

The Image of a Political Figure in Academic Texts: Eduard Shevardnadze¹

Abstract

This article examines the construction of Eduard Shevardnadze's image in Georgian academic works, focusing on how his role as a political figure is represented in collective memory. Analyzing key texts by Stephen Jones, Dimitri Shvelidze, Giorgi Mchedlishvili, and Ronald Grigor Suny, the study explores Shevardnadze's portrayal as a complex leader navigating Georgia's turbulent transition from Soviet rule to independence. While credited with stabilizing Georgia post-civil war and advancing Western integration, his legacy is marred by corruption, authoritarianism, and unresolved conflicts. The analysis highlights how his image transcends the hero-antihero dichotomy, reflecting his enduring influence on Georgia's historical narrative.

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

Introduction

In addition to defining events, epochs are often associated with specific personalities. Their importance increases even more in transitional periods, because on the one hand they influence the development of events, and on the other hand their image is constructed under conditions of political and socio-cultural changes.

Research conducted within the framework of various projects has shown that the image of Eduard Shevardnadze in collective memory requires a separate study. We are interested in how Eduard Shevardnadze is perceived as a political leader in collective memory. How and why his image changes and transforms over time and among different social groups. Contemporary perceptions of him are not uniform. His discussion goes beyond the discourse of hero and anti-hero. The only undisputed fact is that Eduard Shevardnadze is perceived as a strong figure and a smart politician in all times and spaces, which is reflected in his nicknames - "Silver Fox" in Georgia and "Shevy" in the West, both of which 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. We can rightly call him a man-epoch, as both Soviet and post-independence Georgian politics

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and history are associated with his name. In 1972-1985 he was the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Georgian Soviet Republic. In 1985-1990 he was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union. From 1992 he was the Chairman of the State Council of Georgia and from 1995-2003 he was the President of Georgia. Eduard Shevardnadze, as a definer of the politics of memory, was for a long time the main creator of other people's images, and his image is also changeable and contradictory. He became not only a political figure, but also a site of memory associated with the last 30 years of Georgian history of the twentieth century. The dispute over his figure began during his lifetime and continues today in various narratives. This process, despite its chronological proximity to the present, has transcended the space of communicative memory and is beginning to establish itself in cultural memory, as he is discussed not only in scientific works and documentary films, but has also become a character in artistic texts, which is a clear indicator of his transition into cultural memory. In addition to his career achievements mentioned above, Eduard Shevardnadze's name is associated with significant events that remain relevant for discussion: for example, the case of the "Airplane Boys" - young people who were executed in 1983 for attempting to flee the Soviet Union by airplane; Eduard Shevardnadze's connection and association with the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification; the Tbilisi War and civil confrontation. the use of Russian troops to defeat Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the loss of Abkhazia; the realization of the idea of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline and the granting of the function of a middle corridor to Georgia. The constant telling of these and similar stories creates narratives within which the image of Eduard Shevardnadze is formed and transformed. Analyzing these different narratives through the lens of collective memory will contribute to understanding Georgia's recent history from an interdisciplinary perspective (Halbwachs, 1992).

To demonstrate how a political figure is represented in collective memory, the article examines how Eduard Shevardnadze's image is constructed in academic works. For the purposes of this study, we have selected significant works published in the Georgian language in Georgia for analysis. These include: 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“. The image of a specific politician is tied to the evaluation of significant events, how society perceives them, and how their

meanings and perceptions change or remain unchanged over time. This is particularly true for political figures, whose image is directly linked to the significance of specific events. For instance, the dynamics of understanding the events of the 1990s are as follows: the primary landmark is April 9, symbolizing struggle and victory, the restoration of independence, and the beginning of a new Georgia. Consequently, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava emerged as unequivocal heroes, as 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, and their interment there ultimately solidified their heroic image (Nora, 1989).

