vasily P. Mzhavanadze ran the republic as first secretary of the Georgian Communist party. Appointed by Stalin just before he died, Mzhavanadze ran Georgia—from the beach resorts along the Black Sea, across the fruit orchards and melon patches, to the chalk-soil wine vineyards and Caucasus peaks and valleys—like a Tammany boss. Georgia's primary occupation—dealing—thrived. For the Georgians, at least. If the Soviets weren't getting their cut, well, that was their problem. Georgians by the hundreds flew daily to Moscow, Leningrad, Murmansk, and farther, their suitcases bulging with fresh-cut carnations, citrus fruits, almonds, and tomatoes that they

would hawk for three rubles ($4.00) a pound in the farmers' markets of those less-fortunate cities. They'd fly back to Tbilisi, sometimes the same day. This time the suitcases would be stuffed with either rubles or city goods—books, records, Italian shoes—that they could sell for another profit in Georgia.

The process itself is semilegal. Soviet farmers are allowed in their limited market economy to sell privately what they have left over after first selling the bulk of their produce to the state. In Georgia, where farmers in 1972 earned $400 million from private plots, the priorities were reversed. What was left after the private sales, if anything, went to the state. That kind of planning put Georgia, one of the richest republics in terms of physical resources and climate, in fifteenth and last place when it came to state production statistics.

Mzhavanadze didn't mind. Under only occasional pressure then from Moscow, he responded by dutifully making speeches denouncing extortion, nepotism, and corruption. His real concern —and his wife's, whose strong will and expensive tastes seemed to dominate most of the party boss's activity—was his seven dachas. So that he could keep them, he tried to insure that the system suffered no Kremlin body blows.

The first real hint of trouble, that Moscow was ready to "come back" to the Georgia problem, appeared in an article in the national trade-union newspaper TRUD in March 1972. In a detailed and surprisingly candid public washing of dirty linen, TRUD described an illegal Georgian operation that cost the highly centralized Soviet economy more than two million dollars. The brains behind the scheme was an economics student, a university dropout turned taxi driver, named Otari Lazishvili. TRUD called him "an underground millionaire who laid on thousand-ruble [$1300] banquets in Moscow, Kiev, and Alma-Ata when his favorite soccer team won, who had two dachas with swimming pools, one near Tbilisi and another on the Black Sea coast in Abkhazia."

As a front, Lazishvili ran a laboratory in which new synthetic materials were tested. Using stolen government materials, he turned out hard-to-get plastic raincoats, turtleneck sweaters, scarves, and gaily colored nylon shopping bags, which buyers quickly grabbed up—the farmers' market routine slightly refined. "In reality, it was a private concern called Lazishvili and Company," TRUD said. "At the time of the investigation, police found more than one hundred thousand rubles' [$133,000] worth of jackets, sweaters, knitwear, and other goods, none of which were registered in government documents."

The money brought powerful friends, including Mzhavanadze, to the Lazishvili dachas (no nouveau riche snobbery here!). The businessman became a Georgian *capo di capos*. His opinion was sought when it came time to fill government and party posts throughout the republic. A man of foresight, Lazishvili had the judiciary salted as well. At his trial the public prosecutor asked that he get the death penalty, a not uncommon sentence for far less serious economic crimes against the state. Instead, the Georgian Supreme Court, which sentenced nearly one hundred persons in connection with the case, gave him a light fifteen years.

Lazishvili, of course, was only the tip of the Georgian iceberg. A week after the first mention of him in the press, the party's Central Committee in Moscow widened its attack to include the entire state of affairs in the republic. In a decree splashed across the front pages of the national papers, it criticized the Georgian leadership for "struggling weakly against such phenomena, alien to our society, as embezzlement of state property, profiteering, bribery, and idling."

It criticized Tbilisi party leaders for shoddy consumer goods, poor city sanitation, falling behind in apartment construction, giving high-ranking jobs to unqualified people, and allowing Georgian nationalism to flourish instead of incorporating it into the general Soviet fabric.

