

Georgia: Sanaia Murder Inquiry Slated

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Many Georgians believe the police investigation into the murder of a leading journalist has been a travesty

Back in July, tens of thousands of people attended the funeral of one of Georgia's best known journalists, Giorgi Sanaia. Many were convinced his murder had been politically-motivated.

They were also outraged because Sanaia's programme, Night Courier, had gained a reputation for its neutrality and willingness to give a voice to all sides in Georgian politics.

When police announced on December 5 that they had arrested a suspect, it wasn't long before doubt was thrown on the investigation. Friends and colleagues of the murdered journalist believe that the move was merely an attempt to brush up the image of the interior ministry and its new chief Koba Narchemashvili.

They also say that the murder inquiry has obscured the facts surrounding the crime and that, while the police may have the right man, the motive for the murder is being concealed.

"We supported this inquiry from the start," said journalist Tamriko Dekanosidze, a close friend of Sanaia's, "but the motive for the murder now being offered makes us doubt the objectivity [of the investigators]."

Sanaia, 25, was shot dead with a single bullet at his apartment some time after midnight on July 26. The suspect Grigol Khurtsilava, 32, was arrested on charges of pre-meditated murder after investigators linked his gun to the crime. He soon confessed to the killing.

However, many are convinced that the murder was politically-motivated.

Some of Sanaia's colleagues say he may have been targeted because a videotape the journalist possessed reportedly provided evidence of collusion between high-ranking members of the security forces and criminals in the Pankisi region.

It was widely suspected that one man in particular had a lot to benefit from seeing Sanaia silenced - the former interior minister Kakha Targamadze, ousted at the beginning of November after serial allegations of corruption. His successor, Narchemashvili, arrested Khurtsilava.

Sanaia's colleagues say Khurtsilava's account of the circumstances surrounding the murder are laced with inconsistencies.

In his confession, Khurtsilava says he was drunk when he bumped into Sanaia in the street. The latter was on his way home from the Rustavi 2 television station. Khurtsilava says he failed to recognise the presenter but asked him to buy him a beer. He says Sanaia, who had just finished a live broadcast, agreed and invited him back to his apartment.

Khurtsilava was drinking vodka in the journalist's flat when, he said, an argument broke out over Sanaia's "cynical" response to his suggestion that they bring some prostitutes up to the flat. At this point,

Khurtsilava brought out his gun and shot Sanaia.

A number of things do not seem to ring true in this version of events. Firstly, Sanaia's fellow journalists ask why their colleague, who had been the target of numerous threats, would invite a total stranger into his home.

"I knew Giorgi a long time and cannot imagine why he would do this," said Eka Khoferia who took over from Sanaia on Night Courier. Besides, she said, it seems rather improbable that forty minutes after meeting each other, a relatively good-humoured conversation ended up in murder.

Then there is the mystery of the murder weapon and bullet-casing. Khurtsilava had been employed as a bodyguard at the interior ministry. He was dismissed a year and a half ago, but never surrendered his gun - an Italian made Tanfoglio Force 99.

Only 500 of these have ever been sold in Georgia, most of them procured by the police. That being the case, it seems strange that it took four months to identify the gun as one missing from the police department and match it to the bullet which killed Sanaia.

"It is a very painstaking process," head of the ballistics at the interior ministry, Zaza Altunishvili, said, blaming antiquated equipment for the delay.

Yet even if there was good reason for the length of forensic investigation, it doesn't account for the fact that Khurtsilava led police to the exact spot where he had thrown, or hidden, the bullet-casing and keys to Sanaia's flat. A friend of Khurtsilava's said he drank heavily, suffered from stress and routinely lost his memory.

The Georgian press has also been sceptical as to how the drunken Khurtsilava managed to kill Sanaia with a single shot. Another unanswered question is why the neighbours failed to hear the gun going off.

"I doubt every single fact in this story," said Tamriko Dekanosidze. "I believe that the murder was planned and was not a result of a private argument. Khurtsilava may have been the killer, but his motives are highly unconvincing."

Details of the case remain extremely murky. Apart from Khurtsilava's bizarre confession, the only other evidence that has emerged is that provided by a bread-seller who claims to have seen the light in Sanaia's apartment switched on around one hour before the murder. This has led some to suggest that the journalist's assassin had waited for him to return from the television studios.

Khurtsilava has been detained for three months pending a trial date while the state prosecutor prepares the case against him. But the warning of journalist Mari Kirvalidze back in July seems to remain as poignant now as it did then.

"Look into your hearts!," she said in the daily Alia. "We all know who killed Sanaia, don't we? The case won't be resolved."

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