The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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Georgia Calls for Probe of Former President's Death

February 23, 2011

TBILISI — Georgian lawmakers have requested a new investigation into the mysterious death of the country's first post-Soviet president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was ousted in a military coup shortly after leading the country to independence.

Officially, Gamsakhurdia — a former Soviet dissident and Georgian nationalist — killed himself with a single gunshot to the head in December 1993 after leading an uprising that failed to reverse his removal two years earlier. But many supporters say he was murdered, and much about his death in a village in western Georgia remains mysterious.

The Georgian parliament asked prosecutors on Tuesday to open a new investigation into Gamsakhurdia's death after hearing the conclusions of a parliamentary commission, set up in 2009 and led by Gamsakhurdia's elder son, Konstantine.

The lawmakers voted to hand investigators the commission's 335-page report on Gamsakhurdia's overthrow and death.

"We sent this document, the conclusions of our commission, to the Prosecutor General's Office to investigate this case and to find out the truth about the decease of the first president of Georgia," Konstantine Gamsakhurdia told Reuters.

Konstantine said his father had been "persecuted by the special forces" and blamed the government of former President Eduard Shevardnadze, an ex-Soviet foreign minister. The commission's conclusions did not support the official version of the death as a suicide, he said.

The son of a famous writer, Gamsakhurdia led Georgia to independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, taking power after winning a 1990 parliamentary election in the Soviet Union's first free multi-party vote.

But many blame him for fanning the flames of nationalism that plunged Georgia into civil war and helped push the pro-Russian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into breaking away from Tbilisi.

Ousted in a December 1991 coup, he fled abroad but returned to fight the government of Shevardnadze — himself ousted in the 2003 Rose Revolution that brought President Mikheil Saakashvili to power.

Gamsakhurdia was first buried in western Georgia, where he died in 1993, but his widow had him reburied in Chechnya when she moved there.

Saakashvili, declaring Gamsakhurdia a statesman and patriot, organized the return of his body to Georgia from Russia in 2008.

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