The Kremlin then summoned to Moscow Otari Lolashvili, the party chief in Tbilisi, to report on the situation in the city. The report was rejected, Lolashvili was fired, and, in August 1972, he was replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, until then the republic's minister of the interior and, as such, chief of police. A month later the seventy-year-old Mzhavanadze was awarded the Order of the October Revolution, one of the state's highest citations for service, and he retired on pension "at his own request." (He also retired to live by himself. Shortly after taking over, Shevardnadze called in Mzhavanadze's wife for questioning about allegedly smuggling diamonds that the jailed Lazishvili had given her. She fled to the Ukraine, where she now reportedly lives with her sister, the wife of deposed Ukrainian party boss Pyotr Shelest.)

With the tap administered by Leonid I. Brezhnev, general secretary of the Soviet Communist party, Shevardnadze moved up again, this time to take over as party first secretary. At forty-four, he became the youngest leader of a Soviet republic. "He has a lot of class," said a retired soccer player who knew Shevardnadze because the Ministry of the Interior sponsors Tbilisi Dynamo, the local professional team. "Whenever he came down to the dressing room, he always wore a clean shirt and a tie and a nice suit. Nothing flashy. But impressive." Impressive for things besides clothes. "He's tough," another Georgian said when his appointment was announced. "He's the kind of guy who asks, 'How can you work so little and still have a dacha?' He's also the kind of guy that when he says do this or do that, you do it. He's not the kind to forgive if you don't."

Despite the toughness, the dominant feeling in Georgia when Shevardnadze took over was that he would initially come on strong and break up some of the *naleva* (literally, "on the left," or "on the side") operations, but then the pace would ease and gradually everything would return to "normal."

"He's not going to change human nature," a Tbilisi waiter said with a half-smile. "Not here, anyway."

Shevardnadze called a joint party and government plenum in November 1972, and the extent of the problem he was facing was so bad that the full proceedings were not published until February. They revealed that, "Serious mistakes have been made in economic management from which the republic's economy has suffered great losses . . . serious shortcomings in agriculture....The republic is far behind in capital construction. . . . Communications,particularly telephones, are far behind modern requirements."

The report also homed in on agricultural officials who blamed winter snow, spring rains, summer heat, sometimes all and more, for crop failures—anything except mismanagement and anything rather than raise the possibility that although there were enough crops, they were all being sold *naleva*. "Now, when winter and rains are in the past, the number of lagging enterprises continues to grow," snorted party secretary Z. A. Partaridze.

Shevardnadze tried to explain what he had discovered so far: Georgian factories were operating at only 70 percent of capacity (in 1972 two Tbilisi factories alone paid fines totaling nearly two million rubles [$2.7 million] for substandard goods). Unsold, unwanted merchandise worth eight million rubles ($11 million) was found stacked up in ten factories around the city.

While the growth-rate target for 1972 as set by the national plan was 6 percent, Georgia managed to reach only 2.2 percent. The factories met their production quotas, but only by unilaterally reducing the goals. In 1972, in fact, Georgia announced it had exceeded its production goals by 30 million rubles ($41.4 million). It wasn't until Shevardnadze started going through the books that he learned 102 million rubles ($141 million) had been cut along the way from the original target. He also found that although output was up by 216 percent over that of the past decade, profits overall were down because production costs were up 222 percent.

Housing, a perennial Soviet problem, was a nightmare here. The money allocated for 21,500 apartments was simply missing. (What *was* constructed was clearly not great. Today's visitor to Tbilisi can see obviously crooked walls, already laced with broad cracks, on high-rise after high-rise.) The dependability of workers was another troublesome issue. Nearly a third of Tbilisi's 900,000 residents "migrate" each year, many of them the fruit sellers who pile into Tbilisi airport and tip stewardesses ten rubles for a seat on an oversold plane headed to market.

"We have one of the worst records in the country on this," Shevardnadze said. "The reasons why people change jobs so often should be studied scientifically." Hardly. Fast ruble was written all over the operation, as the party boss well knew. He wasted little time in reinstituting the lapsed *propusk* ("pass") system as one means of stabilizing movement and, therefore, the economy. Nobody left Georgia without an official *propusk*. Watermelons and chrysanthemums disappeared from Moscow.

