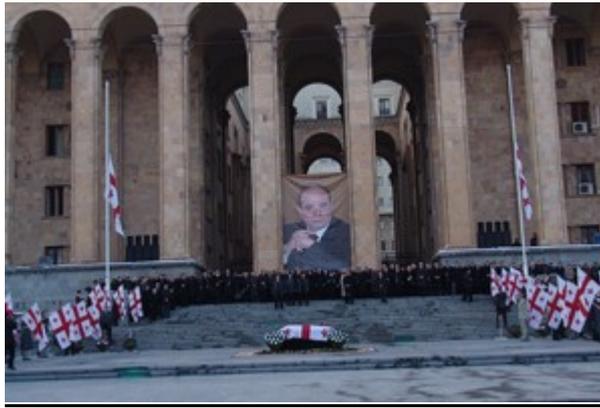


POWER CUT



Zurab Zhvania's picture looms over his coffin, lying beneath the steps of the parliament building, Tbilisi.

The Mysterious Demise of Georgia's Prime Minister

(Zurab Zhvania, 9th December, 1963 – 3rd February, 2005)

Is Georgia's "Rose Revolution" beginning to devour its own children?

The sudden and mysterious death of the Georgian prime minister, Zurab Zhvania, on 3rd February, 2005, provoked much speculation about what had caused it and what his demise meant for Georgia and the wider Caucasus region.

A month after the disappearance of one of the dominant figures in Georgian politics for more than a decade there is still no consensus on the exact causes of Mr. Zhvania's death, but it is a suitable moment to assess both Mr. Zhvania's own role in his country's public life since 1992 and the likely effect of his disappearance from the political scene on Georgian and regional politics. Tracing key aspects of Mr. Zhvania's career helps to put the tragic reality and the potent illusions of Georgia's recent history in perspective.

Fifteen months after the country's so-called "Rose Revolution" in November, 2003, Georgia seems to be sliding back into the corruption, in-fighting and threat of war which have beset it since independence in 1991. Followers of developments in independent Georgia in the years since the coup d'état against the country's first (and only) democratically elected president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia will recognise many of the worrying symptoms from the early 1990s. These were the years when Zurab Zhvania ascended to being right-hand man, first of Eduard Shevardnadze; later he became prime minister and *de facto* deputy of Georgia's post-revolution president, Mikheil Saakashvili.

Although Western newspapers and news channels carried wall-to-wall coverage of the "Rose Revolution" in November, 2003, little analysis of the reality of Georgian life reached the ordinary reader or viewer. Instead of situating that upheaval in Georgia's recent history, the mainstream media reported a stylised "fairy tale" version of plucky downtrodden people rebelling against an aging and corrupt tyrant. What the media failed to analyse was the links between the new Georgian rulers and the old. Nor did it consider its past encomia to Georgia's ousted President Shevardnadze. Instead the Western media slipped from heroising Eduard Shevardnadze, always stylised as the archetypical "Reformer" until very late in his rule, to damning him as a corrupt old autocrat without ever explaining why their consensus had changed.

After November, 2003, the media simply moved on to eulogising his successor in the same hyperbolic terms as once reserved only for Shevardnadze. This continuity in the manner of the foreign media's assessment of Georgia bodes ill for its long-suffering population who

might have hoped that the waning of the Shevardnadze myth would open Western eyes to a more realistic analysis of conditions in the country.

Death of a Reformer



Zurab Zhvania power-broking in Batumi, March 2004

Violent or unexplained premature deaths have pockmarked Georgia since 1991. Although foreign analysts have tended to interpret the rise and fall of Georgian politicians in terms of the Western reform paradigm, on the ground in Georgia the end of political careers and the settling of internal rivalries remains frequently brutal.

Understandably, few wish to speak ill of the dead, but Mr. Zhvania's sugar-coated obituaries in the Western media disguised the zero-sum game which has been Georgia's twisted political road since 1991. Zurab Zhvania's life and death epitomised his country's tragedy.

As so often in post-Communist Georgia, tragedy, farce, cruel irony and shameless hypocrisy were the key features of the sudden death of the 41-year-old premier in the early hours of 3rd February, 2005, and of the official response to his disappearance from the political scene.

Shortly after midnight on 3rd February, the Prime Minister went to the ground floor flat of a twenty-five year old acquaintance, Raul Yusupov, deputy governor of Kverno-Kartli. The reasons for his visit have not been explained, but a backgammon board was set out in the room where Mr Zhvania's body was found several hours later. Mr Yusupov was found dead in the apartment's kitchen.

The official version offered by Georgia's Interior Minister, Vano Merabishvili, was that the Prime Minister's bodyguards became alarmed by his failure to answer his mobile phone or contact them for several hours and that they eventually broke into the flat and found the two dead men. A faulty gas heater had asphyxiated both men through carbon monoxide poisoning. There was no sign of foul play. Piquant details about the ethnicity and construction of the heater leaked out. The Interior Minister reported that, "An Iranian-manufactured gas heater was in the room where Zhvania was found. Presumably, the heater caused the death of Zhvania and Usupov." According to *24 Hours* "The house on Saburtalo Street where Zhvania and Usupov died was visited by Davit Morchiladze, Director General of Tbilgazi [natural gas company of Tbilisi]. He said that the gas heater was primitive, with [a] water pipe instead of a proper exhaust pipe."¹

The ubiquitous Georgian commentator, Gia Nodia, who has presented nuanced versions of the official line for more than a decade, was able to reassure the world's press that faulty gas appliances routinely caused death in Georgia. Although the manner of Mr. Zhvania's death was "bizarre" nonetheless "there was nothing unique about this case." Death by gas leak was

¹ See *24 Hours* (4th February, 2004) @ <http://www.24hours.ge/index.php?n=188&r=1&id=793>]

common with more than 40 similar recent cases.² Even as Mr Zhvania lay suffocating, the morning papers in Tbilisi were reporting the donation of gas heaters to 24 families of blind people in the capital.³ The inadequacy of the basic energy supply was taken for granted. In fact, the day after Zhvania's funeral, Tbilisi was afflicted by widespread power cuts, which the electricity supply authorities hoped to resolve by the end of February⁴ - though other voices from the electricity supply sector expected March and April to be very hard months for consumers.⁵ On 28th February, both electricity and water supply failed in the capital.⁶

The Georgian authorities were anxious to insist on the accidental nature of the Prime Minister's death even when the exact circumstances had not been investigated. In order to emphasise the normality of the sudden disappearance of the regime's second man even his erstwhile disgraced patron, Eduard Shevardnadze, made a public expression of grief and reassurance. Hours after the news, Mr Shevardnadze called Mr. Zhvania Georgia's "greatest state figure, a brilliant person".⁷ The ousted president ruled out foul play in the death of his own political Brutus, though his reason for doing so might strike some as odd: "Zurab Zhvania's death was accidental. As far as I know, he was not frequently visiting this family." Maybe it was not Mr. Zhvania's habit to visit the flat (and regular habits certainly help an assassin plot his crime) but is there a code of conduct for Georgian assassins which requires them only to strike at targets with a regular routine?⁸

Of course Georgia's energy crisis is a real fact of life. Power cuts have bedevilled the country from Eduard Shevardnadze's return to Tbilisi in 1992. Under Shevardnadze in his pre-reform incarnation as Brezhnev's satrap in Soviet Georgia until 1985, neither power supplies nor food stuffs were in short supply. Only after the era of stagnation as Georgia escaped from Soviet isolation into the sunlit economic uplands of full economic reform and membership of the World Trade Organisation did the lights go out and the heating fail. Ironically, it was Shevardnadze's abandonment of the US company AES of Arlington which had tried and failed to make market energy policy work in Georgia and his turn to the Russian UES company in 2003 which was a major factor in his downfall. Even though energy outages were a significant factor in Shevardnadze's deep unpopularity, the Western-backed opposition refused to countenance any move to replace the failed AES company with tried-and-trusted Russian approaches to electricity generation. At the time of the "Rose Revolution" Western media carried patriotic declarations from Tbilisi that Georgians would rather freeze than use Russian-generated electricity!

