

UNVEILING POLITICAL DYNAMICS: THE INTRICATE MOTIVE BEHIND
THE MURDER OF LEVAN (LEON) BATONISHVILI

SIYASİ GELİŞMELERİNİN AÇIKLAMASI: PRENS LEVAN (LEON) BATONIŞVİLİ
CİNAYETİNİN KARMAŞIK SEBEPLERİ

РАСКРЫТИЕ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ ДИНАМИКИ: ЗАПУТАННЫЙ МОТИВ
УБИЙСТВА ЛЕВАНА (ЛЕОНА) БАТОНИШВИЛИ

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ABSTRACT

The paper provides a comprehensive exploration of the complex political milieu in Kartl-Kakheti during the 1770s and 1780s, particularly elucidating Russia's expansionist objectives. Within this historical context, it meticulously examines the altruistic endeavors of Levan Batonishvili, a figure of significance in his own right and an ancestor to the esteemed King Erekle. Batonishvili, distinguished by his erudition, astute intelligence, courage, and active role in politics at the royal court, emerges as a pivotal character in the narrative. His unwavering commitment and robust support for King Erekle, especially in fortifying state policies that aimed at the unification of the country and bolstering defense capabilities, are integral facets explored in this research. Batonishvili's role as a stalwart ally to the king becomes crucial in understanding the broader political landscape. Through a meticulous analysis of primary sources and a chronological examination of political events, the paper posits that Russia, recognizing the influence and effectiveness of Batonishvili, strategically targeted him. This targeted approach, as unveiled through the research, played a significant role in disrupting Georgia's European aspirations, profoundly altering its developmental trajectory towards alignment with Russia. The research not only offers a nuanced understanding of historical events but also underscores the intricate interplay between key figures like Batonishvili and the broader geopolitical forces shaping the fate of the Caucasus in the 18th century.

Keywords: Levan (Leon) Batonishvili, King Erekle II, murder of Batonishvili, disrupting Georgia's European aspirations, Russia's expansionist objectives.

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Unveiling Political Dynamics: The Intricate Motive Behind the Murder...

ÖZ

Makalede Rusya'nın yayılcı hedeflerini vurgulayarak, 1770-1780'li yıllarda Kartl-Kakheti'deki karmaşık siyasi ortamın kapsamlı bir incelemesi sunulmuştur. Bu tarihsel bağlamda, başlı başına önemli bir figür olan ve saygı duyulan Kral Erekle'nin atası Levan Batonişvili'nin fedakâr çabaları özenle incelenmiştir. Bilgisi, derin zekâsı, cesareti ve kraliyet sarayında siyasetteki aktif rolüyle öne çıkan Levan Batonişvili, kilit bir karakter olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Levan'ın ülkeyi birleştirmeyi ve savunma yeteneklerini geliştirmeyi amaçlayan hükümet politikalarının güçlendirilmesi konusunda Kral Erekle'ye olan sarsılmaz bağlılığı ve aktif desteği, çalışmamızın odak notası olmuştur. Batonişvili'nin kralın sadık bir müttefiki olarak rolü, daha geniş siyasi manzaranın anlaşılmasında hayati önem taşımaktadır. Birincil kaynakların dikkatli bir analizine ve siyasi olayların kronolojik bir incelemesine dayanan bu çalışmada, Batonişvili'nin nüfuzunu ve etkinliğini bilen Rusya'nın onu stratejik bir hedef olarak aldığı görülmektedir. Araştırmanın ortaya koyduğu gibi, Rusya'nın hedefe yönelik bu yaklaşımı, Gürcistan'ın Avrupa hedeflerini baltalamada önemli bir rol oynamış ve Rusya ile yakınlaşma yönündeki gelişim yörüngesini Rusya lehine derinden değiştirmiştir. Çalışmada yalnızca tarihi olayların ayrıntıları incelemekle yetinilmemiş aynı zamanda Batonişvili gibi kilit isimler ile 18. yüzyılda Kafkasya'nın kaderini belirleyen daha geniş jeopolitik güçler arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimler üzerinde durulmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Levan (Leon) Batonişvili, Kral II. Irakli, Batonişvili suikastı, Gürcistan'ın Avrupa hedeflerini baltalama, Rusya'nın yayılcı hedefleri.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье дается всестороннее исследование сложной политической среды в Картл-Кახетии в 1770-х и 1780-х годах, в частности, освещаются экспансионистские цели России. В этом историческом контексте тщательно исследуются альтруистические усилия Левана Батонишвили, значимой фигуры сам по себе и предка уважаемого царя Ираклия. Батонишвили, отличавшийся своей эрудицией, проницательным умом, смелостью и активной ролью в политике при королевском дворе, выступает в качестве ключевого персонажа. Его непоколебимая приверженность и решительная поддержка царя Ираклия, особенно в укреплении государственной политики, направленной на объединение страны и укрепление оборонного потенциала, являются неотъемлемыми аспектами, изучаемыми в этом исследовании. Роль Батонишвили как верного союзника короля становится решающей в понимании более широкого политического ландшафта. На основе тщательного анализа первоисточников и хронологического изучения политических событий в статье утверждается, что Россия, признавая влияние и эффективность Батонишвили, стратегически нацелилась на него. Этот целенаправленный подход, как выяснилось в ходе исследования, сыграл значительную роль в подрыве европейских устремлений Грузии, глубоко изменив траекторию ее развития в сторону сближения с Россией. Исследование не только предлагает тонкое понимание исторических событий, но также подчеркивает сложное взаимодействие между такими ключевыми фигурами, как Батонишвили, и более широкими геополитическими силами, определявшими судьбу Кавказа в 18 веке.

