

THE GEORGIAN CHRONICLE

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Major events and trends in politics, economy and social life

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THE GOVERNMENT

The Georgian political agenda was dominated by two major issues -- the war in Abkhazia and relations with Russia. However, from the political point of view it was the latter which was given the priority, since the position of Russia is commonly regarded in Georgia to be the main obstacle in resolving the Abkhaz conflict. It is on this issue, that the opposition, criticizing Mr. Shevardnadze for being soft on Russia, seems to have found a ground for consolidation.

Mr. Shevardnadze's policy was to encourage more active involvement of international organizations, especially the UN, in the efforts to resolve the conflict, while repeatedly reminding the Parliament and the public that Russia could not be excluded from the process. According to some assessments appeals to international organizations were mainly aimed at exerting political pressure on Russia rather than seeking a genuine alternative to the latter's participation. The highest priority was given to ongoing negotiations with Russia on the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and respective package of agreements.

These priorities were clearly displayed in the Parliament, which, due to the critical situation in the country, resumed its sessions after Christmas holidays earlier than scheduled -- on January 12. As earlier, frequent discussions on Abkhazia did not lead to any tangible results, except for expanding a Parliamentary ad hoc commission on Abkhazia, originally composed of the liberal-minded politicians, mainly at the expense of more radical MPs, like Boris Kakubava (January 27).

The issue of the Russian-Georgian negotiations however, became most critical. Three main groups were shaped: a radical opposition, composed of not numerous, though active representatives of the National Independence Party, Merab Kostava Society and some others rejecting the idea of signing any treaty with Russia until its troops are withdrawn from Georgia. Mr. Shevardnadze and his supporters, who outnumbered the others, though did not always maintain the majority in the Parliament, for the most part expressed satisfaction with the way the negotiations were being conducted and defended the provisional agreements reached by that time. The third group (the Republicans, Charter-91, Popular Front, Iliia Tchavtchavadze Society and some others) accepted the idea of signing the Treaty to be important for Georgia, but at the same time raised specific objections or preconditions. Charter-91 demanded to rename the document as the Treaty of the Principles of Interstate Relations with Russia, while the Popular Front, the Republican Party and others insisted on including in it a detailed schedule of the

withdrawal of Russian troops or objected to mentioning the protection of the minorities rights regarding it as a potential pretext for the Russian military intervention in the future.

Heated debates during February 2 and 4 sessions, when Mr. Shevardnadze opposed the demand on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Abkhazia to be put forward as an indispensable precondition for signing the Treaty, prompted the Head of State to request the confirmation of his mandate to conduct negotiations with Russia. He won consent, though it led to the consolidation of the opposition parties against him, which he had always tried to avoid.

On February 16, presumably in an attempt to appease the radicals, he proposed to create a Parliamentary Commission for the revision of the 1921 Constitution, which had been adopted in independent Georgia, in order to prepare it for a referendum scheduled for 1994 -- partially meeting the demands of the National Independence Party and some other opposition groups. The Commission was headed by the Chairman of the Parliament himself. This move, welcomed by the opposition, did actually reduce mounting political tensions (see the Opposition section). It manifested the growing influence of the opposition and at the same time won Mr. Shevardnadze a delay of 1--1.5 year to retain his present position of the Head of both the legislative and executive powers.

A new turn in the situation -- the alleged Russian warplanes assault on Sukhumi on February 20 and the statement of the Russian Defense Minister Grachev on Abkhazia and Ajaria being the zones of strategic interests for Russia -- brought about certain closeness in the judgement of the opposing parties. On February 23 Mr. Shevardnadze told the Parliament he might come to share the views of the opposition concerning the presence of Russian troops in Georgia. At the same session he criticized the Communique, released on the visit of Russian officials S.Shakhrai and R.Abdulatipov and signed on the Georgian side by R.Gotsiridze, V.Rcheulishvili and A.Kavsadze, as containing statements unacceptable for the Georgian side (it said 'peoples', instead of 'the people' of Georgia, contained reference to realities that had developed after the beginning of the conflict, etc). The disavowal of the communique was put to the vote twice: first the needed majority was not obtained, but when voting by name the MPs became more radical and the resolution was adopted. On February 24 the Parliament adopted a Declaration demanding the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Abkhazia, while the next day a Resolution (proposed by Charter-91) was passed commissioning the Head of State to settle the problem with Mr. Eltsin. However, all the sharp-cut statements of Mr. Shevardnadze had for the most part been meant for the Parliament itself and he avoided any steps that could hinder further negotiations with Russia.