² See "Pundit does not expect major political changes after Georgian PM's death" *Prime-News*, Tbilisi, 3rd February, 2005. On 10th February, a homemade gas heater exploded in a school in Zugdidi See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0800_february_11_2005/news_0800_brief.htm. On 2nd March, 4 more victims of carbon monoxide poisoning were reported in Tbilisi. See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0813_march_2_2005/news_0813_brief.htm#5

³ See <http://www.24hours.ge/index.php?n=187&r=8&id=785>.

⁴ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0797_february_8_2005/news_0797_brief.htm#1.

⁵ See Christina Tashkevich "UDC director "optimistic about the future" The country may still be facing an energy crisis, but UDC's Dean White says the future's bright", *The Messenger*, 25th February, 2005. White said "We are looking at particularly severe supply problems in March-April," he says, when the Enguri hydroelectric station will be taken out of service for rehabilitation. "On the one hand this is excellent; this is exactly what needs to happen," White states, referring to investment into the dam's systems. According to White, if "we get through" this period, and Enguri station is rehabilitated, "this should mean that by next winter we are in a much better position for winter in terms of domestic energy supply, especially in peak periods." See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0810_february_25_2005/news_0810_5.htm

⁶ See "Both water and electricity systems go offline" @ http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0812_march_1_2005/main_0812.htm

⁷ See Sebastian Smith, "Leaking gas kills leader of Georgia" <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-3-1469629,00.html>

⁸ See <http://www.24hours.ge/index.php?n=188&r=1&id=793>.

A year after the triumph of the “Rose Revolution” Georgians faced another winter improvising heating and lighting. Even their prime minister was not immune to the failure of the new regime to improve on the incapacity of the old.

Without any evident sense of irony, Tbilisi’s English-language newspaper, *The Messenger* published an encomium of the late premier by an English correspondent James Philips who recalled a picnic with Mr. Zhvania : “The energy system came up briefly in conversation. Energy Minister Nika Gilauri had worked for GSE under Brian [Cronly, the Irish director-general of Georgian State Electrosystem] before becoming minister: Zhvania commented that it was amazing how someone as young as Gilauri, and relatively inexperienced, could be so much more competent than his predecessors in the job”! Mr Gilauri may be more competent than his predecessor – he could scarcely be less – but still not sufficiently up to the job to avoid the conditions which led to Zhvania’s death.

With a premier who rarely went to bed before dawn it is little surprise that for all of the talk of reform during his decade as second man in Georgian politics so little was done to make life better for ordinary Georgians and that Zurab Zhvania should die asphyxiated by the failure to implement the most elementary reforms which left the country’s gas supply in such a parlous state.

Accidents will happen, not least in Georgia, but doubts linger about the official version of Zhvania and Yusupov’s deaths as they were not the first prominent Georgians to come to a premature end. The country has a long experience of dubious deaths in the political elite. To take just one precedent: Did ousted President Zviad Gamsakhurdia really kill himself on New Year’s Eve, 1993, as President Shevardnadze declared, or was he murdered? Other unnatural deaths, officially solved or explained, still haunt Georgia. Within hours of Zurab Zhvania’s death, the Russian-based multi-millionaire oligarch, Mamuka Jincharadze, who had actively assisted Zhvania only months earlier during the crisis in Georgia’s south-western region of Adjara, was shot dead in Moscow.

Perhaps Zhvania’s behaviour in the hours before his death was not unusual by Georgian standards. Maybe the premier’s bodyguards were used to him spending up to four hours after midnight with young friends, but the fact that when they did break in to Yusupov’s flat they found the two dead men in different rooms is odd. After all, how much gas would have to leak and at what rate from a single Iranian canister to poison both men simultaneously one in the sitting room the other in the kitchen. Isn’t it odd that one of them did not notice the encroaching drowsiness of the other or himself? Since Yusupov had not installed the deficient Iranian heater on the day of his demise and since it has been winter for some months it is odd that the build up of poisonous gas (which one local expert said would take 20 minutes) had not occurred before Zhvania’s nocturnal visit.

Family and political friends of the dead men cast doubt on the official version. The former Human Rights Ombudsperson and pro-Zhvania MP, Elena Tevdoradze, visited Zhvania’s mother, Rima, on 3rd February and said that the woman asked her, “What do you think, did they kill my son?”⁹ Yashir Yusupov also denied key parts of the official version including that the faulty heater was new – he said his son had had it for three months. If it wasn’t new, then why hadn’t his son or others died before?¹⁰ On 8th February, Imedi TV reported Mrs Tevdoradze as saying, “We, those people who were close friends of Zurab Zhvania, are very often asking each other these questions in an attempt to find answers, but there are no answers yet”. She refrained, however, from specifying these doubts in any detail.¹¹

Leaving aside, doubts about the cause of the deaths, the official version casts an unintentionally negative light on the lifestyle of Georgia’s “pro-Western reform-minded leaders” (as they are routinely apostrophised in Western media). Leading Western statesmen may have their eccentric habits, but getting a good night’s sleep is frequently a characteristic

⁹ See <http://www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2005/2/4/150655.shtml>

¹⁰ See <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/georgia/hypermail/news/0009.shtml>

¹¹ See <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=9021>

of those who are successful. However, the nocturnal habits of Georgian politicians have a long pedigree. Stalin is only the most (in)famous of their compatriots to have preferred to operate in the night. Reform under the cover darkness is an odd way to promote an open society.

Crocodile Tears?



A rehearsal for The Godfather IV? Patriarch Illia II, President Saakashvili, Mrs. Burjanadze at Mr. Zhvania's funeral

Although newspaper's like *The Times* reported on President Saakashvili's emotional response to the news of his prime minister's death - "His voice cracking, [the President] described Mr Zhvania's loss as a huge blow for the country: "I have lost my closest friend, my most loyal adviser, my biggest ally" - evidence of tension between the two men was emerging before 3rd February and more has emerged since.

President Saakashvili called an emergency Cabinet session, starting with a moment of silence, and had seven days to name a new prime minister. Mr Saakashvili's almost hysterical plea for calm recalled Molotov's radio address after Stalin's death in March, 1953, rather than a democratically legitimate ruler's response to tragedy: "I hope you will stand firm, Georgia will stand firm, and I hope I will stand firm because it is firmness that we need the most at present."¹²

Zhvania died at a tense moment for Georgia. Two days earlier, a bomb in the town of Gori exploded killing 3 policemen and wounding many more. Gori's proximity to the breakaway region of South Ossetia made it an unusually sensitive spot. Stalin's birthplace, Gori was also the power base of the Georgian Defence Minister, Irakli Okruashvili, who had been a prosecutor there and who had led the "rose revolutionaries" from Stalin's statue in the town on their march to Tbilisi to overthrow Shevardnadze in November, 2003.

Although there were indications that the bomb blast was probably part of the mafia infighting so typical of the Georgian police, suspicions that it involved South Ossetians, at least because of the smuggling via the breakaway region, persisted. But Gori's importance in the competing network of Georgian mafia groups reflects the political influence exercised by men with links to the city.