"The plan is law," Shevardnadze said. "It is necessary to be fulfilled without any changes. The party will hold people strictly responsible for every underfulfillment of the plan. It cannot be otherwise."

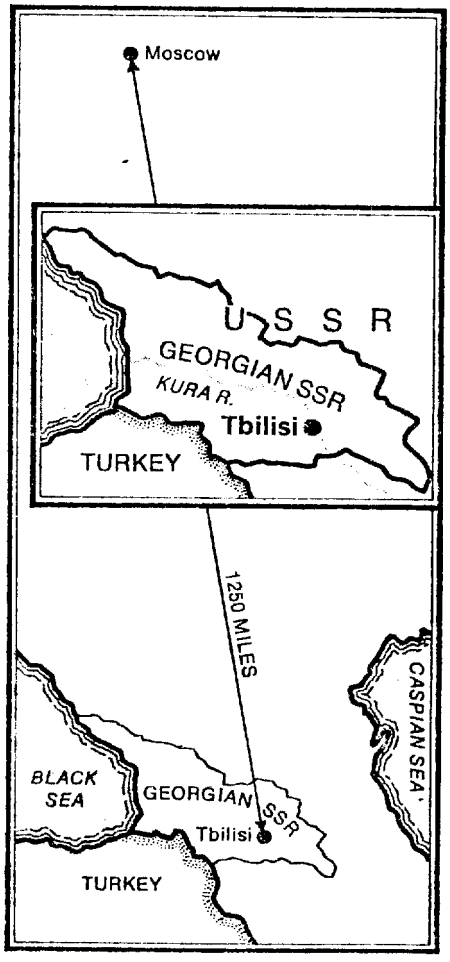
A Georgian himself, he knew there would be foot-dragging. Similarly, he wanted to make certain everyone knew that he would not tolerate it. "We will have to rid ourselves of anything that keeps us from normal work. We will proclaim a real, party-oriented, and principled fight against all negative phenomena in this area. That is the only way, because some comrades hold that everything will run its course and nothing is going to change.

"Those comrades are profoundly mistaken."

Once the housecleaning started, the government-controlled Russian language daily newspaper in Tbilisi, *Zarya Vostoka* ("Dawn of the East"), kept the exposés coming almost every day.

One of them detailed how Georgian officials took control of land reserved for garden plots for factory workers, threw up high walls, and behind them built palatial private dachas—"not small cottages, but huge mansions of fantastic dimensions . . . out of a Georgian fairy tale." Another tracked down the missing money for the 21,500 apartments. The money had never left the State Committee on Home Repair and Housing Construction, which had used it to build

Bob Pelletier



hunters' lodges for committee officials. None of this log-cabin-on-a-duck-pond kind of thing, though. It seems several were made of marble. One, with a forty-five-square-yard billiards room, cost 130,000 rubles ($173,000). A second, designed to house only two couples at a time, cost more than 500,000 rubles ($665,000) to build and decorate.

According to another exposé, Shevardnadze fired Trade Minister Vahktang Tokhadze for "bad management of trade, tolerance of shortcomings, the most flagrant violations of personnel policy [meaning that most of the Tokhadze family worked for the Trade Ministry], and for showing private property tendencies [another dacha owner]."

Following Tokhadze out the door were his first deputy, who had a criminal record, the ministry's party secretary, the head of the quality-inspection department, and the director of Tbilisi's main department store. An investigation linked 70 percent of all the trade organizations in the ministry with cases of overcharging, bribery, and embezzlement. Tokhadze had the plum. He kept himself responsible for the sales of private cars, the single most precious commodity for a Soviet. Ignoring normal retail channels, he let the cars go to the highest bidder.

