

Electoral Skullduggery Mars Georgian Poll

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A shady political deal may have helped secure Eduard Shevardnadze's overwhelming presidential election victory

In the week before the Georgian presidential election, Djumber Patiashvili, Georgia's last Communist boss, held a rally in Tbilisi's main cinema, packed mostly with elderly supporters. Patiashvili, grave voice and knitted brows, rattled out a slew of stock phrases -- none of which were worth quoting. During his speech there were occasional bursts of applause as the babushki beat their hands together fervently. In all it was pretty amazing that any enthusiasm for the race existed at all, given that the incumbent Eduard Shevardnadze was widely predicted to win overwhelmingly.

Shevardnadze ran on the same promises that he ran with during his last election, essentially saying - just give me five more years and I will bring electricity and jobs just like I promised you five years ago. Foreign leaders flew in before the poll to underline his international stature. He reminded the electorate of the stability that he has brought to Georgia, after two disastrous separatist conflicts and the civil war of the early nineties.

But to the many impoverished, unemployed Georgians forced to endure power cuts which, last winter restricted electricity in Tbilisi to four hours a day, Shevardnadze's boasts were so much boring rhetoric. In the days running up to the election last Sunday, it looked like the problem was less to do with getting Shevardnadze re-elected, than getting more than 50 per cent of the 3 million electorate into the polling stations to make the ballot valid.

Polls were difficult to come by, but it appeared that Shevardnadze was hovering just above the 50 per cent he needed to win outright and avoid a second round. Patiashvili was said to be 15 or more points behind him and Aslan Abashidze, the head of the Adjarian region, was always going to carry almost all of his local constituency which accounted for 10 per cent of the national vote.

After listening to all the hype from the Shevardnadze camp, it seemed that the vote might be closer than his activists would have had people think. Anecdotally, there seemed to be plenty of voters scattered about who thought Patiashvili was a viable option. Bolnisi, for example, was a Patiashvili stronghold and most of the 250,000 Abkhaz refugees -- Georgians displaced from Abkhazia after the separatist war there -- were convinced that only Patiashvili could get them home again.

Then three days before the election, a curious thing happened. Shevardnadze flew to Batumi, the capital of Adjaria, to talk to Abashidze. Why? Some kind of deal was touted, in return for which Abashidze would withdraw from the race. Shevardnadze was, perhaps, more worried about the final result than his propaganda was letting on.

Abashidze runs Adjaria, a rich region on the Black Sea with a lucrative border with Turkey, as his personal fiefdom. Clearly, there were things to be discussed: Adjarian status within Georgia, as yet undefined in the Georgian constitution, and Adjaria's contribution to the national budget being top of the list.

But still the episode seemed odd. If Shevardnadze was so sure of his re-election why the need to bargain? And why would he allow Abashidze to play the kingmaker, handing him political capital? From Abashidze's side the motives for the meeting on the eve of the election were also unclear. Why would he want to do anything for Shevardnadze, a man he had often accused publicly of trying to have him assassinated?

The content of the talks were secret, but the outcome clearly favoured Shevardnadze, because on

Saturday afternoon, less than 24 hours before the polls were due to open, Abashidze resigned his candidacy. But he didn't publicise his withdrawal in the Adjarian media. Late on polling day it became clear that some voters in Batumi were still voting for him.

What happened next? The ballots were spoiled but they were still counted. Thus Shevardnadze boosted the overall turnout, which he was desperate to do, without having to lose votes to Patiashvili. Shevardnadze, the great politician, had out-manoeuvred his rivals with his usual uncanny agility. By Monday morning, Shevardnadze claimed 80 per cent of the vote, Patiashvili had a mere 17 per cent. Turnout was generously put at 66 per cent.

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