Defence Minister, Okruashvili and his supporters blamed the South Ossetian authorities for the "terrorist" outrage, putting the killing of the policemen onto the international "war on terror" map. "This was not a random occurrence," Okruashvili said. "We are dealing with a well

12 See <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-7-1468783,00.html>

organized terrorist act." The South Ossetians denied the charge. What was striking was that Zhvania moved to calm the rising tension caused by Okruashvili's charges implying that the blast was a local criminal act. Two days later he was dead.

Shortly before his death, Zhvania suggested that the Gori bomb might have been part of a strategy of tension to destabilise Georgia. He said, "The organizers of this terrorist act aimed to spread panic among the population and destabilize the situation. However, we should respond with consolidation and effective activities." Since, according to *Civil Georgia*, the prime minister ruled out both South Ossetian and Georgian terrorist groups as the culprits it was unclear whom he had in mind as responsible. Now we will never know. But he seemed to be hinting at an internal Georgian motive rather than an act by separatists.

However, in case anyone had doubts about the linkage between Zhvania's death and the Gori bomb blast, President Saakashvili declared 5-6th February as official joint days of mourning for both the defunct premier and the three policemen.¹³

The arrival of 6 FBI forensic experts in Georgia to analyse both the joint-deaths of Zhvania and Yusupov and the Gori bombing required US Ambassador Miles to exercise considerable diplomatic skill as he tried to avoid linking the incidents or casting doubt on the competence of the Georgian authorities. *The Messenger* quoted Miles as saying, "We don't find these events linked.'... Ambassador Miles said the FBI involvement is being expanded beyond the capacity of testing blood samples from Zhvania. At the request of Georgian officials, a FBI team will arrive in Georgia in the near future to investigate both the prime minister's death and the Gori car bomb, the ambassador said. 'We don't doubt the [Georgians'] technical expertise.'..."¹⁴

Not all Georgians welcomed the FBI. Those with memories going back to 1992 recalled other mysterious deaths such as the murder of the CIA operative Fred Woodruff just outside Tbilisi on 8th August, 1992. One Georgian lawyer, *Tatia Pachulia*, recalled "The FBI was also involved in the case of Giorgi Sanaia. Moreover, it could not investigate such cases as the murder of American diplomat Woodruff. I remember experts were saying that there were so many gaps in the documents of the FBI in Woodruff's case. That is why I do not believe in this organization. I have seen no successful cases related to high ranking officials or important figures investigated by either Georgian law enforcement bodies or by foreign experts."¹⁵

Giorgi Sanaia, a journalist with the television station, Rustavi2, was shot in the early hours of 26th July, 2001, shortly after broadcasting an interview with the warlord, Vepkhia Margoshvili, who alleged drug dealing between Chechens and Georgian officials. Margoshvili's power-base was the geo-strategically sensitive Pankisi Gorge linking Georgia with Chechnya and Russian officials had repeatedly claimed the gorge was the route whereby

¹³ See <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=8984>

¹⁴ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0797_february_8_2005/news_0797_1.htm

¹⁵ http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0798_february_9_2005/questions_and_answers_0798.htm
For Woodruff, see Mark Almond, "The KGB and America's War on Drugs" in Wall Street Journal (10th March, 1994). Two tyre-repairers witnessed Woodruff's murder at the GAI post on the Military Highway outside Tbilisi but they were never interviewed by US officials but BHHRG spoke to them in 1995 when their account contradicted the official version. The soldier Anzor Sharmaidze, convicted of killing Woodruff, subsequently withdrew his confession of accidentally firing the fatal shot and other Georgian officials alleged a plot to murder Woodruff after Shevardnadze fell out with his security chief Eldar Gogoladze, Woodruff's fellow passenger. However, then CIA Director James Woolsey and the FBI stuck to the official line, "this attack was a random act of violence and was not politically motivated." See <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/frwoodruff.htm>. On 22nd January, 2005, President Saakashvili said he wanted to reopen the inquiry into Woodruff's murder. See <http://www.templetonthorp.com/en/news856>

Chechens smuggled weapons and foreign fighters into Chechnya to attack Russian forces there.

Sanaia had apparently touched a neuralgic point in relations between Shevardnadze's regime and the Kremlin. Given growing US involvement in training Georgian forces to patrol the Russo-Georgian border region – a training programme which escalated rapidly a few months later after 9-11 – any coverage of dirty dealings in the Pankisi Gorge was a sensitive topic for two great powers as well as Georgia herself.

The Independent Association of Georgian Journalists reported, "The FBI came to Tbilisi after the funeral; they took boxes of evidence back to America for analysis, and then, after weeks of silence, announced that the findings were "inconclusive."

"Then a strange thing happened. Within an incredibly short period of time Margoshvili was assassinated, the Georgian government collapsed, and a man was arrested for the murder of Giorgi Sanaia." Sanaia's death had certain typical Georgian features in common with Zhvania's – leaving aside the single gunshot to the back of the journalist's head: "Sanaia himself wasn't missed till roughly 5 pm, when he should have turned up at work. Georgians are chronically late by nature, and so his co-workers did not begin to fret until past 6. It was then, after being unable to reach him via his landline or cell phone, that they turned up at his door." His widow, Khatuna Chkaidze did not accept the conviction of Grigol Khurtsilava for her husband's murder."¹⁶

After Sanaia's death which did so much to damage his regime's reputation, Shevardnadze emphasised his appeal to the Americans for help:

"We have appealed to our friends abroad. I must repeat that we have appealed to the US administration. They responded immediately, and their experts will join the investigation into the Georgian journalist's killing. This is needed in order to achieve a higher level of objectivity and transparency. By the way, FBI experts have given us a great deal of assistance in clearing up some well-known terrorist acts and other serious crimes in the past."

By this time, Washington's backing for Shevardnadze was being visibly withdrawn and his appeals for US support had an increasingly pathetic quality. Sanaia's murder was one of the factors used by Zurab Zhvania to justify his turning against his presidential patron. In summer, 2001, Zhvania finally gave up the last posts which Shevardnadze's patronage had showered on him since the early 1990s, resigning as leader of the ruling Citizen's Union party.

First in the queue for a funeral



Mourners pay their last respects

¹⁶ See <http://www.iagj.org.ge/memorial-sanaia2.htm>

At Zhvania's state funeral at the new Holy Trinity Cathedral dominating Tbilisi's skyline, Georgia's Patriarch Ilya II, who was already head of the Orthodox Church in Soviet times and is a perennial survivor from regime change to regime change, declared that the late prime minister "was always the first," as Saakashvili nodded agreement. "The first in doing good things, the first to think, and now again, he is the first -- the first government official to have a funeral in this cathedral!" The Netherlands flew in one thousand roses to be scattered along Rustaveli Avenue as Zhvania's cortege passed – making obvious what sceptical observers had guessed in November, 2003: the apparently spontaneous appearance of roses in the Georgian winter as Saakashvili's symbol was not a locally-generated phenomenon. If roses don't blossom in February in Georgia, does anyone believe they bloomed in November?¹⁷

More funerals looked set to follow since a key donor to the new cathedral, Mamuka Jincharadze, was murdered in Moscow at the same time as Mr Zhvania asphyxiated. In addition to his philanthropy towards the Georgian orthodox church, Mr Jincharadze also helped finance the anti-Abashidze uprising in Adjara in May, 2004.¹⁸ Jincharadze had been a backer of the ousted Adjara president, Aslan Abashidze, and his changing sides was a key factor in paving the way for President Saakashvili to assert his authority in the autonomous region. Jincharadze's money seems to have bought out some of the Adjara security forces and paved the way for another popular triumph without resort to heavy weapons. Mr. Zhvania seems to have preferred things that way too, but there are indications that his closeness to former allies of President Saakashvili's opponents was not well received by the presidential faction. With Jincharadze dying so soon after Yusupov, Mr Zhvania's comrades were beginning to look an unlucky bunch.

