

Was the former Georgian PM murdered?

By [Global Research](#)

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Senior politicians in Georgia are for the first time publicly asking whether the mysterious death of Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania in 2005 could have been murder.

The official cause of death was carbon monoxide poisoning, caused by a gas heater in his apartment. But now the opposition is calling for a more thorough investigation.

According to some Georgians, Zurab Zhvania was the architect behind Georgia's Rose revolution. But it was Mikhail Saakashvili who went on to become president, with Zurab Zhvania as his prime minister.

In February 2005 Zhvania was found dead, apparently poisoned by gas.

Bezhan Gunava from the Conservative Party of Georgia says: "it was the Georgian democracy that was poisoned".

"Every day people get killed in Georgia. People are unlawfully detained and other anti-democratic actions are carried out," Gunava said.

At the time of the death, Zhvania's family questioned the official version.

"The government is trying to block a real investigation into the case," Giorgi Zhvania said, brother of the former Prime Minister.

In an interview with the Washington Post in 2006, Georgia's ex-president, Eduard Shevardnadze, also implied it was murder.

Now some members of the Georgian Parliament members have the same view.

"Authoritarian rule dominates, with only one person who personifies the judicial system, the cabinet and the president - this is nothing but authoritarian rule," Bezhan Gunava said.

"None of us saw Zhvania's body being brought to the place where he was found, there are facts and details screaming that Zurab Zhvania's death was not an accident".

But who would kill Zurab Zhvania and why?

Aslan Abashidze from the Institute of International Relations in Moscow says there was a widespread belief that Zhvania would become president.

"But he became the secondary figure, although he was a powerful prime minister. Of course, if he was taken out because of this, it would be unforgivable."

The state of personal relations between Saakashvili and Zhvania remains unknown. But close allies have turned on the President.

In 2007 [Irakli Okruashvili](#), who held several ministerial positions, claimed the president was corrupt and abused human rights. He also said Zurab Zhvania's corpse was taken to the apartment where he was found dead along with a friend.

Rumours continue to circle around Saakasvili.

"There are many questions which remain unanswered, and that is enough to assume something happened," Aslan Abashidze said.

Officials in Georgia are now demanding those answers. Political or not, Zurab Zhvania died four years ago when the country looked to be a young democracy.

Now Georgia's political instability is more visible, and perhaps the country's shaky political life will help reveal the truth about its beginnings.

Strange coincidence?

In late May 2005, what looked quite an ordinary domestic crime was committed in the small town of Kvareli in Georgia. Two young men from Tbilisi went to the provincial town to see their former classmate. But the latter turned out to be 'mad'. He had a gun and fired at his guests, killing one and injuring the other. Finally he shot himself.

This would certainly be considered a common domestic drama if it were not for one fact. The 'Tbilisi guest' who died was Levan Samkharauli, the head of Georgia's forensic medical examination at the Ministry of Justice. In the previous winter he had prepared the death certificate of Zhvania and his friend.

So, the 'domestic' murder in Kvareli seemed suspicious to many: it happened the day after the Georgian TV channel '202' showed a documentary called 'Without a bullet'. The film cast doubt on the official version of Zhvania's death.

Samkharauli was killed in front of many witnesses. The 'mad' classmate fired 20 shots before getting close to the victim and shooting him right in the head. Then he ran home, where police later found him. It's reported that he shot himself twice (!) - in the heart and in the head. The bullet shells have never been found.

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Russia Today
November 8, 2008

A year after mass anti-Saakashvili protests were held in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi the struggle of the country's opposition continues. RT sums up Georgia's recent history and tries to take a glimpse into the country's future.

Citizen S's Rosebud

Mikhail Saakashvili came to power in 2003, following events that became known as the [Rose Revolution](#). On November 23 a group of demonstrators stormed Georgia's parliament. They demanded the resignation of then president Eduard Shevardnadze after the results of parliamentary elections were judged to have been falsified.