On the other hand, there is the civil war, which later evolved into conflicts involving criminal gangs, the so-called "brotherhoods." Both are unequivocally perceived as negative events. As time passes, fewer people wish to be associated with them. This is considered a national disgrace, and those linked to the civil war and the onset of criminal conflicts are branded with the image of antiheroes. For example, Tengiz Kitovani, the former defense minister under Zviad Gamsakhurdia's government, was a key figure in the civil war and the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia's regime. Similarly, Jaba Ioseliani, a "thief-in-law" and founder of the armed "Mkhedrioni" corps, is another notable figure. Despite his negative perception, Ioseliani also has a certain alternative perception. 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. In many cases, he himself shapes the images of heroes and antiheroes, as he was the primary determinant of Georgia's reality in the last 30 years of the 20th century.

Results and Discussion

The perception of Eduard Shevardnadze's work in Georgia today remains complex, polarized, and 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 Soviet Georgia (1972–1985), USSR Foreign Minister (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, which 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 global diplomatic contributions. This is often highlighted in academic and international circles, as noted by historian Stephen Jones, who describes him as a globally celebrated “Silver Fox” for his diplomatic acumen.

Post-Independence Stabilization: Shevardnadze’s return in 1992 amidst civil war, separatist conflicts (Abkhazia, South Ossetia), and economic collapse is credited with partial stabilization. Certain circles in society, notes his pragmatic leadership in restoring basic state functions, introducing the lari, and laying the groundwork for Georgia’s Western-oriented foreign policy (e.g., Council of Europe membership in 1999).

Criticisms and Failures:

Corruption and Authoritarianism: His presidency is widely criticized for systemic corruption, nepotism, and semi-authoritarian governance, which 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: His inability to resolve the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts, compounded by an ambiguous foreign policy balancing Russia and the West, is seen as a significant failure.

Economic Hardship: The 1990s, often called the “dark years,” are associated with energy crises, poverty, and unemployment, cementing a negative image among those who lived through this period.

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 defines Eduard Shevardnadze’s image. It is intriguing to examine how Eduard

Shevardnadze's image is shaped or crafted within the context of political analysis and the narration of political history. It is of interest to us because its content covers the period from the declaration of independence to 2012, analyzing the governance periods of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Mikheil Saakashvili. Although the aim of this study is solely to analyze Eduard Shevardnadze's image, the book's structure provides an excellent opportunity to compare Stephen Jones's perceptions of these political figures.

What does Stephen Jones write about Eduard Shevardnadze?

Stephen F. Jones analyzes Eduard Shevardnadze's career as a complex, multifaceted figure of a transitional period. His assessments, rooted in a deep knowledge of Georgia's post-Soviet history, focus on Shevardnadze's role as a leader in both Soviet and independent Georgia, emphasizing his achievements and shortcomings. According to Jones, in 1992, returning 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 tarmac, Shevardnadze addressed the crowd, thanking the intelligentsia: "Great thanks to the Georgian intelligentsia, who, when necessary, took up arms, automatic weapons, to defend democratic Georgia, which awakened early and roused its people. Great thanks to them!" These words are significant because one of the contentious issues surrounding Shevardnadze's persona is whether he was connected to the civil war. In the absence of direct evidence, these words were sufficient for his opponents to claim that Shevardnadze legitimized the civil war. Interestingly, this footage was long lost and only rediscovered in the early 2000s, thanks to Rustavi 2 television.

Jones notes that Shevardnadze returned to Georgia in 1992 amid chaotic conditions—civil war, separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and economic collapse. He managed to establish some stability, for example, 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 shamelessly declaring that the sun rises in the north, returned as the country's savior" (Jones, 2012: 105).

The author underscores that Shevardnadze's political vision and governance style were heavily shaped by his Soviet past. As First Secretary of Soviet Georgia (1972–1985) and USSR Foreign Minister (1985–1990), he displayed reformist qualities (e.g., fighting corruption, supporting glasnost and perestroika), but his approaches often remained within the Soviet bureaucratic framework. This was particularly evident in independent Georgia, where he failed to establish modern, transparent democratic institutions.

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 book's introduction comprehensively characterize Shevardnadze's tenure in independent Georgia. The text does not assess the objective realities that shaped his actions but rather 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, which he considers major flaws of his administration. Despite initial reforms (e.g., introducing the new currency, the lari, and fostering independent media), the economy stagnated, and his governance became increasingly authoritarian. Jones notes that Shevardnadze's “Soviet-style” rule hindered deep democratic reforms.

Foreign Policy: Jones highlights Shevardnadze's ambivalent foreign policy, which sought to balance relations between Russia and the West. He integrated Georgia into the CIS Commonwealth of Independent States (1993) to secure Russian support while simultaneously developing ties with the EU, NATO, and the US (e.g., joining the Council of Europe in 1999 and applying for NATO membership in 2002). According to Jones, this “double game” was partly driven by Georgia's geopolitical situation but 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. However, this international recognition could not overshadow the challenges he faced in governing Georgia, including insufficient support from both Russia and the West.

The Rose Revolution and Resignation: Jones emphasizes that the 2003 Rose Revolution, which led to Shevardnadze's resignation, was the result of growing public discontent. Allegations of rigged parliamentary elections in 2003, economic hardships, and corruption sparked mass protests. Jones notes that Shevardnadze's decision not to use force to suppress the protests was a display of "political wisdom," preventing bloodshed.

According to Jones, Shevardnadze's legacy is ambivalent. On one hand, he laid the foundation for Georgia as an independent state (e.g., national currency, Western-oriented foreign policy). On the other, his inability to implement deep reforms and combat corruption led to a crisis in his governance and, ultimately, his rejection by the public.

In addition to Stephen Jones's work, for the purposes of this study, we have selected significant works published in the Georgian language in Georgia for analysis. 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. All of them are published in Georgian and have influenced other academic and non-academic texts and narratives. None of these monographs have the primary aim or research focus of studying Eduard Shevardnadze's image; they are interested in the 1990s for various other reasons.

Dimitri Shvelidze –Political Confrontations and the Overthrow of the National Government in Georgia, 1987–1992 - Shvelidze's work focuses on the political turmoil that led to the overthrow of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's government, presenting 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, he also associates Shevardnadze with controversial events, such as his ambiguous stance during the civil war and the use of Russian troops to defeat Gamsakhurdia. Shvelidze's assessment is mixed, 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).

Giorgi Mchedlishvili – “History Without Distance: Chronicles of the Turbulent Years, 1988–1995”. The work provides a detailed account of Georgia's turbulent transition period, with

Shevardnadze as a central figure in the early 1990s. The author highlights Shevardnadze's role in halting armed conflicts and restoring state functions, depicting him as a pragmatic leader navigating 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, built during his time as the Soviet Union's Foreign Minister, but notes that his domestic governance was overshadowed by corruption and economic hardship. 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).

Ronald Grigor Suny , „The Making of the Georgian Nation“. 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. He portrays Shevardnadze as a reformist during his tenure as First Secretary of the Georgian SSR (1972–1985), fighting corruption and improving living conditions. In the independence era, Suny connects Shevardnadze to Georgia's stabilization and Western integration, such as the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline project. However, he criticizes Shevardnadze's failure to resolve separatist conflicts and the corruption that plagued his administration, which eroded public trust. Suny's analysis underscores Shevardnadze's dual legacy as a globally respected diplomat and a controversial domestic leader (Suny 2022).

The authors differ in focus: Suny provides a historical-political analysis in a broader context, while Shvelidze and Mchedlishvili concentrate on specific turbulent periods.

Thus, it is interesting to examine, alongside the analysis of historical and political contexts, how Eduard Shevardnadze's image is constructed, how he is evaluated, what events the authors associate him with, how and why they link his name to various events, what 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 who attempted to navigate the challenges of a transitional period but was hindered by his Soviet past, corruption issues, and authoritarian tendencies, which prevented the formation of a modern democratic state. His main achievements include a partial transition from chaos to stability, laying the groundwork for national institutions (e.g., currency, media), and initiating a Western-oriented foreign policy. However, his shortcomings—corruption, economic stagnation, and election fraud—led to the end of his rule. Jones's

analysis underscores that Shevardnadze's legacy in Georgia remains controversial: he was the "Silver Fox" who brought some stability but failed to meet the demands of modern democracy.

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