Zhvania's Career Path: From Eco-Glasnost to Greenhouse Gas

Few would have predicted that Zurab Zhvania would one day join Georgia's list of mysterious deaths. His career seemed to glide effortlessly upward despite numerous changes of political allegiance. Apart from his short-lived, active participation in the anti-Gamsakhurdia uprising, Mr. Zhvania avoided the para-military fatigues and posing beloved of so many other Georgian "reformers".

He had graduated in 1985 from Faculty of Biology at Tbilisi State University. Soon enough, as *glasnost* developed in Gorbachev's Soviet Union, Zurab Zhvania became a pioneer Green activist and helped to set up Georgia's Green Party in 1988. Although the *Guardian's* obituarist, Dan Brennan, said that Zhvania was not a Green in the environmental sense, in fact he was co-secretary of the European Greens in the late 1980s. This passing commitment to ecological values was something which Zhvania shared with a number of Georgia's current political leaders, like Speaker Nino Burjanadze and ex-Defence Minister, Giorgi Baramidze. The new Georgian premier, Zurab Noghaideli also followed the well-trodden path from Green activist to Shevardnadze apparatchik, and then to supporter of President Saakashvili.

Georgia is not alone in seeing ostensibly environmental dissidents turning into functionaries of Euro-Atlantic integration. Across the Black Sea in Bulgaria, the country's current foreign minister, Solomon Passy, was a leader of Eco-Glasnost in the late 1980s. Like their Georgian counterparts, Bulgarian Greens have moved on since then - Zhvania and Passy became lead local advocates of trans-Caucasian and Black Sea pipelines to carry oil and natural gas to the West. By 2005, backing for greenhouse gas industries was all that was left of their flirtation with ecology.

Strangely enough the European Parliament's Greens failed to note Zhvania's abandonment of key environmental principles. The Swedish MEP, Per Garthton paid tribute to Zhvania as "The

¹⁷ See <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav020705.shtml#>

¹⁸ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0797_february_8_2005/news_0797_3.htm

"realo" of the Rose Revolution"¹⁹ ("Realo" is the German term for a Green like Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, who moved from pacifism to backing NATO's war against Serbia in 1999, while "fundis" are the remnant of Greens who stuck to the movement's original anti-military stance.) Garhton admitted, "Zurab Zhvania, who still has a part of his soul with the Greens. But not the whole of it. One thing he does not understand: the principal of rotation, which some Green parties still implement in order to avoid the creation of a "new class" of professional politicians."

Mr Zhvania was the professional politician par excellence. In fact it was his typical political skills as a deal-maker who could shift from one political camp and cause to another without losing his footing which made him so successful in Georgian politics and such an attractive partner for foreign interlocutors, who sometimes found the fiery temperament of his fellow countrymen difficult to negotiate. President Saakashvili's exuberant and aggressive public style was in marked contrast to Zhvania's behind-the-scenes skills. One prefers the podium, the other worked best in smoked filled rooms.

Although not following Green principles of "anti-politics", since coming to power, Saakashvili has engaged in frequent rotation of ministers and other high officials. Even Supreme Court justices have rotated in and out of government raising fears for the genuine independence of the judiciary.²⁰ The whirligig of portfolios last came to rest only 7 weeks before Zhvania's death and in most analysts' estimation it was Zhvania's cronies, especially ex-Green Giorgi Baramidze, who lost out. Saakashvili's gang has been strengthening its grip on power after the open row erupted between Irakli Okruashvili who served as Saakashvili's number two from the late 1990s and Baramidze, Zhvania's protégé while President Saakashvili was in Ukraine celebrating the "orange" version of his own revolution. The public flare up between the two chief henchmen of the numbers one and two in Georgia was an index of tensions within the regime – and a threat to Zhvania's position as *numero due*.

By the end of February, 2005, the Georgian media openly speculated that Zhvania's protégés would have a short tenure in their new posts in the Noghaideli cabinet - Giorgi Baramidze was made state minister for European integration, Goga Khaindrava minister for conflicts resolution, and Zinaida Bestaeva, minister for civil integration. *The Messenger* commented, "The current organization of the government has been criticized on the grounds that the state ministries seem to duplicate the activities of other members of the cabinet." Clear evidence of this clash of jurisdictions occurred when "Baramidze stated shortly after his appointment, for example, that he would be involved in issues of conflicts resolution, for which Khaindrava is responsible; and it was apparent when Bestaeva was appointed state minister that she too, as an ethnic Ossetian, would also be involved in this issue."

Others criticise the title 'state minister' as meaning jobs for Zhvania's boys: "all the state minister posts were created solely to provide jobs for Rose revolution participants." But their abolition "would be one way for the president to rid the government of members of the team of late prime minister Zurab Zhvania - Bendukizde, Khaindrava and Baramidze are all supposed 'Zhvania men.'" It would leave Noghaideli isolated among Saakashvili protégés.²¹

Only a few years earlier, it had seemed inevitable that Zhvania would succeed Shevardnadze as president, firstly as his chosen successor, then as his ex-patron's nemesis after their falling out in 2000. After all, following Georgia's first intra-regime crisis in 1995 when the mafia boss, Djaba Ioseliani, was ejected from power as deputy to Shevardnadze, Zhvania became de facto number two as Speaker of the Georgian Parliament. (In the murky world of Georgian

¹⁹ See "The "realo" of the Rose Revolution – Georgia's professional democrat"
http://www.mp.se/default.asp?mainframe=templates/template_78.asp_Q_avdnr_E_12165_A_number_E_5774

²⁰ See Mary Makharashvili, "Khubua welcomed to replace Supreme Court's Kemularia *But such frequent changes in the court leadership can only have a negative effect, say NGOs*" @
http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0800_february_11_2005/news_0800_4.htm

²¹ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0811_february_28_2005/economy_0811_1.htm

clans and betrayal, Ioseliani accused Zhvania of being behind the murder of one of his henchmen, Union of Patriots leader Badri Zarandia, in Zugdidi on 10th January, 2003, shortly before his own death.)

Both Zhvania and Okruashvili played a role in organizing the 1995 elections which made Shevardnadze president and put their new party, the Citizen's Union of Georgia into a dominant position in parliament. BHHRG's observers found a variety of severe flaws in that poll, ranging from massively inflated numbers of signatures on Mr. Shevardnadze's nomination papers to irregularities on election day and in the count afterwards. The role of Zhvania and other "rose revolutionaries" in previous flawed polls under Shevardnadze made their sudden strictures against the conduct of the parliamentary poll a remarkable example of poacher-turned-gamekeeper.

Ironically, the elections in November, 2003, were the least corrupt conducted in Georgia since 1992 – but Zhvania and his team were not in charge of them as they had been in 1995 and 1999 and again after the "Rose Revolution". In November, 2003, no party predominated and the grotesque elephantiasis of party-lists polling far fewer votes than their nominal supporters was absent for the first time. In 1995 and 1999, all but three of the parties contesting the election failed to poll as many votes as the 50,000 voters who had officially signed their nomination papers! The same thing happened at re-runs held in March, 2004. Yet Mr Zhvania's role in mediating election results as he did in Adjara in March, 2004, never led Western media to doubt his democratic credentials.

