



Georgia Alleges Russian Role in a Coup Plot



Vano Shlamov/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Georgian security forces on their way to the Mukhrovani army base near Tbilisi on Tuesday.

By OLESYA VARTANYAN and ELLEN BARRY
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TBILISI, Georgia — Georgia announced Tuesday that it had [put down a brief military mutiny](#) that aimed to disrupt [NATO](#) military exercises, ratcheting up tensions a day before the exercises are scheduled to begin over Russian objections.

Georgian forces surrounded a tank battalion 25 miles outside of Tbilisi, whose leaders Georgia accused of planning the uprising. A few hours later, most of the unit's 500 soldiers surrendered, and several of their commanders were detained.

President [Mikheil Saakashvili](#) said [Russia](#) was hoping to derail the military exercises, which he called a "symbolic event."

"We are asking our northern neighbor to refrain from any provocations," he said, in a televised interview.

Russia immediately denied any role in the unrest.

"This is not the first time we have been accused of interference without evidence," said a statement from the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#). "We would like to reiterate that Russia, as a matter of principle, doesn't interfere in Georgia's domestic affairs."

The exchange raised the already high temperature ahead of the exercises, run by

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[NATO's Partnership for Peace program](#), which includes nonmembers. NATO has described the plan as routine and small-scale — around 1,000 soldiers will take part in field exercises — but Russia complains that, less than a year after [its war with Georgia](#), any NATO training there are provocative.

Armenia, Serbia and Kazakhstan have said they will pull out of the exercises in solidarity with Russia. Foreign Minister Sergei V. Lavrov notified NATO on Tuesday that Russia was pulling out of a long-anticipated NATO-Russia Council meeting scheduled for May 19 in Brussels in protest of the exercises, as well as [NATO's expulsion of two Russian diplomats](#) on suspicion of spying.

Carmen Romero, a NATO spokeswoman, said Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer “regrets this decision” and hopes to reschedule the meeting soon.

She said the exercises would go on as scheduled.

Dmitri O. Rogozin, Russia's envoy to NATO, warned that the exercises “may significantly affect the stability of the entire South Caucasus.”

“How can one insist on these exercises with such stubbornness and persistence?” he said, in comments aired on Russian television. “If these exercises were held at NATO's insistence in some psychiatric hospital it would be a much more adequate decision than holding them on the territory of the Georgian state.”

Details of the Georgian mutiny emerged throughout the day on Tuesday, leaving many in the capital glued to their televisions.

Shota Utiashvili, a top official in [Georgia's Interior Ministry](#), said authorities learned at 6:30 a.m. that a tank battalion stationed at Mukhrovani — five miles from the site of the planned military exercises — publicly announced a mutiny. He said the unit's 500 soldiers had sealed off the base and would not allow Ministry of Defense officials to enter.

“What happened is that battalion commanders told the soldiers that the Russians were attacking them and they had to take combat positions,” Mr. Utiashvili said. Around noon, he said, the soldiers learned from news reports that their commanders had misled them and surrendered. Authorities “didn't know the scale of the mutiny” and were relieved to discover that it was small and isolated, he said.

In the morning, officials confidently asserted a Russian hand in the plan, but by afternoon they were more cautious. Mr. Utiashvili said it is “not exactly clear” whether the accused plotters had Russian support.

“To have a legally sound case we need more information,” he said. “This morning we had some evidence, and from that evidence one would follow that Russia was involved.”

Incriminating surveillance footage was broadcast all day on Georgian television.

In a video, which had been edited, Gia Ghvaladze, a former major in the Georgian special forces, describes plans to overthrow Mr. Saakashvili's government on behalf of Russia. Mr. Ghvaladze says the plan was to approach Tbilisi with a column of 250 troop carriers and backup from 5,000 Russian troops, and talks about killing six of Mr. Saakashvili's closest advisors.

Mr. Ghvaladze was arrested Monday night on charges of organizing a mutiny. By Tuesday evening, police had arrested 13 suspects, according to the Interior Ministry.

The unfolding events left much of Tbilisi spellbound — or paralyzed. Traffic thinned out on the city's streets, and when Natia Kuprashvili, 29, tried to teach her class at Tbilisi State University, her students' cell phones began to ring so wildly that she gave up and went in search of a television.



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But in the end, she said, "it is very hard to understand what really happened here."

Roman Apakidze, 30, concluded that a mutiny did take place, but that the government was distorting it for political purposes.

"I just don't like the way the government is handling this information — it is real information terror against ordinary people, what they do," he said. "It is better not to turn on the television at all."

Olesya Vartanyan reported from Tbilisi, Georgia, and Ellen Barry from Moscow.

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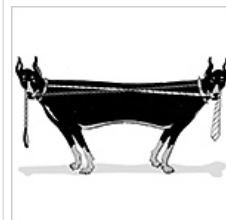
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