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EDUARD SHEVARDNADZE AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

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Eduard Shevardnadze served as Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union from July 1985 until December 1990. His tenure covered a period of momentous change in the USSR, as Mikhail Gorbachev and his friend and ally Shevardnadze initiated sweeping reforms to bring the Soviet Union into the modern era of government. Shevardnadze's longstanding personal relationship with Gorbachev and his own sweeping vision of what was needed to revitalize his ailing country afforded him a sphere of influence that went far beyond foreign policy. The new thinking exhibited by Gorbachev and Shevardnadze cleared the way for the easing of Cold War tensions and the effective end to the East-West rivalry that had dominated international relations from the end of World War II. No one can doubt that, for the West, the world is a safer, albeit less predictable, place thanks in good measure to the liberal and courageous vision of Shevardnadze and Gorbachev. No complete evaluation of Shevardnadze as a statesman is possible, however, without examining the benefits he brought to the people he was specifically charged to serve -- the citizens of the (former) Soviet Union. This paper will thus briefly recap the statecraft of Eduard Shevardnadze - his assumptions, objectives, and strategies - and conclude with a discussion of his accomplishments on both sides of the former Iron Curtain.

Buying Time for Reforms

When Shevardnadze assumed his post in 1985, he was painfully aware, as was Gorbachev, that the Soviet economy, driven too far by unrestrained and unwise military spending and unrealistic commitments to socialist "brothers," was on the brink of collapse. The creaking command economy was incapable of satisfying basic domestic needs, much less financing grand worldwide schemes. As one observer has written, "Shevardnadze understood that the Soviet Union had reached the level of diminishing returns in its interventions abroad."¹ He perceived the

¹ Carolyn M. Ekedahl and Melvin A. Goodman, *The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze*

precarious economy, and the USSR's largely self-imposed international isolation at this time of extreme vulnerability, as immediate threats to his country and sought with Gorbachev to institute radical domestic reforms while simultaneously minimizing the possibility that other countries would capitalize on Soviet weakness. His goal was to transform the USSR into a modern nation which, while adhering to socialist principles, would not be hamstrung by narrow interpretations of them.

In this environment, Shevardnadze saw diplomacy's primary objective as buying time for the needed domestic reforms to take hold. He stated at a May 1987 MFA conference:

The restructuring in diplomatic work is primarily the fundamental awareness, to a greater depth than ever before, of the interrelationship between the foreign and domestic policy of the Soviet Union. Without an awareness of the fact that diplomacy must create for domestic restructuring a favorable foreign-policy environment and conditions, we do not have and cannot have today a qualified, competent diplomat or a competent diplomatic service.²

Key Reforms

The bloated military budget quickly became one of Shevardnadze's main targets. In a revolutionary 1988 speech at the MFA, Shevardnadze argued, "the arms race can exhaust and bleed the enemy dry, but truly at the price of undermining one's own economic and social base."³ In the same speech, he redefined national security, scorning traditional conceptions based on military might and linking it instead with material prosperity. (He later wrote, "It is not just immoral but politically dangerous to equate national security with tanks and nuclear warheads.

(State College, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, publication forthcoming) Introduction

² Eduard Shevardnadze, Report to Conference at Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 3, 1987.

³ Eduard Shevardnadze, Report to Conference of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 25, 1988.

while leaving out such 'trivia' as human life and welfare"⁴) Shevardnadze proved a staunch advocate of Gorbachev's policy of mutual sufficiency, arguing that the USSR could no longer afford to engage in a futile race for military superiority. He further alienated military traditionalists with calls for firm civilian control over the military and a reduction of its role in the policy-making process. Arms control agreements which they perceived as benefiting the West more than the USSR only confirmed their belief that Shevardnadze was undermining both them and the nation.

A new openness in the foreign policy process was another professed Shevardnadze goal. While Shevardnadze was indeed seeking a better decision-making mechanism in the MFA as he publicly pondered ways to make the process more "democratic" and transparent, he was also playing to his foreign audience as he discussed these plans. Only by convincing the U.S. and its allies that the USSR no longer posed a threat could he decrease the possibility of hostile attempts to strike at the enfeebled Soviet Union. In the 1988 speech cited above, Shevardnadze stated that the old days of confrontational politics were over, invoking Khrushchev's infamous threat, "We will bury you" as an example of outdated rhetoric.⁵ He publicly bemoaned the lost opportunities and deadlocked arms negotiations of previous years. He shocked foreign observers (and outraged Soviet conservatives) by speaking of the insanity of the Afghan adventure and the USSR's shameful history of chemical weapon production.

