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Loyalty to West Prevails Over Afghan War Death

By Matthew Collin

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The family grieved. The politicians mouthed their somber condolences. But apart from that, there was little public reaction in Tbilisi to the death of the first Georgian soldier in Afghanistan this month.

The Kremlin-backed television channel Russia Today suggested that the killing of Mukhran Shukvani in the notoriously violent province of Helmand had "sparked debate" over Georgia's role in the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan. It quoted a spokesman for the perennially antagonistic but electorally marginal Labor Party accusing Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili of using the blood of young Georgian men to further his political ambitions.

But the supposed "debate" went no further. There have been no significant anti-war protests in Georgia despite the country's deployment of troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq, where five Georgians have also died. Although public opinion is divided about whether Georgia should be sending soldiers to fight on distant front lines, some people see it as a risk worth

taking to prove the country's value to the West.

"Georgia's prestige and international support grows because of our role in foreign peace operations," said one respondent to a public opinion survey about Shukvani's death in a Georgian newspaper.

"If Georgia wants to be part of the civilized world, it should participate in peacekeeping missions aimed at ensuring security worldwide," suggested another.

When Georgia first sent troops to bolster the U.S. occupation forces in Iraq, a defense official told me that the aim was to show that Georgia was "a contributor to global security, not just a consumer of it." That soundbite is still being deployed by officials here. Although they pulled 2,000 soldiers out of Iraq during the war with Russia in 2008, their 950-member contingent in Afghanistan looks set to remain.

The reason appears to have more to do with local rather than global security. Georgia wants to demonstrate that it is a reliable military partner while it continues to press its fading bid to join NATO. That is understandable, considering Russian troops still hold positions located only an hour's drive from Tbilisi — in violation of the cease-fire deal that ended the war in 2008.

NATO membership is seen by many Georgians as a potential prophylactic against further Russian advances, and it could take a lot more deaths in the brutal wilderness of Helmand to change their minds.

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