In December, 2000, Michael Specter of *The New Yorker* had marked Zhvania out as the West's next favourite Georgian after Shevardnadze: "much of what Shevardnadze promised has come to pass. Terrorism is no longer a daily threat. Parliament is run not by thugs but by a thirty-seven-year-old democrat named Zurab Zhvania, who made his mark as an environmental activist!"²² To confirm that Zhvania apparently enjoyed the "mandate of heaven" from the West in 2002, George Soros's Open Society awarded him its Georgia Prize.

The aging Shevardnadze was clearly losing his support in the West – without which no Georgian ruler could last long. More than a decade of economic and social decline left him without a natural constituency at home once his foreign-backers withdrew their support and his protégés changed patron as they noticed the chill winds of change begin to buffet the "Silver Fox" so long lauded in Washington and Brussels. Foreign aid made up the decisive part of the state budget without which police and security forces could not be paid.

In June, 2002, Zhvania took the decisive step of leaving Shevardnadze's Citizen's Union of Georgia which he had led in practice from 1995 until the year before. He took up the Christian Conservative ticket before settling on the United Democrats. What's in a name? All Georgian parties are personality cults (to put it kindly) and he seemed set on taking charge. But it was not to be.

Zhvania had a big problem with Georgians themselves. Nobody may have spoken ill of him once dead (and no longer a rival) but alive Zhvania was much disliked. Rumours of his alleged homosexuality, which surfaced at the time of his death in a young man's flat, reflected Georgia's homophobic culture. Mr Saakashvili's spin doctors have cultivated the image of a lady killer as have Defence Minister, Okruashvili's friends – whatever the truth of these rumours. Zhvania's partly Armenian family background did not endear him to Georgia's many xenophobic chauvinists.²³ Zhvania was the classic born deputy whose aspirations to the top job were doomed to remain unfulfilled, though not necessarily so cruelly as turned out to be the case.

Stalin's Children: Georgia's New Ruling Elite

²² See http://www.michaelspecter.com/ny/2000/2000_12_18_tbilisi.html

²³ See <http://forum.armenianclub.com/archive/index.php/t-1452.html>

Western hopes for a successful Georgian transition to democracy and the market economy have repeatedly emphasised the youth of Georgia's political elite. After 1992, Shevardnadze was seen as sponsoring a new generation of leaders. Some of them eventually deposed him. President Saakashvili, Zhvania and the other leaders of the National Movement in power since 2003 are remarkably young by the standards of most political elites. However, presuming that they mark a break with the Soviet past simply on grounds of age is a very crude form of analysis..

For all the ruling National Movement's waving of the flag as its party symbol and its preference for Georgian folk costume²⁴ as a political statement, the members of the new elite are typical products of the Soviet Union. In the Western media emphasis is placed on the youth of the "reform-minded" team around President Saakashvili, but they are all old enough to have been educated in the old Soviet Union, descended from three generations of apparatchiks, who served the Soviet leaders from Lenin and Stalin until the collapse of the system in 1991.

Just as President Saakashvili benefited from the "unshakeable union of the peoples" to receive part of his education in Ukraine, so did his new Finance Minister, Valeri Chechelashvili, who learned his economics at Kiev's department of International Economics. The new prime minister, Zurab Noghaideli, had studied in late Soviet Estonia. Mrs Burjanadze's husband was a post-graduate at the Moscow Legislative Institute in the late 1980s while she was entering the Lomosov University there to study international law. Burjanadze's husband, Badri Bitsadze, later became head of Georgia's border guards. Her father was a long-time comrade of Shevardnadze running Georgia's bread industry, Khlebproduktov, under the Communist system and later as its privatised boss!

Having grown up under the reality of existing socialism with its organised hypocrisy masquerading as communism, the reformers – not only in Georgia – have found nothing more natural than to drop Marxist rhetoric in favour of the Market. But in reality they have gone from the cynical power politics of Marxism Leninism to an equally cynical Market Leninism. They and their forefathers in the Communist Party abandoned the quest for the Marxist utopia long before 1991, since when, they have adopted crony capitalism as their model. Like their Western allies in the media as well as in the consulting and donor agencies they have masked their plundering of post-Soviet society with an idealistic rhetoric. Nothing comes more naturally to such people than sweet words to hide cynical intentions – except perhaps sudden deadly fallings out among thieves.

Zhvania's legacy: Reforms always accelerating as reformers fall out

Ever since he fought Kalashnikov in hand to oust Georgia's elected President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in 1991, Zurab Zhvania had been in the front rank of those advocating democracy and the civil rights associated with it. Words, sweet words, became his weapons. He insisted while still Speaker of Parliament under Shevardnadze that the Georgian state had a "vital interest" in promoting freedom of speech: "I hope our listeners and readers will understand me correctly if I say that freedom of speech and thought is the main achievement of Georgian democracy. This victory belongs to all of us together."²⁵

At the time of his break with Shevardnadze over a tax-police raid on the Rustavi 2 television station which was the main audiovisual engine of criticism of the president, Zhvania said, as *The Times* obituary noted that "he would leave politics only when he could be sure 'that no-

²⁴ As Ambassador to Russia, the new Georgian Finance Minister, Valeri Chechelashvili, presented himself to President Putin in a traditional Georgian chokha! Imedi TV (7pm, 9th February, 2005) reported by BBC Monitoring.

²⁵ See <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/georgia/hypermail/200107/0067.html>.

one wags their finger at independent TV companies, that no-one attempts to use economic or other pretexts to terrorise and blackmail the public 's only source of truthful information"²⁶

If an un-persecuted media in Georgia were the criterion for Zhvania's disappearance from the political stage, then his death was certainly premature. Even Western media have had to admit that President Saakashvili does not tolerate criticism easily, let alone dissent.

The law on Freedom of the Media adopted in June, 2004, has been a dead letter from day one. Like so many reforms adopted under the joint Shevardnadze-Zhvania regime to meet OSCE and Council of Europe requirements, the new regime has also proclaimed freedoms which exist only to dazzle foreign delegations. Local Georgian media who backed the "rose revolution" now complain of increasing restrictions on journalistic activities even by comparison with their difficulties under Shevardnadze.²⁷

On 3rd August, 2004, Revaz Okruashvili, the editor of the Gori newspaper, *Sakhalkho gazeti* was arrested having been accused of possessing and dealing in drugs. The arrest revealed a split in the new regime. Rose revolutionaries, Giga Bokeria and Giorgi Arveladze, condemned the editor's arrest, saying that it was his criticism of the local governor, Mikheil Kareli, not only appointed by Saakashvili but hailed as a "hero" by the President, which had led the police to detain Okruashvili. Meanwhile his unrelated namesake, Irakli Okruashvili, then still Interior Minister and therefore boss of the police, said that "many people" who claimed to be journalists were drug dealers!²⁸

The Minister declared that his namesake's guilt was common knowledge: "[The] participation of Revaz Okruashvili in drug sales is widely known [in Gori]." Both the minister and the governor of the region had been students together.²⁹ Prosecutor Okruashvili was singled out by the Council of Europe for praise : "The Secretariat Delegation met with the new Prosecutor General on the first day following his appointment. Mr Irakli Okruashvili distinguished himself by fighting productively against corrupt police officers and organised crime activities during his short term as Governor of the Shida Kartli region."³⁰

Satirical shows which flourished on Rustavi 2 mocking the "dictator" Shevardnadze and his cronies have been taken off air since the "Rose Revolution". Talk shows and phone-ins too have been axed. Why should the 3% who didn't vote for Saakashvili, according to the OSCE approved poll in January, 2004, be allowed to drum their dissent into the ears of the satisfied 97%?³¹