A final objective, and key to the accomplishing of those named above, was a significant expansion of the MFA's role. In order to be of full use to Gorbachev and to carry out his agenda,

⁴ Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 54.

⁵ Shevardnadze speech of July 25, 1988.

Shevardnadze's ministry had to have the clout necessary to take on the Defense Ministry and other centers of resistance to reform

Tools of the Modern Statesman

Having established these objectives, Shevardnadze became the first Soviet Foreign Minister to use the full arsenal of contemporary diplomatic tools. He and Gorbachev were the first modern Soviet statesmen, and quickly proved that they were adept students of the model so long accepted in the West. Shevardnadze understood and courted international public opinion as no other Soviet had. As early as 1987, he was warning his MFA subordinates that *world* opinion, and not just that of the socialist brotherhood, was vital to Soviet interests.⁶ He understood that a nation dangerously short of usable military force must make use of all the "soft" instruments of power available to it. Shevardnadze also reminded his subordinates that their domestic constituency had to be brought on board if there was to be any credibility accorded his new ideas. He reminded his MFA subordinates that, "Each diplomat should be a public affairs specialist."⁷

He was emphatic that the USSR must steer out of its self-imposed isolation in the international community and rely more on constructive interaction with multilateral organizations. Shevardnadze publicly regretted the USSR's non-participation in GATT and the IMF. He conceded that the USSR was being left behind as European integration began to pick up steam, and sought to convince his neighbors to the West that the Soviet Union could be a reliable partner. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, new Soviet thinking made possible a historic agreement in the Security Council which signaled the end of the old era of East-West polarization.

⁶ Shevardnadze speech of May 3, 1987

⁷ Shevardnadze speech of July 25, 1988

Recognizing the need to build a broader power base within his own government, Shevardnadze promoted better ties between the MFA and the Soviet Parliament. In late 1988, he noted that an effective foreign ministry had to negotiate simultaneously with three key players in the foreign policy process: international partners, the Soviet public, and Parliament.⁸ He thus created a new division within the MFA to handle Parliamentary relations. As he surveyed the MFA structure he had inherited, Shevardnadze saw further gaps that impeded the Ministry's effectiveness. In 1988, he directed that special economic cells be established, an acknowledgment that the complexity and importance of economic issues could not be adequately handled by non-specialists. He also created a Department of Arms Control and Disarmament.

Recognizing that the Soviet Union's limited resources no longer could subsidize client states whose value was diminished in a world that transcended pure East-West conflict, Shevardnadze also reevaluated foreign aid. Annual subsidies to Cuba and Vietnam alone were running approximately \$5 billion in the mid-80's.⁹ In 1989, Shevardnadze was publicly laying the groundwork for renegotiation of some of the commitments made to the USSR's friends around the world.

The End of the Soviet Union

The optimism with which the West had embraced the news emanating from the new Soviet leadership was shaken in December 1990, when an embattled Shevardnadze publicly tendered his resignation without prior notice to Gorbachev. Conservative forces, especially in the military, had been hurling increasingly virulent accusations at the Foreign Minister, alleging that

⁸ Eduard Shevardnadze, Speech to the 20th Report and Election Conference of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs Party Organization, November 1, 1988.

⁹ Ekedahl and Goodman, ch. 3.

he had mismanaged his portfolio and effectively sold out his country to the West. Bitter that Gorbachev had not rushed to support him, Shevardnadze stepped down in a dramatic move that made headlines around the world. Nine months later, an abortive coup in Moscow by right wing forces left a greatly weakened Gorbachev to preside over the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

As this paper is being written, Gorbachev remains one of the most vilified men in the former Soviet Union, widely if unfairly blamed for the loss of a once-mighty empire. The spin-off states of the former Soviet Union face varying prospects, but it is unlikely that all of them will prove to be viable political and economic units. Violent ethnic tensions regularly flare up throughout the former USSR, including the independent state of Georgia, now governed by Shevardnadze. Russia itself has become mired in a second Afghanistan in Chechnya, whose lasting legacy may be the ascendance of Alexander Lebed, a former General known for his nationalist views. As Yeltsin faces major surgery, the question of orderly succession remains open and disconcerting. The Russian economy remains desperate, overcome by corruption, inefficiency and the overwhelming needs of the Russian people.

Shevardnadze's Scorecard

How then, to properly assess the contributions and legacy of Eduard Shevardnadze, who with his friend Mikhail Gorbachev vainly sought to revive a terminal patient? As we view the period 1985-1990, it becomes clear that Shevardnadze did not properly assess the depths of resistance to reform both in the military and throughout the entrenched bureaucracy of the Soviet government. It is difficult, even in retrospect, to hypothesize what he might have done to effectively defuse the danger they presented. Gorbachev and, to a lesser extent, Shevardnadze, were and are widely perceived by the rank and file as arrogant intellectuals, out of touch with the

common man. A charm offensive, equivalent to that so carefully aimed at the West in the perestroika years, might have served to coopt the more moderate elements of the military and mid-level bureaucrats. While Shevardnadze clearly saw the necessity of getting the Parliament on board with respect to reforms, he seems to have wrongly assumed that the military could be compelled, however grudgingly, to accept the changes that threatened their own power base.

He similarly seems to have underestimated the depth of nationalist sentiment in the non-Russian republics of the USSR. Once the August 1991 coup attempt had shown how weak Moscow was, the republics in short order unilaterally declared independence. It is hard to understand how Shevardnadze, an ethnic Georgian, could have so badly misunderstood nationalist sentiment. This may be another shortcoming attributable to the elitism of which he was so often accused.

It may well be that, by the mid-1980's, no amount of vision or statecraft could save a system that was premised on falsehood. In a March 1991 interview with *Fortune* magazine, Shevardnadze mused that he and Gorbachev had been too late, and that the radical reforms they sought should have been implemented several years earlier, when a less weary and cynical Soviet people would have provided more support. A philosophical Shevardnadze concluded, "When you're late, well, life has its own laws. And they are very strict."¹⁰

But Who Does the Scoring?

In the West, Shevardnadze is rightly viewed as a courageous man of vision whose liberal ideas and restraint allowed an "evil empire" to crumble with a minimum of bloodshed. We are correctly grateful to him and Mikhail Gorbachev for the fact that Eastern Europeans are once again in control of their own destinies. Their role in the demise of the East-West rivalry in

¹⁰ Jung Ah Pak, "Shevardnadze Speaks Out," *Fortune*, Vol. 23, No. 10 (May 20, 1991), 103-107.

international affairs enabled the world community to unite against Saddam Hussein's aggression in Kuwait. In the post-Cold War era, it became theoretically possible that the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia might be resolved outside the narrow framework of East-West conflict. These are real and significant accomplishments.

There is another question to be addressed, however by whose criteria are the accomplishments of statesmen to be judged? Should we evaluate them by the amount of good they brought to the world at large, or by the extent to which they effectively served their fellow countrymen? While it cannot be questioned that we are much better off as a result of Edward Shevardnadze's vision of the future (Other considerations aside, it is ironically the United States which has reaped the benefits of the economic "peace dividend" that was supposed to save the USSR), can the same be said for a Russian mother whose son has died in Chechnya because Moscow has not yet learned to deal with ethnic aspirations, and the military has not yet been brought under effective civilian control? For the aspiring entrepreneur forced out of business as uncontrolled organized crime groups bleed the economy dry? Or even for the Georgian, who while proud to have an independent homeland, must now face violence from Abkhazian separatists supported by elements in Moscow? Clearly, Edward Shevardnadze is not personally responsible for all the events leading to the current crises in the former Soviet Union. Yet, in a complete evaluation of his performance and that of Mikhail Gorbachev, the question must be asked Could they have better prepared their country for the disintegration that most observers now accept as having been inevitable? If the effort spent on futilely trying to prop up a dying system had instead been spent on preparing for its successor, would the transition have been so painful for those most directly affected?

It is beyond the scope of this brief paper to answer such a hypothetical question. It is worthwhile, however, to remind Western observers that many residents of the former Soviet Union would not give a positive response to the ever-popular political query, "Are you better off now than you were ten years ago?" Any balanced assessment of the legacy of Shevardnadze and Gorbachev should at least acknowledge the chaos that followed them in the country they served. To do otherwise would make for a happier, but less truthful, ending to this paper.

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