Two mysterious deaths in Georgia's "Rose Revolution" regime

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On the night of February 3, 41-year-old Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania was found dead at the home of a friend and fellow party member, 25-year-old Raul Yusupov. Apparently, he had indicated he would stay "only briefly" in the flat, but then failed to make contact for a number of hours. His bodyguards, who were waiting outside, made their way into the dwelling and found the two dead, the friend lying in the kitchen, Zhvania in an armchair in the living room.

The official cause of death was given as poisoning by carbon monoxide, said to have come from a gas heater of Iranian origin. Although 80 such deaths have been recorded in Georgia during the last five years, little credence is given to this explanation. Too many questions remain.

It is questionable why carbon monoxide poisoning was conceded by the authorities as the cause of death without waiting for the conclusion of forensic investigations. Journalists were barred from visiting the scene of the incident, and a number of inconsistencies remain.

Any malfunctioning on the part of the heater still has to be proven. It is said to have been found in perfect condition and had been functioning for months. In addition, relatives of Yusupov deny that he had even rented this dwelling. He lived with his wife and one-and-a-half-year-old son at another location 15 kilometres away. In this connection, it was revealed that various cabinet members have access to dozens of so-called "conspiratorial dwellings."

Moreoever, it is unclear why Zhvania went into the dwelling of "his friend" without his bodyguards. It has been reported that this meeting came about only through the mediation of a third person—i.e., that possibly the "friendship" was not so close.

Also, the role of the bodyguards raises questions. In an unknown location, it is routine for the bodyguards to exclude any potential sources of danger. In addition, they should have maintained contact with Zhvania every 30 minutes and checked on his condition. There are some doubts as to whether the pair really died in this dwelling. None of the neighbours confirm hearing how the bodyguards reportedly tried, initially in vain, to break down the heavily locked house door. The subsequent breaking of a window also happened without anyone taking notice.

One day later, on the evening of February 4, 32-year-old Georgi Chelaschvili was also found dead in his apartment. His alleged suicide is equally mysterious. He is said to have shot himself in the head with a hunting rifle. Prior to the incident, he had not given the slightest indication that he was preparing to take his life.

Chelaschwili was a member of an official commission that is directly subordinate to Zhvania. The day before, he was questioned by police regarding the circumstances of Zhvania's death. It is not known what he said.

Whatever the real causes of deaths of the two politicians, they throw a revealing light on the regime that emerged from the "Rose Revolution."

Mysterious deaths have characterised all such so-called "democratic" regimes, which have been glorified by the Western media and which have come to power via "revolutions" supported by Western governments with large sums of money. In Serbia, one victim was Zoran Djindjic, the prominent head of the "peaceful revolution," who was murdered under circumstances that still remain unclear. In Ukraine, Transportation Minister Georgi Kirpa was shot to death at the high point of the "orange revolution," once again allegedly a suicide. Kirpa was considered a supporter of the outgoing president, Leonid Kuchma, but also a rival of the former prime minister, Viktor Yanukovich. And now Zhvania and Chelaschwili in Georgia!

All of the deaths share a common feature: suspicion of responsibility points towards sections of the national safety apparatus and mafia elements with close contacts to the government. All of the deaths took place against a background of unrestrained moneymaking that has accompanied the privatisation of national property, and that constitute the core factor in the "liberty" so enthusiastically embraced by all of the new governments. Summing up, they occurred in a political climate that—like conditions inside the mafia—encourages murders and mysterious deaths.

The regime that came to power in Georgia following its "Rose Revolution" has failed overwhelmingly to achieve any of the goals it set itself. There has not been the slightest improvement in the social situation of the population, and the abuse of democratic rights is even more pronounced than previously.

The "Rose Revolution" of November 2003 brought about the downfall of the government led by President Edward Shevardnadze. With substantial financial and political support from the US and the European Union, former supporters of Shevardnadze manipulated widespread discontent over the enormous social pauperisation of the country to mobilise a "people's movement" against the aging president. The trigger for the revolution was election fraud in the course of parliamentary elections on November 2, 2003, and indignation over growing corruption and suppression of democratic rights by the Shevardnadze regime.

With the support of this movement, the US sought to bring a government to power in Georgia that was oriented towards the West and that could further American interests in the south Caucasus region. The US sought to secure its geopolitical and energy interests in the region, which is rich in oil and natural gas, and crucial as a lever against traditional Russian influence. At the heart of this project is the recently completed oil pipeline, running from Azerbaijani Baku to Turkish Ceyhan, which spans Georgia and supplies a large proportion of oil from the Caspian Basin to the world market—at the same time avoiding Russia and Iran.

Although the Shevardnadze regime had undertaken a number of measures to accommodate the US—it agreed to the building of the pipeline and the stationing of US soldiers and officers to train the Georgian army and equip it with American systems—it was considered by the US to be increasingly unstable. It proved incapable of taking a firm stance against Russia. In 1999, Russia had unilaterally demanded an extension to its stationing of troops in the three rebel Georgian semi-republics Abkhazian, South Ossetia and Ajaria.

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Zurab Zhvania played a key role in the carefully worked-out long-term plans for the overthrow of the Shevardnadze regime. Alongside the parliamentary president, Nino Burjanadze, and the current president, Mikheil Saakashvili, he was part of the "revolution troika," which placed itself at the head of the movement.

Zhvania was a biologist, who first came to notice at the end of the 1980s by establishing the Georgian Greens as a political party. In 1992, he was voted into parliament and was regarded as one of the most important opponents of Swiad Gamsachurdia, the president at that time. In Shevardnadze's "citizen's union" he rose to the post of chairman of the party and became Shevardnadze's closest supporter, officiating since 1995 as parliamentary president. During this time, he was regarded as Shevardnadze's favoured successor.

However as opposition mounted to the Shevardnadze regime, Zhvania felt that his fortunes could fade and decided to jump ship. The character of the Shevardnadze regime, which had emerged from the "struggle for independence and against the corruption of Gamsachurdia," became ever more evident.

Under Shevardnadze, the country sank to unprecedented levels of poverty. The social system collapsed, pensions and average wages sank to $US7-$20 per month, and electricity and water cut-offs took place daily. Shootings between rival groups of mafiosi were a regular occurrence up until the end of the 1990s. Shevardnadze survived at least three assassination attempts. At the same time, the clan closest to him was able to enrich itself enormously. His daughter Mana controls the film and television industry of the country, while her husband Georgi owns a third of communications enterprise Magti GSM, and Shevardnadze's nephew, Nugsar, controls oil and gas enterprises.

Popular anger over these conditions threatened to erupt uncontrollably. The crisis reached a high point in the summer of 2001. In July, the popular moderator Georgi Sanai, who worked for the independent television station Rustwi-2, had been murdered. In September, the government allowed tax officials to search the offices of the broadcasting station and threatened to close it down because of debts owed to the state. Ten of thousands took to the streets, and in November Shevardnadze was forced to dismiss the government.

Zhvania now realised the time had finally come to leave the sinking ship and no longer leave his political fate in the hands of his collaborators. In 2000, he made the first steps to distance himself from Shevardnadze and publicly accused him of corruption. After the dissolution of government, he resigned from his post as parliamentary speaker. He followed the example of Mikheil Saakashvili, who had already resigned as justice minister in September and had gone into the opposition.

In the following period, the opposition "reform blocs" of Zhvania, Saakashvili and Burjanadze drew closer together as Shevardnadze's popularity sank rapidly—in the summer of 2002 his party received only 1 percent of the vote in local elections.

With help of the US, they prepared an open struggle for power in the parliamentary elections of November 2, 2003. They travelled several times officially and unofficially to the US and have since become closely aligned to different institutions and think tanks in Washington. Contrary to claims at the time, their principal aims were not creating "democratic conditions" and "a wealthy country," but rescuing the ruling establishment and reorienting the country towards absolute subordination to Washington.

The policies of the past years—since Saakashvili took over as president and Zhvania assumed the post of prime minister somewhat later—has confirmed this course. The true face of the new regime is now clearly visible: nepotism, thoroughly dubious business deals, plots, slanders, the continuing dominance of the profiteers who emerged during the Shevardnadze regime and the legalisation of their fortunes.

Saakashvili boasted, for example, that corruption had been eliminated, because the old elite had paid back "generously" to the state. Recently, and with far less ado, the real extent of this repayment was made known: altogether, just 25 million euros flowed back into state coffers. Nobody was called to account for theft or dubious business deals, and all that was in fact done was for the government to effectively legalise the massive profiteering that had taken place in previous years.

Instead, it came to a re-division of the booty to the benefit of the new governing clan. Zhvania played a key role in this process and therefore came under increasing criticism. Under his authority, the mechanism necessary for the re-division came into being—the most ambitious privatisation program in Georgia since the beginning of the 1990s. The proposal was submitted last spring and envisages the sale of more than 200 state possessions. Up for sale are former Soviet enterprises and holiday resorts on the Black Sea and in the mountains, and more.

The second person responsible for the privatisation program was Reform Minister Kakha Bendukidze. He rose to prominence as an oligarch controlling a fortune of several hundred million dollars in the 1990s with the privatisation of Russian mechanical engineering enterprises, and was brought to Georgia by Saakashvili to take over the post of economics minister.

Zhvania became one of the most unpopular members of the new government. On German radio (*Deutschlandfunk),* one of his former comrades in arms described how he went about doing things. Niko Orwelaschvili of the "Georgian Institute for Economic Development"—at the end of the 1980s a joint founder of the Greens—reported on the privatisation of the Black Sea fleet of the Ajarian capital Batumi, one of the two most important privatisation projects of the new government.

Orwelaschvili learned that 16 ships had been sold for a total of $US107 million, which was regarded as a good deal. But then it turned out that the port, which has an annual turnover of $US20 million and is an important source of income for the state, was also a part of the deal. According to Orwelaschvili, this contravenes the country's constitution. The procedure is typical for Zhvania's dubious business practices, which usually took place between the hours of 2 and 3 a.m.

In fact, Zhvania was involved in all the privatisations and made the final decision. In the course of last year alone, the economics minister, who has legal responsibility for such privatisations, was replaced no less than three times. No proper record was published of exactly which property was put up for sale. In innumerable cases, unknown buyers emerged leaving potential foreign investors embittered.

Against this background of criminal wheeling and dealing, it is not surprising that the new government has also been increasingly criticised for offences against human rights. Even the Council of Europe saw itself forced to censure the Georgian government for the "negligent attitude towards democracy and human rights by the president," as the *Frankfurer Allgemeine Zeitung* reported in its edition of February 4.

In addition, the *FAZ* quoted Tina Khidasheli, the chairman of the association of young attorneys, who reported that more cases of torture were recorded last spring than had taken place under Shevardnadze. Those meeting the displeasure of Saakaschvili were frequently subjected to arbitrary treatment and abuse. Khidasheli related the fate of Sulkhan Molashvili, a former director of the audit office and former confidante of Shevardnadze. He currently languishes in prison without access to electricity, sunlight, water or even a chair. An international association of journalists recorded a substantial increase in restrictions of the right to free speech in 2004 compared to a year previously.

It is reported that Zhvania has fallen out with Saakaschvili over the past months. Two close supporters of Zhvania have been sacked in order to reduce his influence in the government. Zhvania is regarded in the government as a "dove." Shortly after assuming office, Saakaschvili threatened to send troops to the three rebellious Republics of Abkhazian, South Ossetia and Ajaria—which Russia had used over the past 10 years to

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put pressure on Georgia—if they refused to integrate into Georgia. Already in May, Saakaschvili was able to depose the Moscow-friendly governor in Ajaria. But he will not be able to assert his will so easily in South Ossetia and Abkhazian.

The events in Georgia clearly reveal that none of the parliamentary groups of the dominant elite represents the interests of the population—despite all their talk of “democracy” and “reforms.” In the coming months and years, the population of Ukraine will inevitably go through similar experiences with the government of Yuchenko-Timoshenko.

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