When he wasn't eulogising free speech that grew out of the barrel of a gun, Mr Zhvania was denouncing factionalism and corrupt clans in Georgia. In summer, 2003, while still organising the opposition to Shevardnadze Zhvania said, "'A lot of people in the opposition have the same agenda -- to strengthen their position as much as possible for the presidential run in 2005. I consider this very stupid because right now we have the problem of dissolving the system of clan government which we have right now in Georgia. Within this system, nobody representing democratic political groups in Georgia will have any chance of winning the presidential race. We should understand that we are fighting to create an environment for democratic elections between political forces -- and not between gang troops, corrupt clans, and maybe some semi-political forces."³²

²⁶ See <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,60-1469553,00.html>

²⁷ See

²⁸ See <http://www.hri.org/news/balkans/rferl/2004/04-08-04.rferl.html>

²⁹ See http://www.civil.ge/eng/article_ngo.php?id=7552

³⁰ [http://www.coe.int/t/e/sg/Secretary-General/Information/Documents/Numerical/2004/SGInf\(2004\)04E.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/e/sg/Secretary-General/Information/Documents/Numerical/2004/SGInf(2004)04E.asp)

³¹ For a sample of alleged cases of media harassment by the new authorities going on just in late September/early October, 2004, , see <http://www.internews.ge/eng/digest/news.asp?i=426>

³² See Robert Parsons, "Georgia: Politicians Prepare For Critical Election Season" @ <http://www.rferl.org/features/2003/07/01072003155643.asp>

As so often with Zhvania, these were nice words. Sadly for him, and worse for Georgia, the toppling of Shevardnadze did not see the end of the clan system. How could it? Georgia's main mafia clans – the Rustavi boys, the Gori mob and the retainers of Saakashvili, Burzanadze and Zhvania themselves – were the rose revolutionaries. Just as in 1991 when it was the mob not people power which ousted Zviad Gamsakhurdia, so in 2003 it was a similar process. Just as in 1991, so in 2003, CNN and the BBC competed with each other to find reporters who could gush most enthusiastically about a “bloodless” revolution as the bloodied counter-demonstrators were chased away. “Bloodless” too often means “no-one on our side was hurt.” Back in 1991, mafia bosses Ioselini and Kitovani were extolled as “artists” and “intellectuals” as they provided the muscle to (re-)install Shevardnadze in power. Zhvania played a bit part then clutching his (presumably environmentally-friendly) Kalashnikov – though he was proud of a photo of his role a decade ago. Now just as the mobsters around Shevardnadze fell out as the rhetoric of reform could no longer hide the crude fight for spoils, so in 2005, it appears that the decomposition of the “rose revolution” into warring factions is under way.

Euro-Atlantic Integration in Theory and Practice

Euro-Atlantic integration was a recurrent theme of Zhvania's rhetoric and his mourners regularly recalled his statement on 27th January, 2001 - “I am a Georgian therefore I am a European” - to the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe (CoE) when the CoE agreed to admit Georgia as a member state even though it was a country which within months Zhvania would denounce as riddled with corruption, censorship and torture!³³

A week after Zurab Zhvania's death, President Saakashvili gave his “state of the nation” address to parliament. Not since Stalin reproached his comrades for being “dizzy with success” at the height of the man-made famine across the Soviet Union in 1931 can the gulf between a Georgian politician's boasting and social reality have been so wide. Saakashvili declared, “Today Georgia is a state and when we are asked what our major achievement is, it is that for the first time in Georgian history, Georgia has become a real state.”³⁴ Now President Saakashvili sees Georgia following the next wave of entrants into the EU itself. “Georgia will catch up Bulgaria and Romania within the next 4-5 years, the president said, and commenting on Georgia's chances of joining the European Union” he told Italian media, adding, “We are no less European than Lithuania.”³⁵

However, the success of state formation has not ended the problem of torture in Georgia.³⁶ Even though the U.S. State Department backs the government of President Saakashvili as effusively as once it endorsed Shevardnadze's administration, in its 2005 human rights report on Georgia it admits that “the Government's human rights record remained poor; although there were improvements in some areas, serious problems remained”. It noted deaths in custody and commented, “Law enforcement officers continued to torture, beat, and otherwise abuse detainees.” These are the kind of official abuses which BHHRG's observers have noted since 1992 and in the period since the change of regime. Recurrent reform initiatives have not been followed through. Georgia's former ombudsperson, Mrs Tevdoradze noted that in his previous incarnation as Shevardnadze's Minister of Justice, Mr Saakashvili had enacted changes to Georgia's corrupt courts and cruel prison system: “I think that there were two very important reforms.. These were court reform and the penitentiary reform, but unfortunately both of them turned out to be still-born.”³⁷ In fact, it was the post-Shevardnadze, Minister of Justice, Giorgi Papuashvili, who abolished a commission responsible for monitoring

³³ See http://216.239.59.104/search?q=cache:6v-pIA1UJ:www.ecoi.net/pub/mv168_cipdd-geo.pdf+Zhvania+clan&hl=en&ie=UTF-8

³⁴ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0800_february_11_2005/news_0800_1.htm

³⁵ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0808_february_23_2005/news_0808_1.htm

³⁶ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0813_march_2_2005/news_0813_3.htm

³⁷ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0813_march_2_2005/news_0813_3.htm

conditions in the Georgian penal system. The commission had been one of Mr. Saakashvili's initiatives during his time as justice minister in Shevardnadze's administration!³⁸

Even media self-censorship has grown since 2003. According to the State Department: "criticism of the Government in the media decreased during the year" and "[television] stations desiring benefits and better working relations with the authorities practiced increased self-censorship." For instance, last November, when a dispute broke out between the Orthodox Church and reformist seminary students and priests. "Media coverage was initially intense," the reports states, but, "In October, in a press conference, President Saakashvili called on the media to be more responsible in their coverage of this dispute. Immediately, all reporting on this dispute disappeared."³⁹

Although President Saakashvili assured the BBC that "Free media and fair elections rule out the existence of a dictatorial regime [in Georgia]." There are reasons to doubt how free Georgian journalists feel and whether the elections were free and fair in January and March, 2004.⁴⁰

Tensions inside the new regime



Flowers that say it all: Roses line the route of Zhvania's funeral cortege.

Only a day earlier, the former Finance Minister to both Mr Shevardnadze and President Saakashvili, Zurab Nogaidheli had been nominated as the new prime minister, even though he did not enjoy unanimous approval within the regime. But Zhvania's old friends like Mrs Tevdoradze and Nino Burjanadze who criticised the new premier's alleged inflexibility and poor intra-personal skills were soon prevailed upon to keep quiet.

Mrs Burjanadze's insistence that factions within Georgia's ruling elite did not exist contradicted her earlier statements. *The Messenger* reported, "On Tuesday Nino Burjanadze criticized the terms 'Zhvania's group' and 'the president's group' that are frequently used in the media, claiming such groups do not really exist. 'We will have talks today and finally the president will make a decision. It always was our will and Mr. Zurab's will that these groups should be united and that there should not be such divisions of the groups as Saakashvili's, Zhvania's and Burjanadze's,' said the speaker of parliament. 'Mr. Zurab Zhvania's decision

³⁸ See <http://www.ocnus.net/cgi-bin/exec/view.cgi?archive=52&num=13573>

³⁹ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0813_march_2_2005/news_0813_3.htm

⁴⁰ For Saakashvili's claim, see <http://www.ocnus.net/cgi-bin/exec/view.cgi?archive=52&num=13573>. See this Group's reports on Georgia in 2004 for the elections.

that the United Democrats should be unified with the National Movement stemmed from the fact that there should be no continued dividing into groups,' she said."⁴¹

The clannish nature of Georgian "reformers" is a public secret. For all of their rhetoric about Western style openness, auditing of state contracts, etc., Georgia's rulers since 1992 have repeatedly treated the public purse and state assets as a spoils system. Getting Western aid is part of this system and to get Western governments and sponsors to pay up requires verbal reassurance – not so much to the Western officials who are not averse to taking their own cut as to Western taxpayers who need to be shown that their rulers and representatives performed due diligence before the money is stolen.

