

Georgia: Questions Linger About Zhvania Death

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A year after Georgian prime minister's mysterious death, the official explanation for the cause continues to be questioned.

Police sentries still stand guard outside the building in Saburtalo Street where the bodies of Georgian prime minister Zurab Zhvania's and Deputy Kvemo Kartli Province Governor Raul Usupov's were found in the early hours of February 3, last year.

A girl who lives in the building says the cops never leave. She says they often spend the night in Russian-made Zhiguli "07" cars parked outside.

None of the neighbours are willing to say anything about what they saw or heard that night. When asked by journalists, most of them just slam the door. Policemen on duty are not in the mood to talk either.

Adding to the air of mystery, the government has still not finished its investigation into Zhvania's death.

The government is sticking to its "informal" preliminary scenario, which it gave just hours after Zhvania died: that a faulty gas heater allowed toxic fumes to build up in the apartment, killing Zhvania and Usupov.

After all, such poisonings are frequent in Georgia every winter.

Yet with each day that the government's investigation drags on, an equally "informal" theory grows more widespread among the Georgia public. Zhvania, many here believe, was murdered.

The prime minister's closest relatives openly say they are sure Zhvania was assassinated.

His wife and brother say the government is lying and that the version of gas poisoning is a blatant fabrication. Without citing specific evidence, they allege unidentified political rivals arranged Zhvania's death.

High-ranking government officials dismiss those allegations.

"I'm sure that Zhvania died as a result of an accidental gas poisoning," parliament deputy speaker Mikhail Machavariani told reporters on the first anniversary of the prime minister's death.

Zurab Zhvania was one of the most well-known and influential people in Georgia. In 2003, he was one of the three leaders of the Georgian Rose Revolution together with now-president Mikheil Saakashvili and

parliament speaker Nino Burjanadze. Yet Zhvania had worked closely for many years with former Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze, far longer than Saakashvili or Burjanadze.

Zhvania was a personal member of Shevardnadze's early team. He was later speaker of parliament before becoming Shevardnadze's implacable opponent.

When he became premier in 2004, Zhvania took immediate control over Georgia's moribund economy. He started implementing liberal market reforms. In addition, many experts say his more conciliatory approach to the conflicts with separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia could have played a significant and positive role.

Many analysts say Zhvania was moderating influence on Georgia's new government, and kept it from becoming too radical under the often emotional leadership of President Saakashvili.

"Zhvania was very even-tempered," said Alexander Rondeli, president of the Georgian Centre for Strategic and International Studies. "He had the ability to find a rational solution to any problem.

"Zhvania ensured that the functions of the leadership were evenly distributed. His death was a huge loss for the country."

The breaking news about the prime minister's death interrupted morning Georgian TV broadcasts that February morning.

Government officials were quick to get on the air.

"This was an instance of gas poisoning. An Iranian gas heater was installed in this room. This must have happened suddenly, as Mr Zhvania was sitting in the armchair at that time...", Internal Affairs Minister Vano Merabishvili said a few hours after Zhvania's body was found.

According to the early story that journalists quickly reconstructed, Zhvania left his office at the State Chancellery at around 22:55 on February 2, 2005. He was first driven to his mother's flat, and then 35-40 minutes later, went the apartment on Saburtalo Street.

Police initially said the flat had been rented by Usupov. The nature of the relationship between the two men has been the subject of gossip and conjecture here.

Raul Usupov's father Yasha said that his son had good relations with the prime minister. According to investigators, Zhvania's cell phone number was found in Raul Usupov's cell phone contact list. However, the prime minister's brother Giorgi Zhvania said that Zurab Zhvania had not used that particular number for a year before his death. Parliament member Vasil Maghlaperidze said publicly after Zhvania died that Usupov has asked for help in contacting the prime minister, perhaps suggesting that the two men were not that well acquainted.

Pictures of the flat on Saburtalo Street were published later. They showed a table with an opened cognac bottle atop it. Nearby was a backgammon board.

The pictures gave the impression that Zhvania and his guest had a late supper, drank, and died from fumes emitted by an incorrectly installed gas heater.

That's still the preliminary official version of events.

"The first theory that was voiced officially immediately after Zhvania's death remains in force. The case has not been closed and no further comments are being made about this," Khatuna Tskhvediashvili, head of the press service of the General Prosecutor's Office, told IWPR.

Government officials have refused to provide any more details to journalists over the past year. Although from time to time, stories citing "leaked information" with no attribution appear in the local press.

According to Georgian law, Zhvania's relatives have the right to access investigation materials. Citing these materials, the brother and wife of the late prime minister have stated repeatedly that they do not trust the official investigation.

Giorgi Zhvania says it's his belief his brother was already dead when he was brought to the flat on Saburtalo Street. Giorgi Zhvania believes the scene at the flat was staged.

When asked to explain why he believes this, Giorgi Zhvania says the investigation showed that no fingerprints of the prime minister and deputy governor were found in the room where they allegedly spent the night.

