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Georgia: A Country Between Assaults

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"This is the last act of terrorism in Georgia," the bruised president kept repeating on the TV screen immediately after the 29 August 1995 assassination attempt. A remote-controlled explosion had left the president's unprotected car in flames, and the entire nation in limbo. His survival was so miraculous that evil tongues spread slanderous stories, alleging that he staged the assault. He took action to cope with his major adversary, Jaba loseliani, the leader of the Mkhedrioni paramilitary faction, and the growing power of the criminal syndicates. Within a few months the main homebred troublemakers like loseliani and his deputy security chief, Temur Khachishvili, were in jail. The security chief, Igor Georgadze, a former KGB agent who was later denounced as the main plotter, was hiding out in Moscow. (1)

This strange alliance between the KGB and criminals did not raise eyebrows in Georgia, where over the previous few years the people have learned not to be surprised at anything. As early as 1992-93 Russia had exploited, and exacerbated, Georgia's conflict with the secessionist region Abkhazia in order to force Georgia to join the CIS and accept Russian military bases on its territory. Since then, Russia's peacekeepers have failed to enforce a CIS-mandated expansion of their zone, which in effect inhibits the return to Abkhazia of 250,000 ethnic Georgians expelled by Abkhaz fighters. Russia continues to view the Caucasus as its sphere of influence and resents Georgia's and Azerbaijan's increasingly Western-oriented policies. Repeatedly Russia has used its military and security leverage to undermine the government and the territorial integrity of Georgia.
After the August 1995 incident, the presidential guard service was strengthened, and Georgian state security expressed full confidence in its ability to prevent any future attempts on the president's life. Public life had since been developing without major incidents, although the breakaway region of Abkhazia, the consequent issue of displaced persons and the energy crisis remained persistent problems. Georgia was slowly building an international reputation as a country able to maintain internal stability despite unresolved disputes and social problems, and therefore eligible for a longer-term and larger-scale partnership with the West—a somewhat uneasy prospect for certain circles in the Russian leadership and the opponents of Shevardnadze's rule at home. The president's party in the parliament repeatedly assured concerned Westerners that Georgia was irreversibly transcending the chaotic stage of its transition.

On 9 February 1998, however, the nation woke up to learn there had been another attempt on the president's life, once more with heavy artillery involved, and again unsuccessful. The president's armored Mercedes-Benz was attacked this time as he traveled from his suburban residence to downtown, even though the highway was thought to have been properly secured. The shooting involved heavy grenade launchers and lasted long enough to make outsiders wonder naïvely why helicopters never appeared on the scene and how the attackers' trucks managed to disappear. However, the president once again confirmed his legendary reputation of having been blessed with a tremendous amount of luck. He emerged unharmed, although two bodyguards were killed in the attack.

Among the very first pieces of information broadcast about the assault was the discovery of papers identifying the only dead assailant left at the scene as a Chechen resident of Dagestan. The official Chechen representative later remarked ironically that terrorists would not normally have all their papers and entire records on them. Georgian public opinion was unanimous in assessing the report as a clear attempt to create Georgian/Chechen friction and distrust. (2)
Georgian media, experts and public opinion immediately looked for a Russian trace. Russia was not pleased with the improved prospects of the Caucasus region. An economic revival is anticipated in Azerbaijan due to renewed operation of the Northern pipeline route and the increasing likelihood of a Georgian/Azerbaijan pipeline. Moreover, the strengthened Western-oriented Georgian/Azeri alliance, the kernel of the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) formation, was emerging as a prototype of a self-sustaining, united Caucasus. It was emphasized that Russia continued to provide sanctuary for the former Georgian security chief Igor Georgadze, suspected of plotting the previous assault on Shevardnadze. Georgadze is the son of Panteleimon Georgadze, the current leader of Georgia's Communist Party, who has publicly supported the idea of restoring the Soviet Union. Igor Georgadze reportedly made his getaway via a Russian military flight from the Russian military airdrome, Vaziani, outside Tbilisi. According to some accounts, the latest set of assailants used the same method to flee the country.