Shevardnadze subsequently bowed out, leaving three heroes of the Rose Revolution – Parliamentary Chair Nino Burdzhaneladze, then opposition leaders Saakashvili and future Prime-Minister Zurab Zhvania – in power.

According to the country's constitution, Burdzhaneladze became acting President and a date (January 4, 2004) was set for election, in which Saakashvili predictably won a landslide victory, getting 96% votes of a record 82.8% turnout.

Adjara's Velvet Revolution

With all the talk surrounding two newly recognised independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's two other regions with tensions have largely eluded attention.

The Armenian majority of Southern Samtskhe-Javakheti region has repeatedly called for greater autonomy, while the South-Western Adjara had spent a week separated from the rest of Georgia during the spring crisis of 2004.

Ruled by authoritarian Aslan Abashidze, Adjara managed to capitalize on the early years of market economy, with its capital port of Batumi becoming a major transit hub for goods heading to and from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

With the majority of the aforementioned exports being oil, Abashidze preferred to keep the most of the transport and Black Sea tourism revenues in his region – something that would never suit the Saakashvili, who had aims at bettering the economy.

Sensing that Saakashvili will come for him sooner or later Abashidze heavily opposed the Rose Revolution, declared a state of emergency immediately after Shevardnadze's ousting and sought to establish closer ties with Russia in hopes of getting support.

However, Russia was in no rush to undermine its relations with Georgia. Following a tense week of attempting to ignore both protests within his region and Georgia's arms wiggling outside, and while flying to Moscow for advice following every new development, Abashidze resigned.

The events received its own soft – 'Velvet' – revolution label and Abashidze, who moved to Moscow, got his 15-year sentence in absentia.

Evident progress of economy

Having two very tough political issues resolved and shedding virtually no blood Saakashvili shifted his attention to economy, and it was an immediate success.

Employing economy professionals from the private sector into Zhvania's cabinet, the most notable of which being Russian oligarch of Georgian origin Kakha Bendukidze, who became the Minister of Economy, Saakashvili's regime managed to raise the GDP growth rate from 5% in 2004 to near 10% in 2007.

One of the ways of doing so was by easing the regulations regarding business and entrepreneurship. Georgia rocked the International Finance Corporation's annual 'Doing Business' rating, that tracks indicators of the time and cost to meet government requirements in business start-up, operation, trade, taxation, and closure.

It climbed some 75 positions in 2007 alone, and with a 2% fall of unemployment, Georgia was named the [reformer of the year](#). By 2009 (the rating for each year is published in September of previous year) Georgia is the 15th most business-friendly economy in the world, ahead of Germany (25), Switzerland (21) and way ahead of Russia (120).

Some even claimed that Saakashvili's regime managed to root the corruption out of the traffic police - an area with a strong tradition of bribery ever since the Soviet era.

When I interviewed him in 2006, Bendukidze left the impression of a man not only proud of his achievements, but also one who sees a long road of improvement ahead of himself and his country.

Yet somehow, the events of 2007 went from good to bad.

Death of an ally and alienation of others

The roots of the problem began in 2006, when amid a rising economy Georgia suddenly started to address the problem of breakaway republics of [South Ossetia](#) and [Abkhazia](#). The fact that it happened in between [visits of U.S. senators](#) to Georgia leaves little doubt on who gave Saakashvili the ill-timed idea.

Striving to bring back the breakaway regions, Saakashvili didn't even spare his friends. These actions were not typical of country leaders, but more of mobster bosses like Tony Montana.

The minister in charge of regulating conflicts Georgy Haindrava - one of the key supporters of Saakashvili during the Rose Revolution - was dismissed with no remorse, after strongly opposing the idea of using force to solve the conflicts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

By then Saakashvili had already lost the wisest of his allies. In February 2005 Prime Minister Zhvania was found dead in a rented apartment. Police claimed he died of carbon monoxide poisoning due to an inadequately ventilated gas heater. Although, his death was ruled accidental, Zhvania's family continues to question the results of the investigation.