The trade purge, however, had an unexpected side effect and brought about Shevardnadze's first real problems with the local citizenry. The shake-up knocked out so many key officials responsible for supplying Tbilisi with food that residents used to food surpluses found themselves waiting in line in shelf-stripped stores only to be told this and that product had not arrived. The Georgians, whose concern for their stomachs runs high, took to the streets in protest. It was not until the army had been called out that the street battling was broken up. The action only served to intensify the government's new campaign:

- A party secretary, a district attorney, and a police chief were fired in the Mestiski region of the republic for covering up the rape of an assault victim by her would-be rescuer. "The level of crime is very high, and the level of solving dangerous crimes is very low," the government said.
- A campaign to curb drug abuse (rarely mentioned anywhere in the Soviet Union) was initiated, with compulsory treatment ordered for addicts and alcoholics.
- Shevardnadze tried to get Mzhava-

nadze's wife back from the Ukraine to try her for the alleged diamond smuggling. So far he's been stymied by the requirement that Moscow has to approve inter-republic extraditions. The Kremlin apparently prefers that the wife of a former candidate member of the politburo not go on trial.

• Two members of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist party were expelled for undisclosed "criminal activities."

• The minister of justice and chief judge of the Adzharistan region of Georgia were fired for "lax prosecution of the law," a euphemism for taking bribes.

The crackdown hit the streets as hard as it did the ministers.

One morning a sudden warning went out to Tbilisi's taxi and bus garages to keep all public vehicles off the streets. Within the hour, police swooped down on several private cars painted to look like taxis and on one bogus bus. "You can't throw a cigarette butt on the sidewalk anymore," one fruit seller said. "You spend 200 rubles [$266] for a good evening out in a restaurant with fifteen bottles of wine—that's not a lot, you know—and the police come by and ask, 'Where did you get that money? You only earn 180 rubles [$240] a month.' "

For some Georgians, particularly the intelligentsia, the crackdown is a chance for the republic to regain some respect. "We have been embarrassed for a long time now," a professor at Tbilisi State University said. "It has all happened in the past twenty years, all this corruption. Before that it was the Armenians who were the shrewd businessmen. We were mostly drinkers and not very hard workers."

But the intelligentsia, a tiny minority where it exists at all in Georgia, is hardly the most representative body of thought on the Shevardnadze regime. Among the working class at least, indications are clear that the changes have been less than popular. With the firings, arrests, and limitations placed on private enterprise has come a stepped-up Sovietization campaign, strongly laced with heavy-handed Marxist-Leninist propaganda and the continued official cold-shouldering of local hero Josef Stalin. It has all rankled, and some apparently are getting tired of waiting for things to "get back to normal."

Georgians say there have been at least two assassination attempts aimed at Shevardnadze. In one a bomb failed to go off. In the second, gunmen attacked his car and shot Shevardnadze's chauffeur in the shoulder but missed the party secretary.

General anti-Soviet sentiment led recently to the dynamiting of a statue commemorating the "liberation" of Georgia by Russian Bolsheviks, who in 1921 overthrew the independent republic (the bombers chose to ignore the fact that it was their own comrade Stalin who had led the Bolshevik takeover). The Georgia Supreme Soviet responded to the attack by publishing a decree promising long prison terms to anyone involved in "the destruction or damaging of cultural monuments."

Shevardnadze chaired his second party plenum in late October 1973 and said widespread corruption continued to involve some of his top officials, "including highly responsible officials of party organizations. . . . It cannot go on like this. The Central Committee . . . intends categorically to establish a Bolshevist order in every region and city of the republic. There will be no mercy to anyone—regardless of age, rank, or former merits—who will dare to ignore the instructions, demands, and the statements of the party."

So the crackdown will continue until something gives, even if it turns out to be Shevardnadze himself. He is undoubtedly certain of his own role in Georgia, but less clear is his place in the overall scheme of Soviet politics. He still does not have a seat on the ruling politburo, on which Mzhavanadze held a candidate, or non-voting, place from 1957 until his "retirement."

Among the local heirs of Stalin, speculation varies as to why, for the first time, they are no longer represented on the twenty-man body (including candidates) that guides the foreign and domestic political fortunes of the Soviet Union.

The dominant street-level theory is that Georgia simply is being punished for obvious practical and political shortcomings. Another is that the cautious politburo is clearly aware of Shevardnadze's talent—and ambition—and is waiting to see what kind of job he does at home before he is allowed as a regular into the clubby corridors of the Kremlin. A third theory, gaining more credence all the time, is that the Kremlin does not want to elevate to national rank and prominence the man implementing its first sustained attempt at Sovietizing Georgia, until it is certain he will survive the effort. □