

Sajaia Death Stuns Georgians

Author: [Zviad Koridze](#)

The apparent suicide of President Eduard Shevardnadze's security supremo has shocked Georgia

The violent death of the secretary of the National Security Council, Nugzar Sajaia, has shaken up the Georgian political establishment.

Sajaia, a close ally of President Eduard Shevardnadze, was in overall charge of the Georgian security services. The president is struggling to both explain his ally's apparent suicide and to appoint a successor.

Sajaia was found in his office in a critical condition with a gunshot wound to the head on the morning of February 25, his birthday. He was taken to Tbilisi's Republican Hospital, but died soon afterwards.

Sajaia had known the president for more than 30 years. He is the latest former Communist Party associate of the president to die violently, since Shevardnadze returned to Georgia in 1992. The others were Zhiuli Shartava and Suliko Khabeishvili.

The Georgian authorities accept that Sajaia committed suicide, although colleagues who saw him on the morning of his death say he exhibited no signs of anxiety. Jemal Gakhokidze, now serving as the acting secretary of the security council, and the last person to see Sajaia alive, said he had been upset by press attacks.

Shevardnadze called Sajaia the "victim of moral terror", declaring that Georgian politicians who had been waging a smear campaign against Sajaia were responsible for his death.

His enemies included: parliamentary deputy Boris Kakubava, who accused Sajaia of being behind an assassination attempt on the leader of the autonomous republic of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze; the ex defence minister Tengiz Kitovani, now living in Moscow, who claimed in the press that Sajaia was a homosexual; and the former interior minister, Kakha Targamadze, who also has Russian connections.

At the time of his death, Sajaia and a group of other ministers, known as Sajaia's team, had just finished work on national security plans. The group comprises the new interior and security ministers, the head of the government guards, the president's press secretary and the powerful chairman of the supreme court, Lado Chanturia.

What these men all have in common is that they are fairly young, have a reputation for not being noticeably corrupt and are strongly loyal to Shevardnadze. An official in the state chancery, speaking anonymously, said that Sajaia's successor will probably be selected from this group.

Shevardnadze has so far avoided naming a successor to a job that many people covet. His final choice will say a lot about the state of Georgian political life.

Targamadze would obviously like the job. His appointment, however, could cause a lot of government infighting and provoke public anger because of his pro-Russian views. If Gakhokidze is confirmed in the job, the security council may be downgraded, as he is considered a political lightweight.

The most frequently mentioned candidate is Chanturia. Should he be nominated, he could become Shevardnadze's heir apparent. That's one reason why the succession race has aroused such interest. Another is that the post of security supremo could acquire even greater significance as American military advisers arrive in Georgia to pursue their war against terrorism.

Zviad Koridze is an independent political analyst based in Tbilisi.

Location: Georgia

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/sajaia-death-stuns-georgians>