Ключевые слова: Леван (Леон) Батонишвили, царь Ираклий II, убийство Батонишвили, подрыв европейских устремлений Грузии, экспансионистские цели России.

1. Introduction

The murder of Levan (Leon) Batonishvili, a prominent figure and heir of King Erekle, has not received extensive attention in Georgian historiography. Notable researchers

such as G. Kikodze, V. Macharadze, G. Paichadze, A. Ioseliani, and S. Kakabadze, among others, have variously labeled his death as a tragic or fatal accident, with some attributing it to intrigues within the royal house, especially as Erekle was grooming Levan as the future king of Kartl-Kakheti (L. Tukhasvil). These perspectives were shaped by communist historiography and supported by the available materials, further complicated by the disappearance of Levan Batonishvili's embassy materials and the secrecy surrounding Russian spy network materials in the archives.

M. Kekelia, in a groundbreaking move, acknowledged the targeted nature of Levan Batonishvili's murder at the age of 25, noting that "the death of Leon Batonishvili undoubtedly impacted the foreign orientation of the country" (Kekelia, 1963: 276). However, he refrains from directly addressing the purpose of the murder, confining his analysis to the judgment of the jury. Examining the political landscape of Kartl-Kakheti in the 1770s, Russia's expansive goals in the Caucasus, and the historical dimensions of Levan Batonishvili's life, this research applies the historical-comparative method, era reconstruction, and analysis of historical materials to unravel the mystery surrounding his life and murder.

Leon Batonishvili, son of Erekle Batonishvili (1756-1782), stood out for his education, keen intelligence, courage, and political activism at the royal court. Influenced by the highly educated, pro-European Anton I t, he played a pivotal role in the state policy of unifying the country and enhancing defense capabilities—a focus of King Erekle. The 14-year-old prince received his first combat baptism in the battles of Atskuri and Aspindza. He was undergoing military training with Davit Commander. Leon was always a strong support for the King. Despite his exuberant and famous yet tragically short-lived life, Leon Batonishvili's contributions remain inadequately studied and evaluated.