Zhvania says other details of the investigation do not add up.

"For example, initially, one of the [prime minister's] bodyguards Mikheil Dzadzamia gave evidence that, before taking the prime minister to this flat, he went to the supermarket in Saakadze Square for food," Giorgi Zhvania told IWPR.

"When I learned about this evidence, I noted that the supermarket in Saakadze Square closes at 22:00 hours."

The late premier's brother said three days after that contradiction emerged, a new version of events was produced, according to which Dzadzamia was said to have visited a different shop. That shop is on Saburtalo Street, not Saakadze Street, and it is open until midnight.

"Interestingly, both contradictory accounts are now part of the case," Giorgi Zhvania told IWPR.

Giorgi Zhvania points to what he considers other instances of fabricated evidence and an effort to conceal the “real” cause of Zhvania’s death.

In particular, according to Dzadzamia's statements, he himself switched on the gas heater in the flat in Saburtalo Street when Zhvania arrived just before midnight.

However, Giorgi Zhvania said that according to cell phone company logs, Dzadzamia could not have been in the flat at that time.

He said the logs showed that at roughly the same time, 23:59, a call from Dzadzamia's cell phone was placed from the Didube area of Tbilisi.

That’s several kilometres away from Saburtalo Street and the apartment where Zhvania died.

There are other discrepancies, says Giorgi Zhvania, citing investigation materials he says he’s had access to.

According to the official investigation, Zhvania’s chief bodyguard, Koba Kharshiladze, arrived at the flat where the prime minister was at 4:00. Dzadzamia is said to have opened a window by pushing it with his hand. Kharshiladze then squeezed into the room through the window. He reported that he found the prime minister dead.

However, when a re-enactment of the sequence of events was carried out, Kharshiladze failed to push open the window in the same manner.

Giorgi Zhvania, who witnessed the re-enactment, told IWPR that Kharshiladze then changed his story, “After this, he [Kharshiladze] said that he penetrated through another window.

“However, as it turned out, that window had been bolted shut from the inside.”

Correspondingly, the bodyguard could not have opened the window with just a push.

Moreover, had the window been open, Giorgi Zhvania told IWPR, carbon monoxide would not have accumulated in the room. According to the investigation's account, carbon monoxide poisoning was the cause of death.

Investigators told IWPR they could not comment on any of these allegations, citing the ongoing investigation.

Mze TV journalist Irakli Imnaishvili told IWPR that the day after Zurab Zhvania's death, he took a five-

minute interview with the internal affairs minister Vano Merabishvili.

Imnaishvili said he asked him only one question, "How could you have concluded just a few hours after the premier's death that his death was accidental?"

According to the journalist, the minister cited the smell of gas in the room. However, Imnaishvili pointed out that carbon monoxide is colourless and odourless.

In addition, Imnaishvili said his bosses at Mze TV forbade him to broadcast the interview with Merabishvili. Later, the journalist said, officers from the internal affairs ministry came and confiscated the cassette.

There are also questions as to irregularities the night in the gas supply system of the Saburtalo district of Tbilisi where Zhvania died.

According to records of the emergency service of Tbilgazi, Tbilisi's gas distribution company, on February 2 the gas pressure unexpectedly rose in the area where the apartment where Zhvania died.

A Tbilgazi employee, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said a lock on a pressure control box had inexplicably been broken into.

There are also questions about the autopsy, which placed the late premier's time of death at between three and five o'clock in the morning.

According to the same Tbilgazi registry, the gas emergency service came to the area near the site at 2:45, and shut off the gas at 2:55.

But Zurab Zhvania's bodyguard Dzadzamia told investigators that the gas was apparently on when he reached the flat an hour and five minutes after the gas utility said it cut supplies.

Dzadzamia testified that when he entered the room at 4:00, he heard the gas heater sizzling. Dzadzamia reportedly asked another bodyguard to shut it off.

Sceptics of the preliminary official version of Zhvania's death also point to contradictions in the Georgian government's account of reports by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI, concerning Zhvania's death.

An IWPR source gave IWPR the FBI laboratory findings on condition of anonymity.

The actual FBI report contradicted Georgian claims that the bureau's investigators corroborated findings that the Iranian-made stove was capable of producing lethal levels of carbon monoxide.

However, the Georgian language translation of the report widely published in the Georgian press gave an

exactly opposite account. It claimed FBI tests at the flat concluded the stove could indeed have produced lethal levels toxic gas.

When asked to explain such a major discrepancy, Giga Bokeria, a leader of president Saakashvili's parliamentary bloc, called it "simply a translation error".

Parliament itself, dominated by the president's supporters, last year refused an opposition call for an independent commission to be formed to look into Zhvania's death.

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Location: South Ossetia

Georgia

Abkhazia

Topic: Special Report

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgia-questions-linger-about-zhvania-death>