In his interview to Russian TV news on the following evening, Shevardnadze pointed directly at Russia as the most probable plotter. The reaction of the Russian leadership and media was that of utmost astonishment about the Georgian allegations, although a few Russian analysts could not resist admitting there was logic to those claims. Yet the prevailing assessment, especially after the tragicomic hostage-taking in western Georgia took place, was that Russia is always held responsible for destabilizing events in the Caucasus, while the Caucasians fail to establish law and order at home. For his part, Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov made light of the incident. While visiting Kosovo, he attempted a "promotion" of Russian arms and tried to demonstrate that a Russian grenade launcher can pierce a Mercedes.

Among all the hypotheses and theories that quickly emerged, there was one possibility that experts, journalists, even officials failed to consider: that long-forgotten Zviadists were responsible. Although the nationalist former president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was deposed in the winter of 1991 and later fled to Chechnya, had died, some of his supporters still remain.
In view of the growing scandal, the Georgian security service, at last, did its job: all those suspected of involvement in the assassination attempt (all of them Zviadist) were promptly detained. While some prominent Zviadists, most notably Gamsakhurdia's widow, Manana Archvadze-Gamsakhurdia, and the leader of the political wing "Roundtable--Free Georgia," Tengiz Kikachishvili, denounced the assassination attempt and its organizers, others retaliated against the government. On 10 February in Zugdidi, a region in western Georgia (near the Abkhazian border) known as a Zviadist stronghold, four UN mission observers were taken hostage by a group led by a previously unknown character, Gocha Esebua. Events that followed were reminiscent of old Italian movies: Esebua gave interviews to the media while curious villagers replaced each other at a permanent feast in the house where the hostages were kept. The hostages praised the care they were receiving, while Esebua sought to bargain the hostages for nothing short of the release of the persons held in connection with the assassination attempt against Shevardnadze, the restoration of "legitimate" rule in Georgia and the removal of Russian military bases from the country. The outcome seemed to promise peace: Esebua fled shortly after all of the hostages were released. However, within a few weeks the terrorist leader was killed by Georgian internal ministry personnel, and brutality took a new turn: Half a dozen gunmen, remarkably those known as having reconciled with Shevardnadze's rule, were shot at Esebua's funeral in front of several hundred people. Shortly after the attack the Georgian interior ministry stated that the same people were involved in the assassination attempt against the president and the shooting at the cemetery, with the aim of disrupting the frail process of reconciliation between the supporters of the former president and the current government. Local papers came to the same conclusion: The terrorist act in Zugdidi was committed by "irreconcilables" from Esebua's group. (5)

The new assault on the president showed with clarity how naïve it was to imagine that the once-powerful Zviadists would finally accept their defeat in the civil war of 1991-92 and the consequent neglect from the Georgian media and general public. Just prior to the assault, all currently active political parties and figures in Georgia dismissed the Zviadists as powerless. In the post-civil war years the Shevardnadze administration had
been consolidating power, achieving wide recognition domestically and abroad. The
Zviadists inside the country seemed scarce, divided and discouraged. In the meanwhile,
the notorious Chechen terrorist leader (and late President Djokhar Dudaev's son-in-law)
Salman Raduev had sworn to help bring Gamsakhurdia's followers back to power.
Nobody in Georgia paid any attention to that pledge. Everyone was surprised that a
Zviadist group was the primary executor of the latest attempt, although the identity of
Zviadists' backers remains a mystery.

Whatever the investigation may reveal about the structure of the plot and cast of
characters involved, the assassination attempt exposed several important problems
within Georgian society:

• There is an unsatisfactory system for government/population feedback;
  Enormous responsibility has been placed upon one person, the president;
• There has been no public assessment of the political effects of the 1992 coup;
• Defeated opponents have been substantially underestimated in terms of their
  readiness for action, ability to create liaisons, and outside support;
• A combination of political, economic and geostrategic conditions favorable for the
  country's immediate development, and unfavorable for Russia's strategic plans for
  the Caucasus region, has developed;
• The status of reform and economic growth in Georgia has been assessed too
  optimistically; and
• There is massive corruption in the country.