2. Methods

The primary methodology employed in paper is the historical-comparative research method, forming the foundation of the investigation. In addition, a diverse array of analytical tools is wielded, including cause-and-effect analysis, synthesis, and critical analysis, enriching the depth of the study. A cornerstone of this research lies in the utilization of primary sources, encompassing archival materials and pertinent scientific literature addressing the research issue. The incorporation of new information resources, coupled with contemporary research methodology, enhances our ability to assess King Erekle's strategy within the contextual intricacies of the historical period. Moreover, the research draws on critical and comparative-historic approaches, employing case analysis techniques to glean insights into the multifaceted layers of the studied period. The inclusion of scientific and historic materials, along with rigorous scrutiny of archival records, ensures a robust and nuanced exploration of the historical dynamics under examination. This comprehensive methodological approach contributes to a thorough understanding of the complex historical events and their implications.

3. Discussion

On January 5, 1772, a plenipotentiary embassy led by Levan Batonishvili and Catholicos Anton I was dispatched to the imperial court of Catherine II (Sakartvelos tsentraluri sakhelmtsifo saistorio arqivi F 1449: S 1368). The diplomatic mission faced prolonged delays in Astrakhan. On January 30, 1772, when the ambassadors arrived in Kizlar they were permitted by the Governor Nikita Beketov to enter Astrakhan before an audience with the Emperor in St. Petersburg. The Foreign Affairs Board meticulously examined the materials of the embassy members (Ioseliani, 1985: N51-52)

Unveiling Political Dynamics: The Intricate Motive Behind the Murder...

The Russian government, offended by King Erekle's perceived "jealousy and slander", met the high-ranking ambassadors with indifference. This was preceded by the scandal related to the adventurer Totleben when the war campaign of 1770-1771 failed on the Georgian front, which literally revealed the true interests of Russia. In addition, in this context Sukhotin's unsuccessful military expedition and the decision to recall him from Georgia on December 15, 1771, should be mentioned which in a way cast a shadow not only on the Russian imperial court, but also on the image of its military strength. This background was aggravated by the breakdown of the peace talks with Turkey. Due to the threat of prolongation of the expected war, Russia itself, in uncertainty, could not give a definite answer to the conditions proposed by the Georgian ambassadors, which ultimately ended in complete disappointment. In desperation, King Erekle sends pleading letters for proper support and help to P.V. Bakunin and the Vice-Chancellor Golitsyn. In the letter dated March 16, 1773 and addressed to Nikita Panin, the head of the Foreign Affairs Board, one can clearly see the obvious hopelessness of the King, who was offended by the disrespect to the ambassadors.

Afterwards, King Erekle was forced to appeal to the Emperor himself about receiving ambassadors in January 23, 1773 (Tsagareli, 1898: 98). The ambassadors had to wait for more than a year, from January 1772 till spring 1773, in Astrakhan, when they were allowed to continue their way to St. Petersburg by the order of Catherine II (Tsagareli, 1898: 370). Only 25 members out of the 69-members of the retinue were allowed to go to St. Petersburg. Among them were the heroes of the Russo-Turkish war, who reminded the dedication of Georgians: Ibreim Beg, the owner of the Khertvisi castle; Prince Vachnadze, who defected the Pasha of Akhaltsikhe, helped Suleiman and Erekle greatly in capturing the Khertvisi castle; Pavle Andronikashvili, the hero of the Aspindza battle, asked for help to return his family members kidnapped by the Leks. By participating in the embassy, they reminded Russia of the severe consequences of the war for Georgia and wanted to convince the imperial court that the unification of the historical Javakheti, the Georgian territory that was left in the hands of Turkey, was of state importance for Kartl-Kakheti.

Later in 1774-1775 the King Erekle multiply tried to obtain a loan of 43 thousand tumani (430,000 minaltuns/rubles) in exchange for the war expenditure and great danger of his neighbors who were riding against him due to the involvement in the war on the Russian side. He proposed the subjugation of the Azerbaijani Khanate and a plan for a new campaign against Iran, but these offers went unanswered.

