



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Special Operation on Gabriel Salosi Street and its Consequences

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On 22 December 2017, a special operation was organized against a small armed group at an apartment located on Gabriel Salosi Street. Following a clash lasting several hours, the Georgian Special Forces killed the leader of this armed group, IS field commander, Ahmed Chataev, and his two companions, Ibrahim Adashev and Aslanbeg Soltahmadov. The fourth member of the group, Shoaip Borzиеv, was arrested before the beginning of the skirmish.¹ A month later, on 26 December, the Counter Terrorism Department apprehended four alleged members of Mr. Chataev's group with a fifth heavily injured and later succumbing to his injuries from the force used by the Georgian Special Forces.² Later, owing to an alleged association with this group, two individuals were arrested in Georgia³ and one in Turkey.⁴

As noted above, the individual who was wounded and died during the special operation was a resident of the Pankisi Gorge, Tamerlan Machalikashvili. According to the version of the information given by the authorities, Mr. Machalikashvili was collaborating with Ahmed Chataev's group and was holding a hand grenade during the attempt to arrest him which caused the use of force. However, Mr. Machalikashvili's family, his lawsuits and a group of NGOs all express skepticism towards the official version.⁵ The ombudsman also raises the question of a potential misuse of force by Georgian law enforcement.⁶ The death of Tamerlan Machalikashvili has led to strong grievances and protests in the Pankisi Gorge.

The incident with Ahmed Chataev's group and its further developments have revealed several problematic issues in Georgia's national security. Namely:

1. Problem of Border Defense

The clash with Ahmed Chataev's group has demonstrated severe gaps in the defense of the country's borders. According to the State Security Service of Georgia, Mr. Chataev's

¹ Statement of the State Security Service <http://ssg.gov.ge/news/306/saxelmtsifo-usaftrxoebis-samsaxuris-gancxadeba> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

² State Security Service of Georgia Detained 5 Individuals on Charges of Financing, Providing other Material Support and Resources to Terrorist Activities <http://ssg.gov.ge/news/303/sus-ma--terorizmis-dafinansebis--terroristuli-saqmianobis-sxvagvari-materialuri-mxardacheris-da-resursebit-uzrunvelyofis-braldebit-5-piri-daakava> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

³ Anatoli Berdzenishvili was Arrested on Charges of Assisting Ahmed Chataev <http://reginfo.ge/people/item/4735-axmed-chataevis-daxmarebis-braldebit-anatoli-berwenishvili-daakaves> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

⁴ Gocha Saginadze Arrested as Part of the Investigation of Chataev's Case <http://reginfo.ge/people/item/4462-chataevis-saqmis-gamowiebis-parglebshi-turqetshi-gocho-saginawe-daakaves> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

⁵ Lawyer: Why Did Machalikashvili Die While he was About to be Transported? <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/128454-advokati-ratom-gardaivala-machalikashvili-mashin-roca-gadakvana-igegmeboda> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

⁶ <https://radioway.ge/news/human-rights/item/677-ombudsmeni-%E2%80%93-maqsimalurs-gavakete%2C-rata-dadgindes%2C-moxda-tu-ara-walis-gadameteba-spezoperaziisas> [Accessed 15 May 2018]



accomplices facilitated his transportation to Georgia's border and then assisted him in illegally entering the country through the Kirnati-Maradidu section of the Georgian-Turkish border.⁷ The official version suggests that the mountainous and forested sections of Georgian borders are poorly controlled. The loopholes in border defense create a fertile environment for a variety of illicit activities. Aside from militant groups, smugglers, human traffickers, drug cartels and foreign intelligence also could benefit from these routes. It is known, that Turkish-Georgian border has better infrastructure compared to the borders between Georgia and its other neighbors, which increases the risk of illegal penetration. Moreover, the demarcation of state borders between Georgia and its neighboring countries, except Turkey, is still problematic.⁸

2. Available Weapons and Explosives

⁷ State Security Service of Georgia Detained 5 Individuals on Charges of Financing, Providing other Material Support and Resources to Terrorist Activities <http://ssg.gov.ge/news/303/sus-ma--terorizmis-dafinansebis--terroristuli-saqmianobis-sxvagvari-materialuri-mxardacheris-da-resursebit-uzrunvelyofis-braldebit-5-piri-daakava> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

⁸ Matsne <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3710484> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

The skirmish on Gabriel Salosi Street has shown that Ahmed Chataev's group possessed enough weapons and explosives for a long-standing resistance against the Georgian Special Forces. The information obtained by the media lists more than 1,000 bullets and tens of optical devices confiscated during the special operation. In addition, military radios, backpacks, binoculars and bullets were found in a hiding place near Tbilisi.⁹ According to the State Security Service, Mr. Chataev blew himself up during the clash which shows that the group also possessed explosives.¹⁰ This all suggests that these persons, who illegally entered Georgia, were able to obtain a large amount of weapons. Georgian security services did not reveal information on the origin of these weapons. Theoretically, the weapons could have been obtained abroad or from the occupied territories. Illegal weapons on Georgia's controlled territories could be available for extremist organizations as well as organized crime groups.