Zhvania was, as many believed, for Saakashvili what Manny Ribera was for Tony Montana in Scarface: the person, who managed to stop him on the brink of radical and irreversible actions.

A year after Zhvania's demise Saakashvili started to fear for his position. He started a campaign to [intimidate the opposition](#) by mass arrests. Saakashvili also attempted to initiate an [early presidential election](#) in 2008, though having been elected in early 2004 he was entitled to office till 2009.

In August 2007 when yet another of Saakashvili's former allies - ex-Defence Minister Irakly Okruashvili - [made grave accusations](#) against the President, Georgia saw itself on the brink of civil war.

Okruashvili also gave some new [info on Zhvania's death](#), and was immediately detained by police.

November 7, 2007

This led to mass protest organized by none other than Haindrava in the early days of November. Tens of thousands gathered around the parliament building in Tbilisi [demanding Saakashvili's resignation](#) on November 1.

Saakashvili initially [dismissed the protest](#) as 'a campaign' of lies. Then, on their sixth day of the standstill, with some 70,000 protesting on the streets of Tbilisi, he addressed the nation, [calling for calm](#).

Meanwhile out on the streets, riot police used tear gas, sound guns, water canons and rubber bullets many of which were believed to be [supplied by Azerbaijan](#) to disperse the crowds.

Opposition channel Imedi TV which has been called 'the voice of opposition in Georgia' was [shut down](#). It was broadcasting live when the presenter in the studio suddenly announced that there were riot police and special forces in the building. They then detained the billionaire tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili owned TV station's employees.

RT's own correspondent [Ekaterina Azarova](#) and cameraman Evgeny Litovko, were caught up in the police crackdown. They were conducting a live television broadcast when special forces began to spray tear gas, as a result of which our team suffered [tear-gas poisoning](#).

To watch RT's footage of the events, please [follow the link](#).

By the evening of November 7, Saakashvili - again rather like Tony Montana - was relegated to a state in which his enemies were once his allies.

Repeating Abashidze's actions of 2004, he declared a 15-day nationwide [state of emergency](#).

January election and war

Having the political initiative in his tight grip Saakashvili gave the green light for a [snap election in January](#), banking on the lack of time the opposition had for choosing and preparing their candidate.

It was a risk, but also his only chance to end the disturbances, which already brought about the Human Rights Watch's criticism for using 'excessive' police force and warnings of growing authoritarianism from International Crisis Group.

It took some time for the opposition to decide on the single [candidacy of Levan Gachechiladze](#), while their main financial supporter Badri Patarkatsishvili announced he would campaign against Saakashvili in order to keep Georgia from [sliding into 'dictatorship'](#).

Patarkatsishvili's Imedi [resumed broadcast](#) in December, but refrained from any politics related discussions till the election.

Despite having this kind of opposition, Saakashvili prevailed in the election with 53.47% of

the vote, with both Gachechiladze (25.69%) and Patarkatsishvili (7.10%) lagging [far behind](#). Opposition supporters claimed the results were rigged and went on hunger strike demanding a [second round election](#).

Meanwhile in London, unable to handle the defeat, 52-year-old Patarkatsishvili [died of a heart attack](#).

In April a mysterious American businessman [Joseph Kay](#), claiming to be the oligarch's step cousin, appeared in Tbilisi to claim the [rights for the Imedi channel](#) backed by Saakashvili's government.

Though Kay vowed not to interfere with the channels editorial or personnel policies, the latest Imedi's incarnation [was politically harmless](#).

With no alternative TV channels [left in Georgia](#) apart from the state-backed ones, Saakashvili had achieved yet another victory. His United National Movement party [dominated the parliamentary election](#) in May.