Since Georgia's economic cake is shrinking and unemployment soaring, the pressures on those trying to carve up the spoils are growing. Away from the Western media reports eulogising flat taxes in a country where 40% or more of the population has no income, the dismissal of 100,000 public servants plus almost half of the employees of the main electricity generating company are symptoms of ongoing economic implosion rather than market reform. Georgia's birth-rate has halved since 1990, falling from 92,815 births to just 46,194 in 2003! During the same period, the population fell from 5,424,400 to 4,315,200.⁴² The minimum monthly pension reached 28 lari or \$15 dollars in 2004 while \$200 million was added to the defence budget in December that year. Maybe pensions were paid promptly for the first time but they were hardly a living income, even in Georgia. Even factors like the strengthening of the lari against the dollar and rouble – much boasted about by government ministers – actually hits ordinary people because so many depend on remittances from abroad and their value has fallen as prices rise at home.

For all the talk about fostering private enterprise little is in evidence. After the President told Parliament on 10th February about his ongoing successful reform programme, the only opposition party leader, David Gamkrelidze (whose New Rights party has excellent links in Washington should the present reformers' time run out) declared, "Small businesses are in a bad state, the economy is in stagnation," adding that the economic policy of the government could be summed up as "selling property to [economy supremo] Bendukidze's friends."⁴³ Kaka Bendukidze was a Russian-based ethnic Georgian oligarch until 2004 when he returned to Georgia to run the economy promising to privatise everything - except "our souls"! George Soros is a shareholder in his OMZ group, which, among other things, runs Russia's nuclear power plants.⁴⁴

Georgia's Crowded Political Summit

After the Rose Revolution, the post of prime minister was specially created for Zurab Zhvania, but the new President who had leap-frogged over him into the top spot seemed anxious to consolidate power in his hands.

Far from reducing the presidential powers which he inherited from Shevardnadze, Saakashvili has been bent on concentrating even more powers of patronage in his own hands. The day before Zhvania died, the Georgian Parliament balked at handing the President the power to appoint all nine judges on the Constitutional Court as well as other constitutional amendments and the creation of a super-law and order ministry, renaming the Interior Ministry the Ministry for Police and Public Order reminiscent in scope of Stalin's NKVD. Saakashvili also proposed reducing the number of parliamentary deputies from 225 to 150.⁴⁵

⁴¹ http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0798_february_9_2005/news_0798_1.htm Mrs Tevdoradze's daughter was arrested in 2004 after falling out with the new mayor of Tbilisi, Zurbab Tchiuberashvili, soon after his appointment by Mr. Saakashvili.

⁴² See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0800_february_11_2005/news_0800_brief.htm

⁴³ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0800_february_11_2005/news_0800_2.htm

⁴⁴ For Bedukidze, Soros and OMZ, see http://www.rusnet.nl/news/2003/09/30/usinesseconomics_06_5239.shtml

⁴⁵ See <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/georgia/hypermail/news/0005.shtml> In Ukraine a similar (unreported) expansion of de facto presidential power has taken place since Saakashvili's friend Viktor Yushchenko was installed by "people power" there.

Did Zhvania influence many National Movement MPs to challenge the President's proposals?

Already in February, 2004, the Georgian Parliament had endorsed a new presidential right to appoint and dismiss ordinary judges. Saakashvili also acquired the right to dissolve parliament without its own consent. These reforms were debated and passed before the proposals were formally published!⁴⁶

The post of prime minister had been specifically created as a consolation prize for Zhvania, so long Shevardnadze's dauphin and now piped of the presidential prize by Saakashvili. Will it survive the demise of its *raison d'être*?

Georgian commentators seem to agree that the appointment of Zhvania's finance minister, Zurab Nogaideli, (who naturally also served Shevardnadze in that role) is a sign of two things: Saakashvili wanted to reassure Zhvania's political clan that not all of them faced political oblivion but at the same time the premiership would not be held by a figure with any independent stature. Georgian analyst, Ia Antadze, gave a telling index of how close the new premier was to his deceased predecessor: "Zurab Zhvania and Zurab Nogaideli were close friends. Zhvania even involved Nogaideli in the privatization process."⁴⁷

Reform = War

On his return to power in 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze stoked up tension with Georgia's breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Abkhazia's beautiful coastline had been the playground of the Soviet Union and the charms of its *nomenklatura dachas* beckoned to the mafia dons who had reinstalled Shevardnadze by force in Georgia's early experiment in "people power" which overthrew the elected president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union at exactly the same time as Gamsakhurdia was chased into exile, South Ossetia suddenly took on significance as the new international boundary with Russia made it an entrepot for smuggling to and from Moscow and the Russian regions, including insurgent Chechnya. Shevardnadze let loose the dogs of war in August, 1992, replacing Gamsakhurdia's war of words with the Abkhazian separatists with an all out onslaught by his robber barons, Djaba Ioseliani and Tengiz Kitovani. Probably Shevardnadze hoped that by sending these potential rivals to loot the coastal resorts of his country's north-west he would be able to consolidate power in Tbilisi in peace. Instead the Georgian forces were routed and Shevardnadze was forced to resort to summary executions to maintain order as his rabble fled.

Maybe Zhvania, whose career profited from the murderous folly of that war, had tried to remind his bellicose young president of the grim realities of those days. Soon after taking office, President Saakashvili announced, "Every minister must take a sub-machine gun in his hands, wear a military uniform and run 10 kilometers - or less if he cannot," Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili told journalists. "The important thing is that all of them take part in military training."⁴⁸ For all of this Mussolini-style emphasis on military training for his ministers and his bombastic rhetoric, President Saakashvili was sensibly studying abroad when the debacle at Sukhumi in September, 1993, almost destroyed the "reformer"

⁴⁶ See 66.116.100.86/humanrights.ge/eng/files/REPORT.pdf

⁴⁷ See <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=9027>

⁴⁸ See <http://newsfromrussia.com/world/2004/05/17/53951.html>. The minister for settling conflicts, Giorgi Khaindrava, who had refused to "serve on principle because it was the Soviet army" before 1991 was among the first to show enthusiasm for the new belligerence: "I always thought that the time would come when we would have our own army. Today, I will join the unit, where big physical loads are practiced, with pleasure."

Shevardnadze's career and might have cut short Zurab Zhvania's ascent up the greasy pole of Georgian politics.⁴⁹

Saakashvili's exuberant approach to resolving political issues had begun to divide him from Zhvania even before Shevardnadze fell from power. Zhvania had pushed Saakashvili forward to be head of the parliamentary fraction of the Citizens' Union in August 1998 but after both broke with Shevardnadze, Zhvania had criticised his protégé's tendency to what he called in February, 2002, "excessive radicalism." Once in power together this tension reappeared.

