



Georgia: A Counterterrorism Operation Raises Questions

OE Watch Commentary: When Georgian security forces conducted an intense, 20-hour long special counterterrorism operation in Tbilisi on 21-22 November, it generated a lot of attention in the Georgian and international media, particularly since this kind of incident rarely happens in Tbilisi. The accompanying excerpted articles report on the operation, which resulted in the death of a high-profile member of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As the excerpts demonstrate, the operation has also raised important questions about security in Georgia.

The first article from *Civil Georgia*, an English language independent online news agency, reports that the Georgian government confirmed the identity of one of the people killed in the operation as Ahmed Chatayev. The article briefly recounts the operation and notes that “one of the main questions – how the group managed to enter Georgia undetected – remains unanswered.” The article also notes how “Chatayev was wounded and arrested by the Georgian police following the Lopota gorge clash in late August 2012” and that later “Georgian prosecutors dropped the case against him in January 2013, citing absence of evidence.”

While Georgians might immediately associate Chatayev with the Lopota incident in 2012, the article from *Novaya Gazeta*, an independent Russian newspaper, recounts Chatayev’s involvement in a number of conflicts, providing some insight into the clash with Georgian security forces in Tbilisi. The article reports that Chatayev “took part in the second Chechen War,” later “fled to Europe with his family” and “convinced Austria to grant him political asylum.” The article also notes that “Over the past ten years (Chatayev) was arrested five times: in Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Sweden and Georgia” and “released (every time) for lack of evidence.” The article states that “there were always influential politicians or international organizations that advocated for him – a political refugee pursued by Russian authorities.” After Georgian authorities dropped charges against Chatayev for his involvement in the Lopota Gorge incident, the article notes that “he went to Syria” and “led the “Yarmuk” battalion – a unit of Chechens in ISIS [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria].” Most notably, Chatayev “was believed to be the organizer” of the 28 June 2016 attack on the Istanbul airport and he reportedly threatened Georgian authorities from Syria. Chatayev ultimately failed to carry out a terrorist attack, if that was in fact his goal, but many in Georgia still question how someone with such a high-profile (Chatayev was also well-known for having lost his left leg and right hand in various conflicts) and ties to terrorist groups could have made it into the country. **End OE Watch Commentary (Stein)**

“As a result of the 20-hour special operation, two members of the criminal group were killed, while one person remaining in the apartment – Ahmed Chatayev – detonated himself.”

Source: “Chatayev among Killed Suspects, Security Service Confirms,” *Civil Georgia*, 1 December 2017. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30690>

Georgian State Security Service issued a statement on December 1, confirming that one of the three terrorism suspects killed during the anti-terrorist operation in Tbilisi on November 21-22 was an ISIS member Ahmed Chatayev. The SSS [State Security Service of Georgia] said Chatayev’s identity has been confirmed “through investigative activities and examinations... including DNA and finger prints analysis.”

...at the beginning of the operation, “for several hours the SSS Counterterrorist Department was conducting negotiations [with the suspects] regarding their surrender.” The suspects, says the SSS, refused to do so, opening fire and throwing hand grenades at the security forces members. “As a result of the 20-hour special operation, two members of the criminal group were killed, while one person remaining in the apartment – Ahmed Chatayev – detonated himself...”

...One of the main questions – how the group managed to enter Georgia undetected – remains unanswered...The operation claimed the life of one security forces serviceman, with another four wounded...Chatayev was wounded and arrested by the Georgian police following the Lopota gorge clash in late August 2012, but was soon released from jail on bail. Georgian prosecutors dropped the case against him in January 2013, citing absence of evidence.”

Source: Gordienko, Irina. “Ловушка (A Trap),” *Novaya Gazeta*, 23 November 2017. <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/11/23/74650-nomer-odin>

...This kind of fighting has not been seen in usually quiet Tbilisi for some time... On November 23, Georgian media, citing a number of sources in the Security Council, reported that among those killed was Ahmed Chatayev, a close associate of the leader of the Caucasus Emirate (an organization banned in Russia) Doku Umarov, and an associate of the head of the Islamic State, al-Baghdadi...

...Chatayev was born in the Chechen village of Vedeno in 1980 and took part in the second Chechen War, during which he lost his right hand...In the early 2000s he fled to Europe with his family. Russia declared Chatayev wanted through Interpol, but in 2003 he convinced Austria to grant him political asylum...Over the past ten years, he was arrested five times: in Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Sweden and Georgia...He was released (every time) “for lack of evidence” and there were always influential politicians or international organizations that advocated for him – a political refugee pursued by Russian authorities.

In August 2012 Chatayev was connected to the scandalous anti-terrorist operation in the Georgian village of Lapankuri on the border with Dagestan. According to the official version, a group of 20 well-armed men infiltrated Georgia from Dagestan...As a result of a special operation, 11 men were eliminated, all of them Kists who came from the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia... During the operation, Chatayev was wounded and surrendered a few days later. The newly elected government of Bidzina Ivanishvili freed Chataev because of a new “Amnesty” law...Chatayev moved to Turkey after the amnesty and in February 2015 it became known that he went to Syria, where he swore allegiance to the head of ISIS...

Chatayev led the “Yarmuk” battalion – a unit of Chechens in ISIS. However, he could not take part in the fighting: after the loss of his right hand, he lost his left leg during the counter-terrorist operation in Georgia... In June 2016 a major terrorist attack took place at the Istanbul International Airport, killing 43 people and injuring 240...Chatayev was believed to be the organizer...In 2016 Chatayev sent the Georgian authorities a threat from Syria. He demanded the release of the former imam of a village in Pankisi, Ayub Borchashvili (serving a 14 year sentence). If the demand was not met, Chatayev threatened terrorist attacks in Georgia...