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How Animal Farm Plays Out in Georgia

By Paul Rimple

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A European Court of Human Rights ruling in April found Georgia guilty of human rights violations in regards to the high-profile murder case of Tbilisi banker Sandro Girgvliani. While the administration has agreed to pay 50,000 euros ($72,000) to the Girgvliani family for nonpecuniary damages, it will not reinvestigate the case, a decision opposition leaders say confirms a coverup.

On Jan. 27, 2006, Girgvliani and his friend Levan Bukhaidze walked into an upscale cafe where Girgvliani's girlfriend was sitting with Interior Ministry officials. Girgvliani, upset with the company his girlfriend was keeping, insulted a ministry official at the table. When the two friends left the cafe an hour later, four men stuffed them in a Mercedes and drove them to a cemetery outside Tbilisi where they were stripped and beaten. Bukhaidze survived the assault, while the half-naked body of Girgvliani was found the next day covered in lesions and bruises with a dozen knife wounds on his throat.

The investigation and trial that followed fueled a growing opposition movement and became a key political issue, as it was largely believed that the murder was ordered from above and that

investigators covered up links to other Interior Ministry officials.

Gia Alania, former head of the first unit of the Interior Ministry's department for constitutional security, was sentenced to eight years in prison, while three officials from the same department were sentenced in July 2006 to seven years on the same charge.

But the same month, a 14-year-old boy received a 10-year prison sentence for attempted murder. Apparently in Georgia, a child can be imprisoned longer for attempted murder than an adult murderer, particularly if that adult works at the Interior Ministry.

In August 2007, Georgia's Supreme Court reduced the sentences of all four police officials by six months. Saakashvili pardoned them the next year.

The European court found this kind of justice disagreeable, noting that "different branches of State power ... had all acted in concert in preventing justice from being done."

Georgia's parliamentary minority has twice requested an investigation of these cases. The ruling party has flatly refused, claiming that exploiting families' tragedies for "gaining political scores" is wrong. Presumably, the miscarriage of justice is right.

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