Zhvania seems to have counselled caution and sought non-violent solutions where his younger president preferred threats and even direct action. Certainly, the response to Mr Zhvania's death in South Ossetia, the more exposed of the two breakaway states, was measured and sympathetic. According to *24 Hours*, "Eduard Kokoity, president of the self-declared South Ossetian republic, stated that Zurab Zhvania had supported peaceful solution of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, and "made great efforts to end Georgian aggression in the summer of 2004." Kokoity expressed hope that Zhvania's death would not negatively affect the negotiation process."⁵⁰ Zhvania's role in the separatist question was symptomatic of his personal authority within the post-Shevardnadze regime according to Georgian commentators. Paata Zakareishvili commented after the premier's death: "The Prime Minister is not directly authorized to interfere in the conflict resolution process. The fact that Zurab Zhvania often participated in conflict resolution issues was a result of his personality and not from his position. Zhvania was just an acceptable political figure for the authorities in breakaway South Ossetia and Abkhazia."⁵¹

President Saakashvili is not alone in deploying bloodcurdling rhetoric and crude threats. For instance, referring to the newly-elected president of Abkhazia, Saakashvili's Defence Minister, Okruashvili declared on 16th December, 2004, "I do not intend to remain [defense] minister more than five years," he said. "That leaves [Bagapsh] faced with the following choice: either by the end of this period he returns to his native Russia, or he leaves this world."⁵² Zhvania preferred to avoid this type of brutal street-mobster language.

Of course, Okruashvili is only echoing the brutal rhetoric of President Saakashvili who last August declared, "I earlier gave an order, and it still stands, that we should immediately open fire on and sink every ship that enters Abkhazia. I want to make sure that so-called Russian tourists hear this. It is not a place for you to put out deck-chairs..."⁵³ Needless to add, Senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain have nominated Mr Saakashvili for the Nobel Peace Prize, proving that in the halls of Congress at least the age of satire is not yet dead. Their encomium asserts that Saakashvili had "displayed an extraordinary commitment to peace," along with co-nominee and ex-border guard, Viktor Yushchenko.⁵⁴

Although Zhvania paid a provocative visit to the Georgian enclaves inside South Ossetia on 14th August, 2004, when shots were allegedly fired at his convoy by the Ossetes, in practice he was regarded as a moderate in the new regime in Tblisi.

⁴⁹ Of course, like his Ukrainian counterpart, Viktor Yushchenko, Mr Saakashvili was trained in the Soviet era as a border guard – but they were only taught how to shoot at would be refugees not Abkhazians firing back. See <http://newsfromrussia.com/world/2004/05/17/53951.html>.

⁵⁰ See <http://www.24hours.ge/index.php?n=188&r=1&id=793>

⁵¹ See <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=9027>

⁵² See <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2004/12/mil-041217-rfer101.htm> & www.kvali.com/kvali/index.asp?obiektiv=show&n=241. On 8th April, 2004, BBC Radio 4's "Crossing Continents" was devoted to a flattering portrait of the new prosecutor-general by Tim Whewell, who made a similar presentation of the case for the prosecutor on BBC 2's "Newsnight. It is unclear whether Mr Whewell is a routine reporter or master satirist.

⁵³ See *MoscowNews* (4th August, 2004).

⁵⁴ See "Yushchenko, Saakashvili nominated for Nobel Prize" @ <http://www.mosnews.com/news/2005/01/27/orangenobels.shtml>.

Following Zhvania's death, and the transference of Okruashvili's rival, Giorgi Baramidze, from the defence ministry the regional question began to heat up. The EU and NATO were not necessarily helping to calm matters.

The Messenger reported, "The EU Special Representative, Heikki Talvitie also said that he intends to visit both conflict zones at the end of March, adding that he had told this to Secretary of the Security Council Gela Bezhuashvili, who he met while in Tbilisi. "I also met with State Minister for Conflicts Resolution Goga Khaindrava one week ago when I arrived in Georgia. Both people are very important for the South Ossetian plan," he said. By the time he returns, he concluded, "the new Georgian prime minister will have been appointed."

"We have to go over this new situation and see how we proceed but I believe that we should not delay too much. I think that the new Georgian prime minister will have to solve many priorities and South Ossetia is one of them." The fear is that diplomatic double-speak means that the EU and NATO will back another attack on the separatist republics starting with South Ossetia in the spring.⁵⁵

NATO's peace plan for the region included Lithuania's despatch of 14,000 Kalashnikovs to Georgia, a country awash in automatic weaponry!⁵⁶ While the United States will supply \$12 million to buy weapons from America.⁵⁷

Meanwhile anti-Russian rhetoric is also on the rise in Tbilisi. Both Speaker Burjanadze and Gigi Bokeria, the leather-jacketed key Rose revolutionary, are demanding the withdrawal of remaining Russian troops. They accuse Russia of failing to honour agreements to train a new Georgian army (something being done now by U.S. advisers) and of failing to bring an end to Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatism. Whether proposals to prevent new Russian troops rotating into their two bases in Georgia, effectively blockading them, will lead to a peaceful solution to the issue may be doubted.⁵⁸

Springtime in the Caucasus could be a season of war.

Conclusion: 1993 all over again?

Marx famously said history repeats itself first as tragedy then as farce. Georgia looks set to be an exception to Marx's dictum. Tragedy is repeating itself.

The death of Zurab Zhvania has removed a moderating influence on the Rose regime in power since November, 2003. President Saakashvili's bellicose tendencies risk plunging the South Caucasus region back into the kind of bloody mayhem seen in 1993. He may have ousted Adjara's Aslan Abashidze bloodlessly in May, 2004, with the help of the late Messers Zhvania and Jincharadze, but South Ossetia and Abkhazia are not inhabited by ethnic Georgians and so the taboo on mutual bloodletting among Georgians which held - for once - in May, 2004, may well not apply if the two breakaway regions are attacked. They have proved tough nuts to crack so far. The Georgian armed forces may be wearing NATO-style uniforms but their professionalism is much criticised even by their political masters. Yet arms

⁵⁵ See Anna Arazanova, "EU representative praises Zhvania for 'delivering' People go, but life must go on, and peace plan must go ahead as planned, says Talvitie" in *The Messenger* (9th February, 2005) @ http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0798_february_9_2005/news_0798_2.htm

⁵⁶ See "Lithuania sends Georgia 14,000 Kalashnikovs" in *The Messenger* (10th February, 2005) @ http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0799_february_10_2005/news_0799_brief.htm#4

⁵⁷ See *The Messenger's* editorial, "Foreign interests and Georgian democracy" @ http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0800_february_11_2005/opinion_0800.htm

⁵⁸ See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0812_march_1_2005/opinion_0812.htm

shipments from the West and supportive rhetoric in Washington and Brussels suggests that an attack could be imminent.

Zhvania's moderation may have owed more to his business interests – for being linked with clans who stood to lose from violence. Also if an attack were successful Zhvania's clan would face being pushed aside by the triumphant "young Turks" around Saakashvili. Nonetheless, whatever his motivations, Zurab Zhvania represented the politics of deal-making rather than brute force.

As Georgia's economy stagnates and poverty remains endemic, a foreign adventure offers the Rose regime its best chance of survival, or so it seems. Whether it is anyone else's interests inside Georgia is open to doubt. The West is backing the suppression of the so-called "union of unrecognised states" from Nagorno-Karabakh to Transnistria as part of a geo-political settlement of pipeline routes and the hedging in of Russia, but the price for locals will be high. Ironically, even as the US Senate passed a resolution presenting its condolences to Zhvania's family and noting that "Georgia's integration into the Euro Atlantic institutions will be the climax of Zurab Zhvania's plans and his long-term heritage,"⁵⁹ Zhvania's death opens the way for the little local war of "Euro-Atlantic integration" which he opposed until his demise silenced his doubts about the wisdom of attacking Georgia's separatist regions.

(9496 words)

⁵⁹See http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/0800_february_11_2005/news_0800_brief.htm