

Georgia Justice Hinges On Who Is the Leader

By [Paul Rimple](#)

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As my cleaning lady predicted, former Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania has come back from the netherworld of Georgian supposition with nails and coffins intended for the country's new opposition leaders. The stable political transition we had all hoped for is being threatened by the Georgian version of "High Plains Drifter."

Giorgi Zhvania, the late prime minister's brother who has also become a lawmaker for the new majoritarians, Georgian Dream, went on television last week and claimed that his brother's death was staged by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, Vano Merabishvili, Zurab Adeishvili and Giorgi Baramidze. He said the case would be reopened.

In the early hours of Feb. 3, 2005, Zurab Zhvania and a deputy governor, Raul Usupov, were found dead in a small rented Tbilisi apartment. The official cause of their deaths was carbon monoxide poisoning from a malfunctioning gas heater. The deaths were deemed accidental, but conspiracies came out even before rigor mortis set in.

At the time, most everybody said the FSB did it, because Russians always do it. Georgians say Russians whacked 19th-century nationalist Ilia Chavchavadze, President Zviad Gamsakhurdia and political leaders Gia Chanturia and Merab Kostava in the 1990s. "External forces" have always been out to destabilize Georgia.

The finger-pointing didn't stop at Russia. Some thought Saakashvili had much to gain with Zhvania being dead and that Zhvania had planned to form an opposition. Irakli Okruashvili, the hawkish defense minister at the time, also claimed — after jumping bail and defecting — that the Saakashvili administration was behind the death.

Although an FBI investigation concurred with official findings, questions remain unanswered. Most people die of carbon monoxide poisoning in their sleep in as little as 15 minutes, but Zhvania was found in the living room and Usupov on the kitchen floor. The symptoms are dizziness, nausea and headache. If Zhvania and Usupov weren't intoxicated, as claimed, how could they not notice something was wrong?

Now that the courts are free from Saakashvili's yoke, Giorgi Zhvania is getting the case reinvestigated. His timing couldn't be worse. The post-election dust hasn't settled yet, and he's already calling for the heads of the country's former leaders. Moreover, Georgia's judicial system has never functioned independently, and there is no guarantee that it won't do the right thing for the new sheriff in town, like it did for the previous one.

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