In its legislative activities, the Parliament had not been very productive. On January 21 a Bill of Changes in the Criminal, Civil and Procedure Codes was passed mainly concerning the status of the Military Procurator's Office, which is now completely independent of the defense authorities. On February 9, an article of the bill Of the Status of the Parliament Member which had been postponed earlier, was adopted in the wording, proposed by the opposition (namely the Republican Party), which ruled that MPs, elected by the majority vote, could not hold simultaneously hold executive offices in their regions (as they had demanded). A bill Of the Conclusion, Ratification, Implementation and Denunciation of International Treaties of the Republic of Georgia was passed on February 11 without much debate.

The Parliament began discussing the Law on Arms. One of the contesting drafts allowed the right to keep arms prohibiting any private ownership of automatic rifles, while another one insisted on the right to bear arms and demanded that 'active members of the national liberation movement' be given the right to keep all their arms, including automatic rifles. Downright prohibition of all kinds of arms under the current situation was considered by the majority to be

an unrealistic approach. During the vote on February 16 both drafts failed to get enough votes (though the first one had better chances).

Debates regarding the Law on Citizenship began on February 25. Three drafts were presented (prepared by the Judiciary Commission, The Union of Georgian Traditionalists and the Popular Front). Since there were no principal differences among them, the Parliament demanded a joint draft to be prepared and presented to it within two weeks.

The executive power. With the formation of the central government structures mainly completed in December, the Head of State proceeded to consolidate his however formal power by appointing heads of local administrations (mayors in the cities and gamgebeli in smaller towns). Kote Gabashvili, a linguist, (elected to the Parliament from the Unity coalition), who had recently been appointed a Minister of Education in the new Cabinet, became the mayor of Tbilisi, while Temur Shashiashvili, former head of the Kutaisi communist organization (the second largest city in Georgia), took the office of the mayor of the same city. On several occasions (in Kutaisi, Poti, Lagodekhi, etc) MPs, elected from a given district, were appointed mayors and gamgebeli in the same region, evidently in an attempt to bring the trend to centralization in line with the local government. Temur Pipia, a philosopher, earlier a supporter of the radical anti-communist opposition, was appointed the Head of the Regional Management Service, designed to supervise the activities of local administrations. Some parliamentarians assessed these moves as an excessive centralization of power in Mr. Shevardnadze's hands (The law on the local self-government is yet to be adopted by the Parliament. The respective commission is headed by Irakli Shengelaia, a leader of the Christian-Democratic Party and a strong supporter of the federalist principles).

The National Security and Defense Council tried to play a more active role in organizing the military and the law-enforcement systems. On January 18 it formed special Office for the Counteraction of Organized Crime and Corruption at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, providing it with Rapid Reaction Units and endowing it quite vast authority. On January 23 the NSDC considered the failure of the recent call-up to the Georgian army and demanded stronger efforts from the Defense Ministry.

The role of the Defense Minister Tengiz Kitovani remained controversial. On January 10 the leader of the National Democratic Party Gia Tchanturia, strongly supportive of Mr. Shevardnadze, openly accused Mr. Kitovani of preparing a military coup and of having clandestine contacts with pro-Gamsakhurdia armed groups in West Georgia, which Kitovani firmly denied. During the first session of the Parliament on January 12 Irina Sarishvili, of the same party, demanded his resignation. However, Mr. Shevardnadze, who had earlier criticized Kitovani for his anti-government statements in a pro-Gamsakhurdia weekly Iberia-Spectri and for having planned a meeting with the Russian Defense Minister Grachev without consulting the Head of State, came to his rescue saying that for the time being he had no alternative to the office in question. In his turn, in an interview to the semi-official daily Sakartvelos Respublika Mr. Kitovani partly denied his earlier assessment of the 1991-92 December-January events as the military coup, and declared that democracy was established in Georgia and Shevardnadze was to be supported. Later, on several occasions he stressed his loyalty to the Head of State.

Reportedly disagreement continued between Mr. Kitovani and his deputy Anatoli Kamkamidze, former general of the Soviet Army, whose position in the ministry was becoming stronger. A group of young officers headed by a 26-years old Gen. Gia Karkarashvili, who is very popular with the military, was dissatisfied with both. G.Karkarashvili, who had led the brigade of the Rapid Reaction Corps (formerly the National Guard) in Abkhazia resigned

because of his disagreements with Kamkamidze. In an interview to an independent weekly 7 Dghe he openly criticized Kamkamidze and the very idea of bringing this "Russian general" to Georgia and entrusting him with the command over the entire Georgian army.

Contradictory statements were made about the process of disbanding of the paramilitary unit Mkhedrioni. Its leader Jaba Ioseliani, not holding any office besides being a deputy chairman of the NSDC, retained his personal staff, bodyguards and vast offices in the Parliament building. Having declared that Mkhedrioni was disbanded, he contradicted himself later on by stating that it was fighting in Ochamchire; his assistant Gocha Arveladze further announced on television that the status and conditions of Mkhedrioni had not changed.

Incidents of armed assaults on Russian military units continued to take place, reportedly, with the participation of the members of official military formations.

The Cabinet of Ministers was mostly preoccupied with current economic problems (s. the Economy section). The activity of the Cabinet revealed the lack of coordination and the absence of coherent political or economic doctrine. The opposition between two vice-premiers -- Roman Gotsiridze and Avtandil Margiani -- became evident, the former being supportive of monetarist reforms and recommendations of the IMF and the latter (formerly the first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party) -- of the state- controlled economy. Shevardnadze or Sigua did not display any preferences.

Two new appointments were made: a philologist, Tamaz Kvatchantiradze (who took part in the race for Presidency in 1991) took over the office of the Minister of Education, while Zurab Gegethkori filled the remaining vacancy of the Chairman of the State Committee of the Land Resources and Land Cadastre.

Tensions in the relationships with the leadership of the Ajar Autonomous Republic continued to develop. The Chairman of the Ajar Supreme Council (which had not convened since the December-January events) Aslan Abashidze continued to ignore the sessions of the Georgian Parliament of which he was a member, while paying several visits to Moscow and making ostentatious steps and statements, contradictory to the policy of Tbilisi. He warmly welcomed P.Grachev's visit to Batumi as a 'normal and natural event', though it had not been authorized by the Georgian government and caused a wave of protests there,. On February 12 he spoke on the Russian television about 'excessive ambitions' of the Georgian leaders. Within the same period the Russian media spread an information about a 'threat of an invasion of Georgian troops in Ajaria', which was later confirmed by Mr. Abashidze himself (though this 'threat' never materialized).

The situation in the former South Ossetian autonomous region continued to be out of control of the Georgian government. No negotiations or discussions were conducted between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali about the future status of the region. In Tskhinvali, a political struggle went on between the legislative and executive authorities of the self-proclaimed South-Ossetian Republic. According to the Sochi treaty, the Russian peace- keeping forces were to leave the region on January 27, but their mandate was extended. On January 28 a delegation headed by Omar Eloshvili, the State Minister in the region, and Valeri Vashakidze, Head of the State Committee for Refugees and Settlement, was to visit Tskhinvali together with the representatives of the UN and CSCE, but local radicals did not allow the Georgian delegation to enter Tskhinvali, while the UN and CSCE representatives later expressed serious concerns about the situation there.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

On January 25 the third round of negotiations with Russia on the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation began in Tbilisi. They were adjourned for two days after an unidentified armed group assaulted upon a Russian military unit in Tbilisi on the eve of the talks, resulting in the death of two Russians. The sides exchanged notes, the Georgian government condemning the incident. According to the 7 Dghe weekly, it could most probably have been undertaken by some Georgian military group interested in the derangement of the talks. Anyway, the negotiations proved difficult but successful. According to the agreement reached by the sides, the Russian military units stationed in Georgia are to maintain double subordination to both governments, including the units currently deployed in Abkhazia under a direct command of Moscow. The date of the complete withdrawal of the troops was agreed to be December 31 of 1995. The general text of the treaty is for the most part ready, but other documents in the package (the Georgian side insisted on signing the package and not just a Treaty) require some more consideration during the Fourth Round which is scheduled for March 9.

Besides the above negotiations, other contacts were also observed between two countries. On January 12, Minister of Defense Kitovani had a meeting with his Russian colleague Grachev. Temur Khachishvili, Minister of Internal Affairs, met the Russian vice-President Rutskoi on January 13 to discuss the ways of cooperation at the level of Ministries of Internal Affairs. On February , Russia's Head of the Nationalities Affairs S.Shakhrai and Vice-Speaker of the Parliament R.Abdulatipov visited Tbilisi to discuss the conflict in Abkhazia. On February 27-28, P.Grachev paid an inspection visit to the Russian troops in Gudauta and Batumi without consulting Tbilisi; Georgian authorities found the act offensive. According to the Russian Ambassador Zemski's explanation Mr. Grachev failed to contact Mr. Shevardnadze in time due to the latter's tight schedule.

Treaties with two other neighboring countries -- Iran and Azerbaijan -- were signed with far less problems during Mr. Shevardnadze's visits to these states on January 19-20 and February 3 respectively. In Iran Mr. Shevardnadze met with President Rafsanjani, Foreign Minister Velaieti, Ayatollah Hamenei and representatives of the ethnic Georgian community. 17 agreements were signed, among them the Declaration on the Principles of Friendly Cooperation. A general agreement was reached on the deliveries of the Iranian gas to Georgia. Mr. Shevardnadze viewed the visit as the beginning of Georgia's new mission -- that of a mediator between the East and the West, the North and the South, regaining its proper place in the Black Sea -- Persian Gulf region.

On February 3 Shevardnadze visited Baku to meet President Elchibei and to sign a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Security. A number of economic agreements were also signed, namely the one, concerning the deliveries of oil to Georgia (which has already led to the drop in petrol prices). During this visit Mr. Shevardnadze also had a confidential meeting with the Chechen President Dudaev. Reportedly Mr. Shevardnadze did not accept Mr. Dudaev's proposition to create a joint anti-Russian front. However, later on the Georgian leader assessed the meeting as 'very useful' and essential for invigorating the 'Caucasian factor'.

On January 26 an agreement on opening a Permanent Representation of the UN in Georgia was signed. Theodore Starchevich of Yugoslavia is currently holding the office.

Contacts with former Soviet Republics -- Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and others, continued -- chiefly on economic issues.

CONFLICT IN ABKHAZIA

According to the ministry of health of Abkhazia (of the Sukhumi government), by the end of February the number of registered casualties on both sides amounted to 721 people (both military and civilians) with 2965 wounded. Estimates of observers go much higher. The number of registered refugees from conflict zones (including the Tskhinvali region) totalled 140,000. The Ibervizia TV program, with reference to well-informed sources, reported that war expenses for the Georgian side had already amounted to 50 billion rubles.

The ongoing war was mainly of a positional nature, with waves of more or less military activity. Hostilities continued on two fronts -- across the Gumista river near Sukhumi and around the town of Tkvarcheli, besieged by the Georgian troops. The sides attained no serious gains, other than occupying particular villages, which went over from one side to the other several times. On January 5 the Abkhazs made a serious attempt to seize Sukhumi, but failed, suffering heavy losses. Contrary to some expectations, the Georgians did not try to attack Tkvarcheli. The Abkhazs continued guerilla warfare and subversive activities in the regions of Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli, creating grave problems for the deliveries of food, electricity and military equipment to Sukhumi.

Both sides extensively used tanks, artillery and missiles. Troops were shipped by barges, equipped with machine guns. The Abkhazs employed delta-planes, the Georgians -- helicopters. Civilians on both sides were subjected to further suffering by frequent shelling: according to the Georgian statistics, 38 civilians were killed and 197 were wounded in Sukhumi during February (casualties included ethnic Georgians, Russians, Abkhazs, Armenians etc.).

As the Press-Center of the Headquarters of the Georgian Armed Forces deployed in Abkhazia reported, on January 21 Abkhaz guerrillas took hostage seven or eight hundred civilians in the Georgian village of Kutoli, setting forth an ultimatum: 10 people would be killed at every attack from the Georgian side.

On January 10 the Abkhazs freed 8 Georgian POWs in exchange for 2 POWs and 23 corpses of those killed during the January 5 attacks. Another exchange took place on February 5 applying the principle all for all. Both sides declared (the Abkhazs on January 10, the Georgians on February 5) that corpses bore traces of torture.

The role of the Russian troops stationed in Abkhazia continued to be controversial. On February 20 Russian warplanes (SU-25 type) shelled residential areas of Sukhumi. According to an initial statement of the Russian military they had retaliated for the Georgians shelling the Russian military laboratory in Eshera, asserting that only military objects had been shelled in Sukhumi (the Georgian side denied having undertaken any shelling of Russian troops). Later the Russians put forward a new version: those warplanes did not belong to the Russian army but had come from the Northern Caucasus. In response Mr. Shevardnadze declared that since the Russian military controlled the airspace in Gudauta, they bore the responsibility for the assault in any case. The incident led to a new serious crisis in the Georgian- Russian relationships.

On February 23, a Georgian seiner Gagra was captured near Sochi in the territorial waters of Russia and taken to the town of Gagra, controlled by the Gudauta government. The crew and ethnic Georgians who were on the seiner were beaten up and taken hostage. On February 28, the Procurator General of Sochi (Russia) together with his colleague from Gagra got on the Georgian fishing-boats Argo and Pitsunda and demanded them to be handed over to the representatives of the Gudauta government of Abkhazia. After the crew refused to obey both

fishing-boats were detained. On March 1 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia sent a protest to the Russian Ambassador in Tbilisi concerning those facts.

In the end of January and the beginning of February several humanitarian aid flights to the town of Tkvarcheli were carried out by the Russian planes under the surveillance of the UN with the purpose of delivering food and evacuating the refugees. The action had been postponed several times: first, when the Abkhazs in Tkvarcheli refused to accept any aid until the Abkhaz official Zurab Labakhua, who had been captured by the Georgian side as a POW but was denying this status himself, was released; later the Georgian side demanded firm guarantees that among the refugees, a proportionate number of ethnic Georgians would be evacuated.

In the end of January the Abkhaz (Gudauta) government signed a Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance, with the self-proclaimed Dniester Republic, a break-away region of Moldova. Among the issues the Treaty covered bilateral military cooperation.

Eduard Shevardnadze met New Year on the frontline in Abkhazia. During his meeting with the Committee of Salvation of Abkhazia (an organization mainly composed of ethnic Abkhazs loyal to the Georgian government) he said: "I was against entering Sukhumi, as it might have caused its plunder; I wanted our military units to go round Sukhumi and move to Gagra [to take control over the Russian border]... I regret that the documents, which had been agreed upon orally, were not submitted to the Abkhazs". "When I spoke to Eltsin on the next day [after the beginning of hostilities] he told me: the generals can get out of control and you, as a smart man, should know it".

On January 5 the Abkhaz spokesman Zurab Achba criticized the Russian government for supplying Georgia and not Abkhazia (the Gudauta government implied) with credits and armament. That made the Abkhazs get their arms illegally. 'The Georgian policy', he stated, 'forces us to demand independence and seek international recognition'.

The conflict in Abkhazia was considered by the UN Security Council on January 29. Alexandre Kavsadze, the Chairman of the State Committee on Human Rights and Interethnic Relations, represented the Georgian side. The September 3 agreement between Georgia and Russia was recognized to be the basis for the settlement, which fully coincides with the official Georgian approach. Two UN missions were to be sent to Georgia: one to study the roots of the conflict and the other to study the possibility of deploying peacekeeping forces in the region.

In the beginning of February Soliko Khabeishvili, the President of the Foundation for Democracy and Revival, also known as 'The Shevardnadze Foundation', started his not much publicized non-governmental peaceful mission meeting with major political forces involved in the conflict.

The Nezavisimaja Gazeta reported on February 9 that the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was preparing a group of 400 fighters to be sent to Abkhazia, including Northern Caucasians, Cossacks, as well as representatives of Circassian Diaspora in Turkey, Syria and Jordan.

OPPOSITION, POLITICAL PARTIES

The period was marked by a growing consolidation of the opposition and the creation of its new center outside the Parliament, raising fears of a serious political crisis. On January 20 and 23 a meeting of 'the parties of the national liberation movement' was held in the headquarters of

the National Independence Party. The meeting gave birth to the National Liberation Movement Satatbiro (Council), headed by Irakli Tsereteli. The primary Declaration was signed by 21 organizations among whom the National Independence Party, Merab Kostava Society, the Union of Georgian Traditionalists and the Monarchist (Conservative) Party (which participated in Parliament elections with the pro-Shevardnadze Peace coalition) are represented in the current Parliament by more than two MPs. Some of the moderate pro-Gamsakhurdia groups also joined the Satatbiro and the meeting received extensive enthusiastic comments in the pro-Gamsakhurdia Iberia-Spektri weekly.

The climax of the crisis was expected on February 21, designed by I.Tsereteli for the Second Conference of the National Liberation Movement (the first one took place in March 1990 and ended up in the derangement of planned Parliamentary elections) and inviting to it both Mr. Shevardnadze and Mr. Gamsakhurdia. The intention raised serious and apparently undue anxiety on the part of the government. Reportedly pro-Gamsakhurdia forces were also planning certain actions for the same day. However, the conference did not justify either the fears of the government or the hopes of its adversaries. It abstained from excessive radicalism, contented with the criticism of Mr. Shevardnadze's 'pro-Russian' position, but made no calls for any street rallies and cautioned against any moves towards the destabilization of the situation. The above-mentioned step, taken by Mr. Shevardnadze with regards to the restoration of the 1921 Constitution, 'robbing' the opposition of its main point at issue, might have accounted for that outcome. In the course of the Conference, a small bomb was blasted under the stage causing no harm.

More moderate parties, usually regarded as being in opposition merely for not supporting Mr. Shevardnadze unconditionally (The Republicans, the Popular Front, Charter-91, etc) did not join the new union. One of the leaders of the Republicans David Berdzenishvili said that there was no national- liberation movement outside the Parliament, thus creation of the Satatbiro was not only an erroneous, but also a dangerous step.

The National Democratic Party announced the beginning of an anti-abortion campaign, which seems to be the result of its extensive contacts with the Western Christian-Democratic Parties (abortion has never been debated in the Georgian politics and the society does not display any serious interest in the problem). While their traditional opponents, the Republican Party, inquired of the financial source of their frequent trips to Brussels; the money in question turned out to have come from the controversial Ajar leader Aslan Abashidze. The Party's leader Giorgi Tchanturia commented on it saying that 'the party is short of hard currency and we shall gladly receive it even if comes from Gamsakhurdia.'

The irreconcilable supporters of the former President held some rallies in Zugdidi and Batumi. In Zugdidi and some other regions of the province of Megrelia, the government is still unable to take the situation under control. The government's concern was further aggravated after the capture of eight tanks, on their way from Abkhazia to Tbilisi for reparation, by the pro-Gamsakhurdia armed groups led by Loti Kobalia, on February 7 near the town of Zugdidi. On January 27, about 150 people took part in the pro-Gamsakhurdia rally held in Batumi with slogans 'We support the only legal government in Georgia -- that of Ajaria', 'Freedom to political prisoners', 'Long live Zviad Gamsakhurdia -- the legitimate President of Georgia'. After the rally students went on hunger-strike near the Tbilisi cinema but the next day their action was interrupted by the police without any complications. In Tbilisi, the support for the ex-President is chiefly manifested by a notable popularity of pro-Gamsakhurdia newspapers.

As for Gamsakhurdia, still residing in Grozni, he did not display much activity. On January 27 his press-service released a statement that the escape of more than 150 prisoners from

Ksani prison had been inspired by the government with the purpose of organizing terrorist gangs against him.

THE SOCIETY, HUMAN RIGHTS

On February 1, Mr. Shevardnadze and Mr. Sigua met with the representatives of students. The students made a number of critical remarks on the activity of the government, especially on its policy with regard to Russia; Mr. Shevardnadze, however, managed to appease them.

On January 27 the Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights and Ethnic Minorities Affairs expressed concern about frequent cases of expulsion of citizens from their homes and forcible occupation of their apartments. In some cases representatives of ethnic minorities fell victim to it, which might give the problem a political dimension.

The Commission formed a Council of Ethnic Minorities, which, on January 23 and 27, met the representatives of Khsna ('Salvation'), an organization of deported muslim population of the Southern Georgia.* On the previous day they were received by Mr. Shevardnadze. The Commission promised to help 31 Meskhetian muslims study in Georgian universities. These meetings might probably be assessed as the turning point in handling the Meskhetian problem.

On January 13, the All-Georgian Association of Human Rights, close to the pro-Gamsakhurdia circles, adopted a declaration, drawing the attention of the authorities to human rights violations in Georgia: political persecution based on charges of terrorism, torture of prisoners. Alexandre Kavsadze, the Head of the State Committee for Human Rights and Interethnic Relations, said at the press-conference on January 16, that there were no political prisoners in Georgia and those who asserted it, had been arrested on charges of terrorism.

On January 28, the Interethnic Congress of the People of Georgia was founded with intention of developing the consciousness of common citizenship among various ethnic communities of Georgia.

On January 11, the employees of the Tbilisi subway threatened to go on strike if their security against the assaults of the representatives of National Guard and other military formations was not ensured. The city police authorities and the National Democratic Party leaders managed to pacify them and persuaded to continue their work.

The Stalin museum in his hometown Gori will be reopened after an interval of two years. This time visitors will have to pay an admission fee.

PUBLIC OPINION

In the polls, carried on by the Institute of Demography and Social Studies and the public organization Slavianski Dom among the ethnic Russian population of Tbilisi, 85% agreed that the interference of Russia into the internal affairs of Georgia would not be to the advantage of ethnic Russians who live there. 7% thought that the rights of ethnic Russians were violated, while 68% was of the opinion that they are not. 58% intended to stay in Georgia, while according to 31% the majority of ethnic Russians would leave. 4% considered that Russians would stay only in case the Russian Federation undertook to take care of them.

The Eurobarometer agency of the CSCE conducted the polls concerning various attitudes to market economy in the states of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The population

of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova displayed little support to market reforms, while that of Georgia, Estonia and Lithuania exhibited a more positive stance.

27% appeared to be satisfied with the Parliament, 26% -- partly satisfied and 40% -- dissatisfied with it in the telephone polls conducted in Tbilisi by the Sociological Center of Psychological Service. However, 53.3% supported live TV broadcasts of its sessions, 23.3% thought a 3 hour digest would do and 16.3% -- supported the idea of brief reports on the sessions.

According to telephone polls conducted by the Resonance newspaper in Tbilisi, 30.2% (mostly young males) thought that the Abkhaz crisis could be better solved through the intensification of military actions, 47.7% preferred peace negotiations, while 18.8% hoped for the involvement of the UN troops. 48.0% thought it reasonable to continue negotiations with Russia on the settlement of the Abkhaz crisis, while 41.3% deemed them ineffective. 55.7% supported cooperation with Russia in the economy only and 23.5% admitted the possibility of military cooperation as well, while 10% allowed a coordinated foreign policy. 6.7% opposed any relations with Russia, while 2% liked an idea of creating a confederation with it. 57.7% wanted the democrats, headed by Eltsin, to lead Russia, 9.1% preferred the centrists (like Gorbachev or Volski), and 30.2% failed to answer. 42.9% supported the legalization of bearing arms with 40.8% opponents.

CRIME

The index of crime registered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in January and February, totaled 1073 and 1571 respectively, with 44 and 61 homicides, 259 and 328 cases of larceny of citizens and 179 and 292 -- of the state property, 156 and 209 robbery of citizens, 31 and 64 -- of state property, 111 and 178 cars were stolen. 57 and 98 people were arrested for illegal keeping, bearing and manufacturing of, or trading with arms, 54 and 76 -- for manufacturing, keeping, purchasing and use of drugs.

It is hard to say to what extent these figures correspond to reality. Namely, the sharp increase in crime statistics in February relative to January might be indicative of the invigoration of the police activity, also displayed in recording crimes that earlier had been neglected, rather than of the actual growth of crimes. The official crime statistics of January and February 1992, when the country was in the state of almost total anarchy after ousting its President, had but slightly differed from that of the current year (e.g., only 44 and 51 homicides had been registered during that period, 240 and 381 cases of larceny of citizens, etc).

In February, the police displayed some signs of becoming tougher on crime. However, the first case on February 19, when after the arrival of the police the robbers took a family hostage, ended up in killing one hostage together with three criminals. Later the same month in a similar situation, the lives of the hostages were saved but the criminals got killed.

The criminal situation in Georgia was also aggravated by an indirect involvement in the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict. The gas-main to Armenia was blown up several times near the Armenian border in the town of Marneuli, populated predominantly by ethnic Azeris.

On January 13, 153 prisoners escaped from Ksani colony through the tunnel they had dug. 5 of them were soon arrested and 2 returned voluntarily.

International drug trade appeared to find its transit route in Georgia. In the beginning of January, a trailer, loaded with 1.5 tons of heroin and travelling from Afghanistan through Central Asia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, was detained in Turkey.

ECONOMY

The consideration of the draft Budget for the first quarter of the year led to the heated debates in the Parliament (January 26-27). The draft, presented by the Ministry of Finances, was largely criticized (by the vice-premier R.Gotsiridze among others), as being developed in an old style and failing to encourage market reforms, though it was approved in the end with several amendments and on condition that the Budget for the second quarter would be based on different principles.

Two main amendments included the equalization of taxes for state and private enterprises. At present the profit tax amounts to 35% (the draft provided for 45% for private enterprises). On the other hand, many of the taxation privileges for various enterprises and organizations, as well as State subsidies, were canceled. Despite the criticism, the Parliament agreed to the Government's suggestion to cover the budget deficit through a 1 per cent long-term loan from the National Bank.

The planned deficit is enormous: with the expenditure totalling 43.6 billion rubles against 11 billions of revenues. The expenses comprise the following: financing of the economy -- 28%, social and cultural programs -- 18%, subsidies for state prices -- 25%, defense -- 6%, law enforcement bodies -- 5%. Revenues are made up of: the surplus value tax -- 33%, excise tax -- 18%, profit tax -- 34%, income tax -- 4.5%.

This kind of budget further aggravated the problem of obtaining banknotes from Russia to pay salaries. Since Russia ceased providing cash last autumn many employees have not been paid for several months. On January 3, a Georgian delegation headed by the vice-premier R.Gotsiridze traveled to Moscow to settle the problem. An agreement was reached on a 'technical credit' for the first quarter of 1993 only. However, since the agreement was to be initialized by the Heads of States and was thus linked to the current Russian-Georgian negotiations, its implementation was postponed for an indefinite period of time.

This made the introduction the new currency a major point at issue. The predominant policy of the government had been to remain in the ruble zone until Georgia was excluded from it, which now seemed to be already happening. The country, however, was not quite prepared to the event, lacking a coherent program of introducing its own currency, and even failing to make a final choice of the company to print the bills of Lari (the name of the future Georgian currency). The recommendations of the IMF (whose mission has currently been working in Tbilisi since January 20) also changed in favor of creating the Georgian currency. In the end of February, the government decided first to introduce a provisional currency (coupons), like some other post-Soviet states (Latvia, Ukraine and others).

On January 1 a decree of the Cabinet of Ministers was issued prohibiting private shops to sell food and tobacco products manufactured in Georgia. A few days later vice-premier R.Gotsiridze publicly denounced it as an anti-market step, which contradicted the legislation on entrepreneurial freedom. Another vice-Premier A.Margiani later defended the decree in the Parliament and said Mr. Gotsiridze had also supported it. The decree, largely criticized in the media and the Parliament as being illegal, was never annulled, leaving the pro-market reformers with the sole consolation that the government was unable to enforce it.

No progress was made towards privatization whatsoever. On January 16 the Cabinet of Ministers referred to some mistakes in the list of premises subject to privatization which had been announced last fall, as being the cause of the delay. In the end of January the Cabinet of Ministers adopted a decree on granting the townspeople land plots in an attempt to alleviate the food problem.

Economic agreements signed in Tehran about the deliveries of 2 billion cubic meters of Iranian gas was assessed by some experts to be the first serious attempt to overcome Georgia's exclusive energetic dependency upon Russia.

The standard of living continued to deteriorate. The subsistence minimum for an average family increased during two months by almost 70% and by the end of January amounted to 22.260 rubles, while the official rate of minimal wages had been frozen since last November at 1,700 rubles. According to the official statistics, by the end of 1992 89% of all the families found themselves below the poverty line (as compared with 75% of families in the beginning of the year). The gap between the rich and the poor also increased: In the beginning of the year the incomes of the richest 20% were 4.9 times higher than that of the poorest 20%; by the end of the year, this ratio increased to 6.5.

Although the general trend towards the decrease of the standard of living is evident, it is hard to say how accurately these statistics depict the actual picture. The consequences of the delay in the payment of salaries for several months have not proved as disastrous as could have been expected, which indicates that a considerable part of the population (including state employees), is no longer dependent solely on the state as regard their incomes.

APPENDIX

THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONS AND THEIR CHAIRMEN

Mandate, Parliamentary Ethics and Privileges	T.Buachidze
Foreign Relations	T.Gamkrelidze
National Security	N.Natadze
Judicial	Sh.Natelashvili
Economic Problems	V.Advadze
Finance and Budget	T.Basilia
Environment Protection and Natural Resources	Z.Nogaideli
Reforms of the Central and Local Government Bodies	I.Shengelaia
Education and Science	R.Kuprava
Health	
Agrarian	R.Liparteliani
Problems of Industry, Construction, Transport, Communications, Energy and Municipal Economy	
Human Rights Protection and Problems of Ethnic Minorities	G.Lordkipanidze
Law and Order	V.Adamia
Social Problems	Z.Sikharulidze
Sport and Tourism	
Culture	E.Shengelaia

AD HOC COMMISSIONS:

On the Problems of Abkhazia	N.Tchavtchavdzeli
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Please contact us if interested in subscription. E-mail is a preferred form of distributing the Bulletin.

* In 1944 the muslim population of Meskheti, a Southern province of Georgia, officially registered as ethnic Turks, was forcefully deported. A part of them, organized in Vatan ('Homeland') society, consider themselves ethnic Turks, while another part united in Khsna identify themselves as ethnic Georgians. Both groups have been struggling in vain to resettle in their homeland. Public opinion in Georgia has been strongly against their return, and in Gamsakhurdia's time many of those who had earlier managed to return were expelled.