

## **One Horse Race in Tbilisi**

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Most voters quietly accept that President Eduard Shevardnadze will win the April 9 elections - but they bitterly resent the fact that there is no real alternative.

Two children are riding with their mother on a tube train. The boy is about three, the girl must be eight. Suddenly, the boy turns to his sister and announces proudly, "I've got a Shevardnadze!"

"Let me have a look," says the girl. The boy solemnly extracts a small wallet from his pocket and takes out a dog-eared campaign flyer. "Which one is it? 'Policy of Renewal'? 'Many are Worthy'?" She knows each one by heart.

With just a few days to go before the election, any self-respecting schoolkid has the full set. There's "Policy of Renewal: Tackling the Economy" and "Policy of Renewal: Tackling Social Problems". There are several versions of the "Many are Worthy [to be president]" slogan but the most controversial is undoubtedly, "Many are Worthy but Shevardnadze is the One. (Actually, Shevardnadze is the Only One)."

It's a slogan that has infuriated Djumber Patiashvili, Shevardnadze's main rival in the election campaign. But Patiashvili's attempts to make his own views heard are constantly frustrated. During his public rallies, mysterious agents provocateurs have pelted the former Communist Party boss with eggs, honked car horns and drowned out his speeches by playing loud music in the street.

By contrast, Shevardnadze's campaign runs like a well-oiled machine. The man who has been Georgia's mentor since 1972 has no trouble in summoning an impressive selection of world leaders to endorse his candidacy: Leonid Kuchma, from the Ukraine, Azerbaijan's Heidar Aliev, Armenia's Robert Kocharian and German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

George Tennet, director of the US Central Intelligence Agency, visited Tbilisi on March 28 for talks with Shevardnadze and security service chiefs. The incumbent is eager to vaunt his close ties with the West.

Meanwhile, Georgia's pop-stars have staged large-scale concerts to voice their unquestioning support and last week the presidential team organised a friendly football match between veteran German players and Georgian soccer heroes.

But, despite the central message that there is simply no alternative to Shevardnadze, the former Soviet foreign minister has hit the campaign trail with vengeance, touring the entire country with an enthusiastic media circus in tow. His cause has been energetically championed by state minister Vaja Lordkipanidze and parliamentary chairman Zurab Zhvania.

The president's telephone hotline is constantly engaged: Shevardnadze and his team answer calls from the electorate for an hour and a half every day. This personal touch is complimented by a new focus on the president's extended family, right down to his grandchildren.

However, in reality, the glossy brochures, the silken promises and the group photos with world leaders offer cold comfort to a largely disillusioned population. In Tbilisi, there have been reports of people fainting from hunger in the streets. Government corruption is rampant.

The separatist states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia retain their de facto independence. If people vote for Shevardnadze on April 9, it is not because he is "The One" but because he is "The Only One".

In fact, Shevardnadze's rivals can only really count on protest votes - from voters who object to this very lack of an alternative. Pensioner Vakhtang Balashvili believes Shevardnadze's re-election would spell another five years of misery. He lives in a small flat with his son's family. Balashvili hasn't been paid his pension in six months: his relations are equally impoverished. Out of desperation more than hope, he will vote for Patiashvili.

Zina Bukhaidze, a flower seller in the Vera district of Tbilisi, still dreams of the days when the local chocolate factory where she works won a gold medal at an exhibition in Leipzig. Now the factory is closed and Zina sells flowers on the streets to feed her two children and 62-year-old husband.

She believes Shevardnadze has done nothing to combat poverty and says that, if no attempts are made to revitalise Georgia's ailing industry, the country will simply "wither away". Seeing no prospect of improvement in any campaign manifesto, Zina refuses to vote at all.

Jujuna Minashvili is also her family's breadwinner. A former kindergarten teacher, she earns around \$1 a day selling ice-cream on Melikishvili Avenue, in central Tbilisi. She supports her son (a struggling artist), her daughter-in-law and her nine-year-old grandson. Jujuna has sold all her most prized possessions - her linen and her china - to buy small luxuries for the family.

"We lead our lives in a kennel," she says. "I wish he [Shevardnadze] would either make things easier for us or just shoot us. In fact, we are dead already." Jujuna, 62, is also unlikely to vote.

Certainly, people no longer speak fondly of Georgia's hard-earned independence. They talk about people suffering from advanced malnutrition, of the gloomy faces on the buses and in the streets. Many have simply stopped hoping that things could change for the better. The lack of faith in "The Only One" is deeply disturbing.

This despondent mood cannot have escaped Shevardnadze. In a recent speech, he declared, "I am ready to face the accusing eyes of the nation and I pledge that I'm ready to tackle and solve Georgia's most urgent problems. I know how to build an independent democratic state. I can do that, I feel my own strength and the support of my country."

If there is any hope or patience left, then it is well summed up by one woman from the town of Khvareli, who said, "Some fruits need to grow for years before you can reap the first harvest. It probably takes even longer to build a state."

Certainly, Eduard Shevardnadze's election victory should give the nation a new political agenda - to ensure that, by 2005, there is more than one realistic alternative in the electoral race. This will be the first sign that Georgia has laid down the foundations for building a nation state.

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