During his extensive journey, Levan Batonishvili familiarized himself with the workings of the Russian state structures, the military forces, delving into aspects such as training, combat and army equipment. His ambassadorial objective was "to comprehend the organization, administration, and cavalry structure in Russia to replicate a similar system in Georgia" (Kakabadze, 1914:11). While in Astrakhan, Batonishvili approached the Governor-Poruchik - Nikita Beketov with the request to join the Russian military service. The letter dated January 22, 1773 and addressed to Governor Panin, conveyed Leon Batonishvili's desire "... we consider his request to be quite bold ... he repeated his desire multiply" and aimed "to give an answer in accordance with the wishes of His Imperial Highness." (Buleishvili, 1991: 64). Batonishvili was ultimately denied entry into military service, a decision likely influenced by political considerations.

In his letter dated October 24, 1772, to Graf Nikita Panin, the head of the Foreign Affairs Board, Levan Batonishvili detailed the disrespectful treatment experienced by the embassy. Tormented by the prolonged waiting and lacking essential comforts, Batonishvili felt akin to a prisoner, expressing the sentiment of being "staying in vain and separated from homeland and unable to meet with the commission... we stay without deeds and unable to

endure the weight of the air... we beg to be freed and worthy to be presented" (Tsagareli, 1902:365). The governor of Astrakhan's preceding letter on October 23, 1772, to Panin reported Batonishvili's firm demand and dissatisfaction with the mission. Batonishvili had conveyed that if he was not allowed to proceed to St. Petersburg, he would insist on an immediate order to return the embassy.

While delayed in Astrakhan during his diplomatic mission, Batonishvili, in addition to his assigned duties, took an interest in the plight of Georgian captives in Crimea. These individuals, who sought refuge in Russia during the Russo-Turkish war, were not granted the right to return home. Instead, they were forcibly resettled to various locations within Russia. Otar Tumanov, the Russian agent reported that captives, seized during systematic attacks by Dagestan feudal, were also transported from Dagestan to Crimea and subsequently sold to the Turkish empire. In February 1774, Batonishvili wrote a letter to Graf Nikita Panin at the imperial court, urging the facilitation of the return of Georgian captives from Crimea to their homeland (Ioseliani, 1985: 51-52).

The astute and fearless Batonishvili delved deeply into the matter, exposing the covert anti-state connections of military agent Bakunin with Alexander Bakari's son and the supporting group of princes. This revelation, coming on the heels of Totleben's adventurous activities and the prior betrayal by a high-ranking military official, likely unsettled the highest-ranking officials of the Imperial Court. Through documentary materials, the embassy unearthed traces of the 1772 Kartl-Kakheti conspiracy in Astrakhan, unveiling the activities of conspirators, led by Zaal Orbeliani, and their ties with Bakunin. Leon Batonishvili's courage and indomitable spirit made him the focus of attention for the Russian intelligence service. Upon his return to Georgia, Leon Batonishvili, with the king's permission, actively engaged in identifying conspirators. The plan devised by King Erekle to restore the United Kingdom of Georgia clashed with the aspirations of Zaal Orbeliani, a supporter of the conspirators advocating for the descendants of King Vakhtang VI, with the legitimate claim to the throne of Kartli. Zaal Orbeliani became the focus of attention for officials of the Russian Imperial Court, receiving precious gifts as detailed in a letter from Catherine II to her favorite, Grigol Orlov (Tsintsadze, 1970, 23-24: 4-6).