August saw the ever more self-confident Saakashvili let the [age-long tensions](#) between Tbilisi and South Ossetia escalate into a full-blown military conflict with Russia's participation, which led to Russia's recognition of the [breakaway countries' independence](#) in September.

U.S. looking for new Georgian leader?

In the dying days of August 2008 a number of prominent political figures from Georgia visited the U.S., including the speaker of the Georgian Parliament David Bakradze, chairman of Georgia's Republican Party David Usupashvili, Burdzhaneladze (who currently heads the new opposition party United Georgia), and David Gamkrelidze, leader of the New Right opposition party.

This was viewed as a move to choose a new leader for Georgia, sparking rumours that Burdzhaneladze has received the overseas blessing for the post.

Gamkrelidze in particular flew across the Atlantic to take part in the 2008 Republican National Convention, where he was supposed to conduct meetings with members of U.S. political elite. In an interview given at the time he suggested that to overcome the political and economic crises Georgia will need to hold an early presidential election.

With Obama in the White House, Gamkrelidze may have to abandon his plans made together with the Republicans.

However, the [short but bloody war](#) obviously put Saakashvili's regime into an ambiguous and unpredictable position.

Now a year after violent mass protests the opposition is once again [on the streets](#)...

Saakashvili critic's death `suspicious`

Russia Today

February 14, 2008

The death of a Georgian billionaire and government critic is being treated as suspicious by British police. 52-year-old Badri Patarkatsishvili died at his home near London on Tuesday night. He was accused of plotting a coup last year before running against President Saakashvili in January's election.

Patarkatsishvili's family say he died of a heart attack.

However, the Surrey police, who are investigating the case, say they treat all unexpected deaths as suspicious until they can prove otherwise.

The police say no radioactive substances have been involved in Patarkatsishvili's death. They have been on alert over the possibility of the use of radioactive materials after the murder of former Russian security officer Aleksandr Litvinenko in London two years ago.

Meantime, Patarkatsishvili's body has been removed for post mortem which is expected to reveal the cause of death.

Georgia's President Mikhail Saakashvili has expressed his condolence to the family of the businessman.

Patarkatsishvili's friends and relatives are preparing to fly to London to arrange the transportation of his body to Tbilisi for burial.

And his personal doctor has reportedly told Ria Novosti that he suffered no heart-related diseases.

"Badri Patarkatsishvili's death was confirmed today by his friend Boris Berezovsky. I don't know if he was killed or died from natural causes. But I know one thing for sure - the government was responsible for his death," Gogi Tsulaula, a member of 'Our Georgia' party, said.

Georgian rebel minister Irakly Okruashvili says the death looks suspicious to him.

"I would like to wait for an official comment. It seems strange that so many deaths are happening in February. I have not contacted Patarkatsishvili personally for five months and I regret this," Okruashvili said.

Badri Patarkatsishvili made a fortune and a name for himself during his business ventures with Russian tycoon Boris Berezovsky.

In 1992, Patarkatsishvili became a Deputy Director General of the Logovaz Group.

In 2006 he sold 100% of his share of the Russian Kommersant editorial house to Russian tycoon Alisher Usmanov.

Patarkatsishvili played a key role in the Georgian opposition. In 2007 he became embroiled in a major political scandal in the country and was accused of plotting a coup against President Mikhail Saakashvili's government.

He had remained in London ever since.

“Now most of the opponents of Saakashvili’s regime are either in prison or in exile or hiding somewhere,” Vyacheslav Nikonov, the President of the Russian Political Foundation, said.

Patarkatsishvili was wanted in Russia for his part in an attempted jail break of ex-vice General Director of Aeroflot, Nikolay Glushkov.

On December 23 an article in the British Times claimed the Georgian tycoon feared for his life. The paper quoted an audio-tape with a conversation, which allegedly took place between the intended hitman and an official from the Georgian Interior Ministry.

The Times said Patarkatsishvili alerted police to the supposed plot.

Russia’s State Duma deputy and Britain’s main suspect in the poisoning of former Russian security officer Aleksandr Litvinenko in London in 2006, Andrey Lugovoy, said the death of Patarkatsishvili is a great loss.

“I knew him for over 15 years and as far as I know he didn’t have any major health problems. All this is strange but you never know what life can bring,” he said.

“I think that his death, the heart attack that he had, is possibly connected with what’s been going on with Georgia over the past two or three months. It might have affected his health. He was a real patriot,” Lugovoy stressed.

Former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze also says the death of Badri Patarkatsishvili is a big loss for Georgia.

“I knew him for a long time. He is not the sort of man to be involved in a murder or a coup. Of course, his death will raise suspicions; he was not an old man,” he said.

According to Shevardnadze, there will be opposition rallies tomorrow.

“This is not surprising. They’ll of course accuse the government,” Shevardnadze said.

“I think if the opposition speaks out about the sudden death of Badri, they have reasons to do this. We have lost not only an outstanding businessman, but a person who’s established a fund for the poor, he helped a lot,” he added.

Patarkatsishvili was born in Tbilisi in 1955 and graduated from Georgia’s State Polytechnic Institute.

Badri Patarkatsishvili is survived by his wife and two daughters.

Russian reaction

Konstantin Kosachev, State Duma International Affairs Committee Chairman, says it’s important to avoid any guesswork, and wait for the results of the investigation.

“I do believe that some motivation for such a development may be theoretically found in some other countries, including Georgia, including Great Britain, where some Patarkatsishvili’s partners, namely Berezovsky, are resided,” he said.

“What is most important right now is to restrain from any speculations on this tragedy, to

wait for the results of the investigation, which is being conducted right now by British authorities and to resume these discussions when the conclusions are made,” Kosachev stressed.

Georgian mystery

The death of Badri Patarkatsishvili is not the first suspicious death in Georgian politics.

One of the leaders of Georgia’s Rose Revolution and the country’s former Prime Minister, Zurab ZhvAnia was found dead in early 2005. His body was discovered in the home of a colleague in Georgia, slumped in an armchair in the kitchen.

Police claimed Zhvania died of carbon monoxide poisoning due to an inadequately ventilated gas heater. Although his death was ruled accidental, Zhvania’s family continues to question the results of the investigation.

Zhvania’s death still a mystery?

Russia Today
October 5, 2007

It has been eighteen months since the mysterious death of the former Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, but the final results of the investigation have still not been released. His death shocked the country and members of Zhvania’s family claim it was a planned assassination.

Now the death of Georgia’s first Prime Minister is once again in the spotlight, after former Defence Minister Irakli Okruashvili cast doubt on the official explanation two days before [his arrest on corruption charges](#).

Zurab Zhvania, a former Parliament Speaker, was one of the leaders of the Rose Revolution of 2003 that brought President Mikhail Saakashvili to power. He became the country’s first Prime Minister in 2004 and was the main architect of Georgia’s massive reform project.

Then, on February 3, 2005, tragedy struck. The Prime Minister was found dead in the flat of provincial official Raul Yusupov. Zurab Zhvania apparently became a victim of CO poisoning from a faulty gas heater.

The death sent shockwaves through Georgia, and many immediately suspected foul play.

An investigation was launched, and experts from the FBI arrived to assist.

The results backed up the conclusion of death by accidental poisoning, but doubts still remain.

Zurab Zhvania’s brother Georgy never believed the official version of his brother’s death, and has hired private investigators to conduct their own investigation.

“Of course, the family does not believe the official version. We know for sure that it was a planned assassination. All the evidence we’ve gathered points at this conclusion,” Georgy says.

Georgia’s Prosecutor General’s Office refuses to make any comment about the case. Though

it has been more than two years since his tragic death, the final results of their investigation have not yet been announced. But even after they are, it is certain that speculation will remain over the mysterious death of the Georgian first Prime Minister.

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