3. Operational Failure

According to official information, members of Ahmed Chataev's group have been residing in Georgia for extended periods of time. They were also out in public places in Tbilisi despite Shoaip Borziev's being on Interpol's wanted list.¹¹ Furthermore, some of the group members visited the Pankisi Gorge and communicated with numerous local residents.¹² After entering Georgia, Ahmed Chataev resided in a safe apartment for a period of several months¹³ which already had been the subject of counter terrorism measures. Therefore, the apartment's landlord must have been under increased control from Georgian security services.¹⁴ The events show that Georgian law enforcement did not manage to identify the group beforehand and prevent an incident. Notably, IS militants managed to enter Georgia whereas residents of the North Caucasus or the Pankisi Gorge undergo additional security measures every time they cross the Georgian border. Additionally, Georgian security services did not manage to identify the real name of Shoaip Borziev during his arrest.

⁹ Courier Exclusive: Scandalous Materials of Chataev's Case <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/94286> [watch from 09:59] [Accessed 15 May 2018]

¹⁰ Statement of Georgia's State Security Service <http://ssg.gov.ge/news/306/saxelmtsifo-usaftrxoebis-samsaxuris-gancxadeba> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

¹¹ Statement of Georgia's State Security Service <http://ssg.gov.ge/news/306/saxelmtsifo-usaftrxoebis-samsaxuris-gancxadeba> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

¹² Yusuf Khangoshvili from Pankisi Called for Interrogation <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/94419> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

¹³ The Deadly Route from Pankisi to Syria <https://www.kvirispalitra.ge/versia/24801-pankisi-siriis-sasikvdilo-marshruti-qamboben-is-khalkhi-ushishroebasthan-aris-shekrulioq.html> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

¹⁴ The Apartment with an Armed Group was under the Surveillance by State Security Service <http://reginfo.ge/people/item/3875-bina,-sadz-sheiaragebuli-jgupi-iybo,-sus-is-dakvirvebis-qvesh-imybopeboda>

4. Special Operation

Due to the lack of information, it is difficult to speak about the strengths and weaknesses of the Georgian Special Forces. According to official information, prolonged negotiations with the group were followed by a special operation which lasted nearly 20 hours.¹⁵ One member of the Special Forces died during the clash. Published footage shows that heavy machinery was also utilized during the operation along with the Special Forces.¹⁶ The positive sides of the operation could be considered as the lack of casualties or hostages among civilians and the detention of one of the group members. However, the special operation raises several questions. How effective were the negotiations with the armed group? Was the death of the law enforcement officer avoidable? Did the group attempt to use a human shield and take hostages? Did someone from Ahmed Chataev's group manage to escape from the place of the operation as was reported in the media?¹⁷ Currently, additional information on the incident is classified which makes it impossible to answer these questions.

5. Public Relations

Public relations were highly problematic during the incident. Authorities failed to establish efficient communication with the media; the poor functioning of the press offices of the law enforcement agencies was obvious while some high-ranking executives even blamed the media for their live broadcast of confidential details of the special operation.¹⁸ The government also denied the existence of Ahmed Chataev among the armed group even though information about this fact was leaked via the media a few hours after the end of the clash. In such cases, an incorrect information campaign could cause panic among the public and complicate the situation even more.

6. Transit of Militants from Syria to the North Caucasus

The incident with Ahmed Chataev's group has raised the issue of the transit of North Caucasian militants from Syria. IS has already lost control over vast territories which increases the likelihood of the migration of foreign fighters back to their countries of origin.

¹⁵ The Operation on Gabriel Salosi Street Finished <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/126781-beri-gabriel-salosis-quchaze-specoperacia-dasrulda> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

¹⁶ Killing of the Terrorists <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TosK2DA7zVY> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

¹⁷ Two Members of Terrorist Group Escaped <http://www.newposts.ge/?l=G&id=157850-%E1%83%A2%E1%83%94%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A2%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98.%20%E1%83%A4%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A2%E1%83%9D%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

¹⁸ Sozar Subari's Statement about Incident on Gabriel Salosi Street <https://imedinews.ge/ge/video/1100/sozar-subaris-gantskhadeba-beri-gabriel-salosis-quchaze-mimdinare-movlenebis-shesakheb> [Accessed 15 May 2018]

According to the official data, at least 2,700 militants from the North Caucasus have fought in Syria and Iraq.¹⁹ The majority of these individuals could attempt to travel legally or illegally back to their homelands through Georgia. The transit of foreign fighters could potentially damage Georgia's international reputation and also trigger Russia's more aggressive interference in Georgia's domestic issues.

Conclusions

The skirmish on Gabriel Salosi Street demonstrated a series of problematic issues in Georgia's state security. The situation requires taking measures in various spheres:

Recommendations

- Modernization of a border infrastructure and intensive cooperation with neighboring states.
- Controlling all possible routes of illegal weapons and explosives trafficking.
- Intensive sharing of information with partner states.
- Detailed analysis and examination of current trends in the North Caucasus.
- Intensive preparation for the Special Forces for clashes in densely populated districts and possible hostage-takings.
- Establishment of an efficient public relations strategy based on the experience of other states in order to avoid panic in society.
- Resort to force only in the case of an inevitable necessity. Russia and Uzbekistan's counter terrorism practice shows the ineffectiveness of coercive and hardline counter terrorist policy which in the long run facilitates radicalization.

¹⁹ C. Moore and M. Youngman. *'Russian Speaking' Fighters in Syria, Iraq and at Home: Consequences and Context*, 2017: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/russian-speaking-fighters-full-report/>