Correspondence from Georgia to Russia confirmed Zaal Orbeliani's active collaboration with Russian intelligence (Tsintsadze, 1970, 23-24: 6-14). Simultaneously, he maintained a covert friendship with Erekle's opponent, Pasha Suleiman of Akhaltsikhe. Following information from the secretary of Yese, Zaal Orbeliani sought refuge with Pasha of Akhaltsikhe in 1775. Upon his return, he was arrested and openly admitted during interrogation: "It is true that I told Bakunin to pity our country. He recounted that His excellency is angry at King Erekle. Then I told him that If the king gives up on Erekle, either he should give the country to someone from Russia or to King Solomon." (Kakabadze, 1919:165)

Between 1772 and 1774, the embassy in Russia succeeded in convincing Leon Batonishvili that relying solely on "unanimity" and diplomatic negotiations would not suffice to save the country. They emphasized that the salvation of the country required the strength of the army, the fortification of royal authority, and national unity. As a result, King Erekle's ambition to break through the hostile encirclement with the assistance of Russia ultimately failed. Having endured significant challenges due to the alliance with Russia, Erekle found it necessary to navigate wisely. It was time to revert to the traditional policy of maneuvering and balancing relationships with disaffected Muslim neighbors, a shift strongly supported by Leon Batonishvili in assisting his father.

Returning to Georgia in 1774, the energetic Batonishvili, filled with great attitude and dedication, embarked on the organization of the army in preparation for the "judgment of the next campaign." According to Oman Kherkheulidze: "God blessed King Irakli with a

Unveiling Political Dynamics: The Intricate Motive Behind the Murder...

son named Leon, who, akin to his father in strength, repeatedly defeated the Leks and thwarted their raids on Kartli. Consequently, the king appointed him to oversee Kartli-Kakheti... Resulting in a perpetually trained army of three thousand, comprising royals, nobles, and peasants" (Kherkheulidze, 1989: 68). Additionally, with the support of friends and royal court fighters, Leon established a retinue consisting of 2000 quick-reaction fighters, as highlighted by Batonishvili's niece, Aleksandre Jambakur-Orbeliani (Batonishvili, 1941:15). Between 1774 and 1780, the relentless attacks from Dagestan feudal lords were quelled through Leon Batonishvili's self-sacrificing battles and actions (Batonishvili, 1914:34). The establishment of the duty army played a pivotal role in ensuring the return of the migrated population to a peaceful life.

Stefan Burnashev (1743-1824), a favorite of Catherine II and Extraordinary Commissioner of Russia, thoroughly examined the state of the royal army of Kart-Kakheti and its defense capabilities. Burnashev affirmed that Leon Batonishvili had successfully thwarted the Leks' attacks with the army and submitted a special report to the imperial court: "By 1783, none of the King's sons was able to organize a duty army like Levan Batonishvili" (Burnashev, 1896: 1-5).

The achievements of King Erekle II and Leon Batonishvili in the Caucasus and the Near East left a profound impact on their neighboring regions. King Erekle's popularity in the 18th century witnessed a notable increase, as evidenced by materials published in the Western European Press of the 1960s (Doborjginidze, 2019:166) and the pages of the "St. Petersburg Agency" in Russia (Shvelidze,1983:2-3). The reasons behind the high expectations placed on Georgia by those subdued by Turkey and Iran become apparent.

Towards the end of the 1770s, a significant portion of the North Caucasus population, particularly the Kabardians, expressed their desire to permanently relocate to Georgia. King Erekle welcomed this initiative with great joy, leveraging blood relations with the Kabardians. Recognizing the strategic significance of their settlement along the borders of Imereti and Akhaltsikhe, Russian intelligence agents sought to capitalize on this opportunity. According to Butkov's report, in December 1778: "King Irakli invited Kabardian landowners to move to Imereti and Akhaltsikhe borders. Sent...to the Kabardians, Ivan Bochelov, the Nobleman, Tarkhan, and the Armenian Zurab were detained in Mozdok" (Butkov, 1869:145). Simultaneously, the Georgian side undertook preparations, clearing roads in Dariali Gorge and repairing bridges on Aragvi and Dariali. The regional successes in Transcaucasia posed a challenge to Russia's conquering plans. Consequently, Georgian ambassadors were arrested, and Kabardians were strictly prohibited from migrating to Georgia. Russia also imposed a strict ban on recruiting troops in the North Caucasus, breaking the centuries-old tradition of enlisting mercenary troops from the local population. This intentional move by Russia aimed to undermine the hegemony of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in the region and the strength of the Georgian army, hindering the possibility of obtaining a military reserve and stable development for the country.

