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Georgia's Chicken Has Come Home to Roost

By Paul Rimple

November 10, 2012



Bacho Akhalaia, Georgia's former interior minister, arrogantly returned to Georgia a week ago from a self-imposed exile following parliamentary elections to answer, as he put it, all the "absurd and idiotic" allegations against him. Akhalaia should have known better. He was arrested within 24 hours for "exceeding official powers" — that is, physically abusing subordinates — and "illegal deprivation of freedom." If convicted, he could face up to 18 years in a prison that he used to manage.

Akhalaia made a name for himself when, at 25, he became head of the penitentiary department and was given authority to use all methods, including those that reportedly violated human rights, to crush Georgia's criminal networks. After the disastrous war with Russia in August 2008, he was promoted to defense minister.

Meanwhile, his brother, Data, earned a cutthroat reputation as head of the Interior Ministry's secret police. He was implicated in the 2006 murder of Sandro Girgvilani, a banker beaten

to death by four Interior Ministry officers, whom President Mikheil Saakashvili pardoned after they served only two years of their seven- and eight-year sentences. Data Akhalaia is still in hiding.

Georgian chief of staff Giorgi Kalandadze and infantry commander Zurab Shamatava were also arrested on related charges. Former Prime Minister Vano Merabashvili said their arrests were reminiscent of the KGB. No irony here. When Merabashvili was interior minister, his cops were the masters of overkill, raiding a television station at gunpoint during a broadcast, beating handcuffed opposition protesters and, according to human rights reports over the past decade, routinely torturing prisoners.

The arrests have postponed NATO's military commission to Georgia, a delegation representing 28 countries, which had been expected to pass Georgia along to the next step of integration. Saakashvili will no doubt have something to say about all this when he addresses the NATO Parliamentary Assembly session in Prague on Monday, as will Prime - Minister-elect Bidzina Ivanishvili when he meets NATO Secretary General Anders Rasmussen in Brussels the following day. So much for working together toward NATO membership.

Akhalaia is just a chicken that has come home to roost. Ivanishvili may have been able to salvage NATO's visit to Georgia at the expense of Kalandadze and Shamatava, but that would have meant that some people are above the law. Rather than seeing how this harms NATO integration, it might be worthwhile to see how this could help it. NATO officers do not beat subordinates.

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