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HEADLINE: Deposed president of Georgia believes his reputation will recover

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BODY:

TBILISI, Georgia _ What an inglorious end for the man who helped change the course of history.

These days, Eduard Shevardnadze, the 75-year-old deposed president of Georgia and last Soviet foreign minister, sits alone in his study and writes. Once a shaper of continents, he's now struggling to reshape his reputation. He's worn out, isolated and despised by his people.

It's been six weeks since crowds stormed the Parliament and forced him to resign in Georgia's popular "Rose Revolution." He watched his protege, 36-year-old lawyer Mikhail Saakashvili, denounce his corrupt administration and ride a wave of indignation to the presidency in the Jan. 4 elections.

In an interview last week, Shevardnadze _ or "Shevvy" as some Americans call him here _ chatted about his legacy: helping Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to bring down the Berlin Wall, dismantle the Soviet Union and bring a peaceful end to the Cold War.

Yet he seemed unable to confront his failings in his home country _ the economic mismanagement, electoral fraud and the corruption that enriched his family while it bankrupted his nation.

Call it stubborn pride. But many here call it lacking a grasp on reality.

"Despite untackled problems, I don't think I'm too unpopular," he told a small group of foreign journalists.

It's said here that the head of a feast must welcome his enemy as an honored guest. And judging from Shevardnadze's living arrangement, that's exactly what the new rulers have done.

In an odd twist, the state has allowed its hated former president to continue living in the presidential palace in Tbilisi. Shevardnadze shares it for now with, of all people, Saakashvili _ the man who deposed him.

"I'll live here as long as they'll let me," he said.

Just how long that will be is unclear. He no longer has the support he used to have. Not even his old friend Gorbachev finds the time to contact him anymore.

Shevardnadze didn't seem like the wily "Silver Fox" who just over a decade ago helped redraw a good part of the world map. He greeted his guests with a limp handshake and weak smile before shuffling to a table for 90 minutes of questions.

His legacy? He gave no mention of the end of the Cold War, the fall of communism or the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Those terms imply defeat for former Soviets who long for their lost empire, and many of them resent him for taking it apart.

Instead, Shevardnadze referred to the "democratization of the Soviet Union," as well as "the unification of Europe" and the two Germanys.

He's proud of pulling Soviet troops out of the bloody morass of Afghanistan _ the equivalent of Vietnam for the USSR _ in 1989. That seems appropriate for a man whose greatest achievements consisted of putting an end to failed experiments.

So was it a failed experiment when Shevardnadze took charge of his Georgian homeland in 1992?

Not to him.

He regrets not being able to prevent the bloody separatist struggle waged by the provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the early 1990s.

But Shevardnadze said he's proud of rebuilding his country's facilities and making Tbilisi a vibrant if physically rundown capital.

He was proud of pulling his country out of isolation and making it "a full member of the international community" with freedom of the press, civil liberties and democratic values.

"You can see it's beautiful now," he said. "Many countries might not have succeeded so well in these last 10 years."

The progress should continue, he said. Though no fan of Saakashvili, he sounded fairly sure his former protege would carry on, calling him "very clever, very strong _ a leader by character."

Shevardnadze even voted for the guy.

But he sounded less confident that Saakashvili, an intense nationalist known for emotional outbursts, has the experience and ability to win over people and strike political deals.

Most difficult of all, he said, will be the new president's fight against the corruption that has crippled the country.

"Even if he fired all the ministers today, that would not defeat corruption," Shevardnadze said. "You have to destroy its base. You have to have laws."

But they needn't start with him.

Shevardnadze, known for stocking Georgian industry with his relatives and allowing them to pocket millions of dollars, still claims innocence.

"Those who surrounded me directly were not corrupt," he said.

Nor does he accept the accusations, voiced by Saakashvili and other officials, that he was preparing to call in tanks to stop the revolution. Officials say lives were spared only because the defense minister defied his orders.

"I made an extraordinary decision to resign to avoid bloodshed," he said.

"As time passes, Shevardnadze will be more popular."

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