During the same period, Erekle embraced the Armenians' initiative to settle in Georgia with enthusiasm, offering lands and various privileges. Manifestos ("Perceptions") were drafted in the Armenian language, contradicting the plans of Russian colonial policy (Sakartvelos tsentraluri sakhelmtsifo saistorio arqivi F 1448: S 1300). In the 1770s, there was an idea of creating a Georgian-Armenian united state led by the Bagrationi dynasty. The future plans of Ioseb Emin (1726-1809) and King Erekle were initially supported by the prominent group sharing the idea—the Madras millionaires, Yakob, and Shamir Shaamirian. However, due to their inconsistency and later adoption of a pro-Russian stance in the 1780s, the plan for the restoration of the "Armenian state" was immediately replaced by the "Russian" plan and indefinitely postponed. Russia's imperial policy swiftly revealed its

purpose and position, diplomatically blocking independent policy avenues and thwarting the Georgian project of reunification and strengthening in Transcaucasia (Bendiashvili, 2008:17). This was particularly evident during the battle with the Khanate of Yerevan, where Russian diplomats became actively involved.

Besarion Gabashvili, the ambassador of King Solomon I of Imereti, alarmed by the secret treaty concluded by King Erekle with Turkey in 1778 and the impending loss of the throne, was dispatched to the emperor's court in August 1778. With the assistance of the governor of Astrakhan, Besarion safely and unhindered arrived in Iran through Russia, where Aleksandre Batonishvili, the son of Bakar Bagrationi, found refuge with Kerim Khan (Macharadze, 1996:36-213). However, it is worth noting that, according to the order of October 7, 1775, ambassadors sent by the Georgian king were forbidden to move within the territory of Russia (Tsagareli, 1902:10-11). An interesting historical analysis suggests that the information about the appointment of Leon Batonishvili to the throne of Imereti by King Erekle may have been deliberately disseminated (Kakabadze, 1922:215). This information is not confirmed by any sources until now but is mentioned in Graf Panin's letter to Lviv (Tsagareli, 1898:342). This raises the logical question of whether it was a well-planned scheme by the Russian government to unite opposition forces at King Erekle's royal court, including "legitimists" supporters and forces recruited by Russian intelligence, all aimed at eliminating the main target - Leon Batonishvili.

Aleksandre Batonishvili was once again activated in the context of feudal rivalry against Erekle. Alexander, the son of Bakar Bagrationi, who had been promoted in the military service of the Russian emperor, had his military rank and Russian uniform revoked, signaling that Russia would no longer be responsible for his actions. However, he was secretly provided with money and effectively expelled from Russia. This marked the initiation of another well-planned venture by Aleksandre Batonishvili back in 1767. In the same year, King Erekle sent a letter about Alexander to Russia through the hands of Archimandrite Porphyry, though the content of this letter remains unclear. I. Lortkipanidze only saw the cover, stating: "...even after that, there is nothing in the cases until 1782" (Lortkipanidze, 1940:28). The "loss" of the letter was likely not accidental and holds a logical explanation. King Erekle might have revealed that the arrival of Alexander Batonishvili could not occur without the support and assistance of the highest officials of the imperial court. Naturally, before exposing such revelations, Russian intelligence had to eliminate any anti-state materials within the spy network. Although Ekaterina's government seemed to hold an official stance, the phrase from the emperor's decree of February 13, 1764, "willingly deigns to let go... Alexandre... to seek his happiness there" (Markova, 1966:367), veils the hypocrisy of the imperial court. A logical question arises here: why do materials only appear from 1782? The answer to this question can be found in King Erekle's letter dated August 6, 1782, in which Russia once again plays the role of the "savior."

Besik and Alexandre, the prince seeking the throne, appeared at the royal court of Imereti in 1779 when King Erekle invaded to punish the disobedience of the Yerevan Khan and the cessation of tribute. Alexander tried to take advantage of the created situation, called the princes of Kartli to come out, and in order to win their hearts, he sent letters of mercy in abundance. Soon he was joined by a loyal prince, Alexander, the son of Dimitri Amilakhvari (1750-1802).

The constant combat readiness of the Georgian army under the command of Leon Batonishvili, the exposure of the opposition forces of the royal court, the peaceful relations with the Muslim neighbors, the secret agreement concluded with Turkey, the stable situation of Kartal-Kakheti and the economic progress turned out to be completely unacceptable and

Unveiling Political Dynamics: The Intricate Motive Behind the Murder...

unexpected for the conquering plans of the Russian Caucasian policy. Therefore, a new chain of resistance from the Russian side begins.

Assumedly, King Erekle preferred that the opposition forces led from Russia joined built-up public opinion that the legitimate contender for the throne of Kartli, Alexandre, the son of Bakari, was "out of favour of the empress". "In 1765, Alexandre, the son of King Bakari, went to Persia, angered by Empress Ekaterina, and came to Karim Khan... stayed in Persia... intending to conquer Kartli." (Batonishvili, 1941:53)

Thus, the above-mentioned political accents clearly indicate for which forces the strengthening of self-defense capability, the unification of the country and the stability of the political situation in Kartl-Kakheti were unacceptable. The stable situation temporarily regulated in the 70s convinced the Imperial Court that the problem of political orientation towards Russia was no longer present in the Kingdom of Kartl-Kakheti. It would also be known from the agency network that in the vanguard of this success, the famous Leon Batonishvili, the king's right-hand man, was standing next to the king, who was called the "king's sword". As we mentioned above, Batonishvili immediately attracted the attention of the highest Russian officials upon his arrival in Astrakhan. Two years of "surveillance" was enough for them to be sure that instead of the slavish obedience they wanted, they were dealing with Batonishvili, who had a strong will, unbroken, royal dignity, whom they naturally perceived as an undesirable candidate and an enemy of their Caucasian plans, whom they could only neutralize with his death. Even during Batonishvili's embassy, his activities and correspondence were strictly controlled and constantly monitored by intelligence agents. It is vivid also from the document of March 16, 1773, where Erekle worriedly writes to Panin: "From Astrakhan, my brother Catholicos Antony and my son Leon sent their men to me ... who were rapidly met on the road ... and rushed into the hands of the enemy with all his books ... we still don't know where they are" (Tsagareli, 1902:89). It seems that the Russian spies were secretly watching the king and Batonishvili. They were gathering information with a special conspiracy, so that after the failed embassy in Russia Georgians would not give up on Russia's orientation in the future.

During this period, the troop of conspiratorial princes led by Zaal Orbeliani seems to be quite strengthened. Secretary Yesse Baratashvili did not deny correspondence with Zaal Orbeliani and Aleksandre Batonishvili. He himself speaks about the proximity of Kartli to the oppositionist Amilakhvri in the transcribed "Koranicon" in 1738. According to the researcher K. Sharashidze when Givi Amilakhvari had the "Counsel for Kartli", it was then that young Yesse started working at Givi Amilakhvari's court (Sharashidze, 1942:124). The obtained archival documents, "The Oath Books" are an interesting proof of the oath of support for the assessor Yesse "forever as a friend and in the plague" (Sakartvelos tsentraluri sakhelmtsifo saistorio arqivi F 1448: S 4561:S 4557). Davit Eristavi of Ksani, Yesse Machabeli, Sulkhan Mdivani, Abashidze, Milakhorbashi were among the supporters. