

Beat: Vips

Eduard Shevardnadze, Gorbachev's FM and ex-Georgian president, dead at 86

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USPA News - Eduard Shevardnadze, who served as foreign minister in the government of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and played a crucial role in ending the Cold War before becoming president of an independent Georgia, died Monday at the age of 86. Shevardnadze, who was one of the world's oldest surviving former leaders, guided Georgia through times of uncertainty and unrest in the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia entered a civil war after a coup d'état against the new country's first democratically-elected president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. As a primary decision-maker concerning Soviet foreign policy in the Gorbachev Era, Shevardnadze was an important figure on the international stage.

He died on Monday after a long illness, according to his personal assistant, Marina Davitashvili, who declined to elaborate on his illness. Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili praised Shevardnadze's contributions towards ending the Cold War and "the establishment of a new world order," which he termed "especially important regarding the formation of geopolitical role of Georgia in the modern world." Garibashvili said the government would cover all expenses for Shevardnadze's funeral. President Giorgi Margvelashvili, meanwhile, expressed "deep sorrow" over Shevardnadze's death, describing the former leader's life as complex and diverse. "He brought a new opportunity for the peaceful development of the world," Margvelashvili said in a statement released by the presidency. Other leaders, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, also offered their condolences over Shevardnadze's death. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he remembered Shevardnadze's contributions on the international stage, including his advocacy for nuclear disarmament at the United Nations. Shevardnadze's political career began in the late 1940s when he joined his local Komsomol organization, the Georgian Communist Party's youth division, of which he became Second Secretary and then First Secretary. His ascension through the Georgian Soviet hierarchy continued for years until he was demoted after insulting a senior official in 1961, according to a BBC profile. After spending several years in obscurity, Shevardnadze became First Secretary of a Tbilisi city district and his anti-corruption work quickly gained the attention of Soviet leaders, especially when he charged Tbilisi's top official with corruption. He was later appointed as First Deputy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic and went on to become the head of the internal affairs ministry, where he charged First Secretary Vasil Mzhavanadze with corruption, according to the GHN News Agency. After becoming First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party in 1972, Shevardnadze spearheaded economic reforms which helped the Soviet Union to regain its footing in the wake of grave nationwide economic decline. After resigning from his office as First Secretary, he received a call from Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in June 1985, asking if he would assume the role of the Soviet Union's foreign minister. Together, the two men would go on to transform Soviet foreign policy and, with the exception of a brief period between 1990 and 1991, only Gorbachev would exceed Shevardnadze's impact on the country's foreign affairs. As a team the men extracted troops from Afghanistan, negotiated treaties on medium-range and strategic nuclear arms, permitted the reunification of Germany, removed military forces from Europe and the China border, and welcomed human rights as part of policy discussions, according to the New York Times. Among his many accomplishments, Shevardnadze forged relationships with U.S. Secretaries of State George P. Shultz and James A. Baker III, who became advocates of resolution in administrations that were fiercely anti-Soviet. Simultaneously, Shevardnadze helped convince Soviet hard-liners that the time had come for reconciliation with the United States. In essence, Shevardnadze brought an end to the Cold War and helped democratize the USSR. Following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Shevardnadze returned to his native Georgia and became the newly independent country's head of state. He was elected president in 1995, but his presidency was wracked by charges of unbridled corruption and nepotism. He was forced to resign in 2003 after violating the electoral reform laws he himself had promoted, sparking a series of protests known as the Rose Revolution. He remained in Georgia in relative obscurity until his death.

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