Stone-age mafias have been replaced by more sophisticated groups that are better
disguised than loseliani's Mkhedrioni, yet no less dangerous. The most visible
corruption takes place in the energy industry. Gasoline is no longer sold from guarded
trucks but is now available at convenient gas stations. On the other hand, Tbilisi, not to
mention the forgotten countryside, is often poorly lit; the population heats its homes with
kerosene and cooks with (exorbitantly priced) liquefied gas. Restoring the natural gas
supply and determining who pays for electricity and who does not would complicate life
and reduce the incomes of criminals who feel at liberty while anti-corruption agencies are restrained by international standards of human rights.

Fortunately there are signs that Shevardnadze's government is trying to address some of these difficulties. The president had repeatedly called for dialogue with his opponents and, even in the midst of the Zugdidi hostage-taking incident, indicated his willingness to negotiate. Shevardnadze stressed his desire to reconcile with the Zviadists by releasing 2,500 prisoners through an amnesty program and commuting the death sentences of 52 Gamsakhurdia supporters.(6) The latter came as a result of Georgia's repeal of capital punishment, passed in order to comply with the requirements for admission to the Council of Europe. Similarly there are some indications that the government and the parliament are taking new measures to curb corruption in the energy ministry. The recent dismissal of the Minister of Fuel and Energy, Davit Zubirashvili, who has been accused by parliament of embezzlement and the unauthorized sale of Tbilisi's crude oil, may constitute the beginning of an effective anti-corruption campaign.

No doubt, Georgia is in better shape than it had been before the 1995 elections: The country is ruled much more competently and intelligently. The parliament, led by well-educated persons, has even revealed some young rising stars. One such MP is Mikhail Saakashvili, the Columbia-trained chairman of the Law and Constitution Committee who is the most active and unbiased promoter of legislature reforms.

Against all the hardships of chilly, blacked-out winters and low incomes, the population has enjoyed greater freedoms than in most other post-Soviet countries. While Shevardnadze has aggressively fought the groups that took up arms in opposition to his government, the same cannot be said of his treatment of political opponents. Parliamentarians, political parties and media outlets that pursue divergent policies are not molested by the state.
Perhaps the government has recognized that, if internal problems remain unattended, the next terrorist action may really turn out to be the last. And in view of what has happened, who can completely discard this possibility? At the parliament session called immediately after the assault, Chairman Zurab Zhvania expressed his firm conviction that the terrorists and their backers could not have stirred up serious trouble in the country if they had succeeded: All of the state structures would operate normally, and law and order would be maintained.(7)

Nevertheless, many believe that, if Shevardnadze were to be suddenly removed, the competing political groups in Georgia, even the smaller ones, would immediately start a ruthless fight for power, even at the risk of destabilizing the overall situation in the country and beyond. Larger neighboring states would offer support to the more compliant groups. An externally supported coup might turn out to be an appalling reality. It is no secret that the greater part of the international credit and Western support, as well as humanitarian and technical assistance, granted to Georgia in recent years has been connected with Shevardnadze's personality as the country's leader. Accordingly, the country might lose a good part of the international support it now enjoys if the leadership changes.

NOTES:
1 A final troublemaker (or so it then seemed), former Defense Minister Tengiz Kitovani, was imprisoned after leading a failed, unsanctioned, attempt in mid-1996 to deliver a group of poorly armed persons to the Abkhaz border in a second effort at punishing the rebellious Abkhaz, a move designed in part to rehabilitate himself from his earlier military defeat with the breakaway region. Kitovani and Ioseliani had been instrumental in removing former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia in a 1992 coup and clearing the path for Shevardnadze. Neither man has been sentenced yet.
2 Yet, as the notorious terrorist Salman Raduev's claim of responsibility for the latest assault shows, Chechens are not unanimous in supporting Shevardnadze's government in Georgia. Raduev's controversial actions raised questions as to whether he is mentally ill, and/or used by Russian security.
3 The president emphasized evidence of Russia’s reluctance to play a constructive role in clearing up the post-Soviet mess. Support for the separatists and failure of Russia's mediation of the Abkhazia dispute, neglect of Georgian demands to give up Georgadze, etc., may be seen as links in the same chain. Of course, no physical evidence of direct Russian involvement in the latest assault was available.
5 Segodnya, 7 April 1998.
7 The government-controlled TV channel broadcast that parliament session live. A detailed account of the session also appeared in Izvestia, 11 February 1998.

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