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## **The Image of a Political Figure in Academic Texts: Eduard Shevardnadze**

### **Abstract**

This article examines the portrayal of Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgian academic works, focusing on his representation as a political figure in collective memory. Through an analysis of key texts by Stephen Jones, Dimitri Shvelidze, Giorgi Mchedlishvili, and Ronald Grigor Suny, the study explores Shevardnadze's image as a complex leader who guided Georgia through its turbulent transition from Soviet rule to independence. While he is credited with stabilizing Georgia after the civil war and advancing Western integration, his legacy is also marred by corruption, authoritarianism, and unresolved conflicts. The analysis reveals that his image transcends the hero-antihero dichotomy, showcasing his lasting impact on Georgia's historical narrative.

**Keywords:** Eduard Shevardnadze, collective memory, image, Georgia.

### **Introduction**

In addition to defining events, epochs are often associated with specific individuals. Their importance increases during transitional periods, because they influence the development of events and their image is constructed amid political and sociocultural changes.

Research conducted within the framework of various projects has shown that Eduard Shevardnadze's image in collective memory requires a separate study. We are interested in how he is perceived as a political leader in collective memory; how and why his image changes over time and how it differs among different social groups. Perceptions of this figure are not uniform, and the discourse goes beyond hero versus anti-hero. The only undisputed fact is that Eduard Shevardnadze is perceived as a strong figure and a smart politician at all times and in all spaces, as reflected in his nicknames – “Silver Fox” in Georgia and “Shevy” in the West. Both nicknames have these connotations.

Eduard Shevardnadze, a leader who retired from active politics after 30 years of rule following the Rose Revolution of 2003 and died in 2014, remains a subject of constant discussion and interest to this day. Rightfully, we can call him a man of the epoch, as both Soviet and post-independence Georgian politics and history are associated with his name. From 1972 to 1985, he was the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic.

From 1985 to 1990, he served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union. From 1992 on, he was the Chairman of the State Council of Georgia. From 1995 to 2003, he was the President of Georgia. As the main architect of memory politics, Eduard Shevardnadze shaped the images of others for a long time while his own image remained instable and contradictory. He became a political figure and a site of memory associated with the last 30 years of Georgian history. The dispute over his legacy began during his lifetime and continues today in various narratives. Despite its chronological proximity to the present, this process has transcended the communicative memory and began to establish itself in cultural memory. He is discussed not only in scientific works and documentary films but also in artistic texts, which indicates his transition into cultural memory. In addition to the aforementioned career achievements, Eduard Shevardnadze's name is associated with significant events that continue to be discussed: the case of the "Airplane Boys" - young people executed in 1983 for attempting to flee the Soviet Union by airplane; the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany; the Tbilisi War and civil confrontation; the deployment of Russian troops to defeat Zviad Gamsakhurdia; the loss of Abkhazia; the realization of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline project and designation of Georgia as the middle corridor. Constant telling of these and similar stories creates narratives that form and transform the image of Eduard Shevardnadze. Analyzing these stories through the lens of collective memory will contribute an interdisciplinary understanding of Georgia's recent history.

To illustrate how a political figure is portrayed in collective memory, this article examines the construction of Eduard Shevardnadze's image in academic texts. For the analysis, significant works published in Georgian were selected: Stephen Jones's monograph „Georgia: A Political History Since Independence“, Dimitri Shvelidze's „Political Confrontations and the Overthrow of the National Government in Georgia, 1987–1992“, Giorgi Mchedlishvili's „History Without Distance: Chronicles of the Turbulent Years, 1988–1995“, and Ronald Grigor Suny's „The Making of the Georgian Nation“. A politician's image is tied to the perception and evaluation of significant events, as well as how their meanings change or remain stable over time. This is particularly true for political figures whose image is directly linked to significant events. For example, understanding the events of the 1990s involves recognizing April 9 as a significant landmark, symbolizing struggle, victory, the restoration of independence, and the beginning of a new Georgia. Consequently, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava emerged as heroes because their names became closely associated with the fight for freedom and the restoration of independence. Their burial in the Mtatsminda Pantheon, Georgia's foremost site

of memory, is a testament to this. Ultimately, their interment there solidified their heroic image (Nora, 1989). On the other hand, there is the civil war, which later evolved into conflicts involving criminal gangs known as “brotherhoods,” both perceived as negative events. As time passes, fewer people wish to be associated with them. Those linked to the civil war and the onset of criminal conflicts are branded as antiheroes which is considered a national disgrace. Tengiz Kitovani, for example, was the former defense minister under Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s government and a key figure in the civil war and the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia’s regime. Jaba Ioseliani, a “thief-in-law” and founder of the armed “Mkhedrioni” corps, is another notable figure. Despite his negative reputation, Ioseliani has an alternative perception as well. Interestingly, in 1992, following the civil war, Jaba Ioseliani was one of the main initiators of bringing Eduard Shevardnadze to Georgia. While the perceptions of these individuals are sharply black-and-white, fitting the labels of hero or antihero, Eduard Shevardnadze exists beyond this dichotomy. He is neither a clear hero nor a clear antihero. More precisely, his image transcends the hero-antihero framework. He himself shaped the images of heroes and antiheroes because he was the primary determinant of Georgia’s reality during the last 30 years of the 20th century.

### **Results and Discussion**

The perception of Eduard Shevardnadze’s work in Georgia today is complex and polarized, it is shaped by historical context, generational differences, and contemporary political dynamics. As of 2025, his legacy is viewed through the lens of his roles as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Georgia (1972–1985), Foreign Minister of the USSR (1985–1990), and president of independent Georgia (1995–2003).

#### ***Mixed Legacy: Achievements vs. Failures***

##### Achievements recognized:

Soviet Era: Shevardnadze is remembered by some, particularly older generations, for his anti-corruption campaigns and economic improvements in Soviet Georgia. These improvements brought relative stability and better living conditions compared to other Soviet republics.

International stature: His role in ending the Cold War as Soviet Foreign Minister earns him respect, especially among those who value his diplomatic contributions to the global community. This is often highlighted in academic and international circles, as noted by historian Stephen Jones describes Shevardnadze as a globally celebrated “Silver Fox” for his diplomatic acumen.

Post-Independence Stabilization: Shevardnadze's return in 1992, amidst civil war, separatist conflicts (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and economic collapse, is credited with bringing about partial stabilization of the situation. Some circles acknowledges his pragmatic leadership in restoring basic state functions, introducing the lari (the Georgian currency), and establishing the groundwork for Georgia's Western-oriented foreign policy, such as membership in the Council of Europe in 1999.

Economic Hardship: The 1990s, often called the "dark years," are associated with energy crises, poverty, and unemployment, which cemented a negative image of this period for those who lived through it.

#### Criticisms and failures:

Corruption and authoritarianism: Shevardnadze's presidency is widely criticized for systemic corruption, nepotism, and semi-authoritarian governance. This led to economic stagnation and public disillusionment. Jones emphasizes that Shevardnadze's Soviet-style governance hindered deep democratic reforms, contributing to the 2003 Rose Revolution.

Separatist conflicts: Shevardnadze's inability to resolve conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, coupled by his ambiguous foreign policy balanced Russia and the West, is considered a major failure.

Economic hardship: The 1990s, often called the "dark years," are associated with energy crises, poverty, and unemployment, which cemented a negative image of this period for those who lived through it.

Stephen Jones's book "Georgia: A Political History Since the Declaration of Independence" was written in English in 2012 and translated and published in Georgian the same year. It quickly became a scholarly bestseller and a subject of discussion. We are interested in this work not as a scholarly text but as a narrative that shaped Eduard Shevardnadze's image. Examining how Shevardnadze's image is shaped within the context of political analysis and history is intriguing. We are interested in it because it covers the period from the declaration of independence to 2012 and analyzes the governance periods of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Mikheil Saakashvili. While this study solely aims to analyze Eduard Shevardnadze's image, the book's structure provides an excellent opportunity to compare Stephen Jones's perception of these political figures.

Stephen F. Jones analyzes Eduard Shevardnadze's career as a complex, multifaceted figure of a transitional period. Rooted in a deep knowledge of Georgia's post-Soviet history, Jones's assessments focus on Shevardnadze's role as a leader in both Soviet and independent Georgia, emphasizing his

achievements and shortcomings. Jones writes that, in 1992, Shevardnadze returned to a homeland facing immense challenges. As a former powerful Soviet foreign minister, Shevardnadze “embodied order and promised peace” (Jones, 2012: 106).

Jones provides a detailed account of Shevardnadze’s return to Georgia. However, one significant detail stands out in his narrative: at the airport, Shevardnadze thanked the intelligentsia on the tarmac: “Great thanks to the Georgian intelligentsia, who took up arms and automatic weapons to defend democratic Georgia when necessary. They awakened early and roused their people. Great thanks to them!”. These words are significant because one of the contentious issues surrounding Shevardnadze is his alleged connection to the civil war. In the absence of direct evidence, his opponents used these words to claim that he had legitimized the civil war. Interestingly, this footage was lost for a long time and was only rediscovered in the early 2000s, thanks to Rustavi 2 television<sup>1</sup>.

Jones notes that Shevardnadze returned to Georgia in 1992 amid chaotic conditions, including civil war, separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and economic collapse. Shevardnadze managed to establish some stability by halting armed confrontations and partially restoring state institutions. Jones considers this one of the significant achievements of his tenure, though he emphasizes that full stabilization was not achieved. Jones discusses the ambivalent perception of Shevardnadze upon his return, writing: “Eduard Shevardnadze, the Georgian party leader from 1972–1985, who left his country as a despised Soviet lackey, declaring that ‘the sun rises in the north,’ returned as the country’s savior” (Jones, 2012: 105).

The author emphasizes that Shevardnadze’s political vision and style of governance were greatly influenced by his Soviet past. As First Secretary of Soviet Georgia from 1972 to 1985 and USSR Foreign Minister from 1985 to 1990, he displayed reformist qualities, such as fighting corruption, supporting *glasnost* and *perestroika*. However, his approaches often remained within the Soviet bureaucratic framework. In assessing the perception of Shevardnadze in Georgia during the 1990s, Jones writes, “Eduard Shevardnadze, the Georgian party leader from 1972 to 1985, who left his country

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<sup>1</sup> Chagelishvili, T. documentary *From April 9 to 9 April*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KRiXsPfx0o> (accessed 15.09.2022)

as a despised Soviet lackey shamelessly proclaiming that the sun rises for Georgia from the north, returned as the country's savior." (Jones, 2012: 105).

Jones writes: "After Eduard Shevardnadze's return to Georgia in 1992 [...] we witnessed the return of a reincarnated nomenklatura with property, and the merging of criminal and political, public and private interests within state structures." He adds, "He restored power as he understood it. [...] In the final years of his presidency, the central government was so weakened and exhausted by corruption, intrigues, unsolved murders, and an empty budget that it practically ceased to exist" (Jones, 2012: 4-5). These two quotes from the introduction of the book comprehensively characterize Shevardnadze's tenure in independent Georgia. Jones focuses on Shevardnadze's personal characteristics and the consequences of his Soviet-style governance.

Jones criticizes Shevardnadze's presidency (1995–2003) for widespread corruption and nepotism, considering them major flaws of his administration. Despite initial reforms, such as introducing the new currency, the lari, and fostering independent media, the economy stagnated, and his governance became increasingly authoritarian. Jones notes that Shevardnadze's rule hindered deep democratic reforms. „Shevardnadze did not bring back communism or dictatorship, but he also failed to ensure the promised democracy and national salvation“ (Jones, 2012: 107).

Jones highlights Shevardnadze's ambivalent foreign policy, which sought to balance relations between Russia and the West. He integrated Georgia into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1993 to secure Russian support all the while developing ties with the EU, NATO, and the US. Georgia joined the Council of Europe in 1999 and applied for NATO membership in 2002. Jones argues that this double game was partly driven by Georgia's geopolitical situation, yet it was often ineffective, particularly in resolving separatist conflicts. Jones notes that Shevardnadze's international image, especially his role as USSR Foreign Minister in ending the Cold War, was far more positive than his domestic political perception in Georgia. Nevertheless, this international recognition could not overshadow the challenges he faced in governing Georgia, including insufficient support from both Russia and the West. „The interim government, which I call the republic, was a 'time of troubles,' characterized by the presence of strong militarized forces, foreign intervention, and a military crisis in South Ossetia and Abkhazia,“ writes Jones. (Jones, 2012: 106).

In addition to Stephen Jones's work, we have selected significant works published in the Georgian language in Georgia for analysis in this study. These include Dimitri Shvelidze's „Political

Confrontations and the Overthrow of the National Government in Georgia, 1987–1992“, Giorgi Mchedlishvili’s „History Without Distance: Chronicles of the Turbulent Years, 1988–1995“, and Ronald Grigor Suny’s „The Making of the Georgian Nation“. These works are recognized as fundamental monographs. They have influenced other academic and non-academic texts and narratives. However, none of these monographs primarily focus on studying Eduard Shevardnadze’s image; rather they are interested in the 1990s for various other reasons.

In Dimitri Shvelidze’s “Political Confrontations and the Overthrow of the National Government in Georgia, 1987–1992,” the author focuses on the political turmoil that led to the overthrow of Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s government. He presents Eduard Shevardnadze’s return to Georgia in 1992 as a pivotal moment. Shvelidze links Shevardnadze to the restoration of order following the civil war, portraying him as a stabilizing force invited by figures like Jaba Ioseliani. However, Shvelidze also associates Shevardnadze with controversial events, such as his ambiguous stance during the civil war and his decision to use of Russian troops to defeat Gamsakhurdia. Shvelidze offers a mixed assessment, acknowledging Shevardnadze’s diplomatic skill but criticizing his reliance on Soviet-era tactics, which hindered democratic progress. The work emphasizes Shevardnadze’s role in shaping the political landscape rather than merely participating in it (Shvelidze, 2021, 591-592).

The work by Giorgi Mchedlishvili – “History Without Distance: Chronicles of the Turbulent Years, 1988-1995” provides a detailed account of Georgia’s turbulent transition period in the early 1990s, with Shevardnadze as a central figure. The author highlights Shevardnadze’s role in halting armed conflicts and restoring state functions, depicting him as a pragmatic leader who navigated a divided society. Key events include the civil war, the loss of Abkhazia, and the establishment of state institutions. Mchedlishvili emphasizes Shevardnadze’s international reputation, which he built during his time as the Soviet Union’s Foreign Minister. However, he notes that Shevardnadze's domestic governance was overshadowed by corruption and economic hardship. Overall, the work portrays Shevardnadze as a figure who defined Georgia’s trajectory, though his legacy was complicated by unresolved conflicts and governance failures (Mchedlishvili, 1999, 332).

In „The Making of the Georgian Nation,“ Ronald Grigor Suny discusses Shevardnadze within the broader context of the formation of the Georgian nation, focusing on his role in both the Soviet and independence periods. Suny portrays Shevardnadze as a reformist during his tenure as First Secretary of the Communist party of Georgian SSR (1972–1985), when he fought corruption and

improved living conditions. However, Suny criticizes Shevardnadze's failure to resolve separatist conflicts and the corruption that plagued his administration, which eroded public trust. Suny's analysis highlights Shevardnadze's dual legacy as a globally respected diplomat and a controversial domestic leader (Suny 2022, 493-494).

The authors have different focuses: Suny provides a historical and political analysis within a broader context, while Shvelidze and Mchedlishvili concentrate on specific turbulent periods.

Thus, alongside the analysis of historical and political contexts, it is interesting to examine how Eduard Shevardnadze's image is constructed, how he is evaluated, which events the authors associate him with, how and why they link his name to various events, which positive and negative characteristics they emphasize, and how his decisions, actions, and their outcomes are assessed.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Eduard Shevardnadze was a complex political figure. He attempted to navigate the challenges of a transitional period, but his Soviet past, corruption issues, and authoritarian tendencies hindered him. These factors prevented the formation of a modern democratic state. His main achievements were a partial transition from chaos to stability, establishing national institutions (e.g., currency and media), and initiating a Western-oriented foreign policy. However, his shortcomings, including corruption, economic stagnation, and election fraud, ultimately led to the end of his rule. Jones's analysis highlights that Shevardnadze's legacy in Georgia remains controversial. He was the "Silver Fox" who brought stability, yet failed to meet the demands of modern democracy.

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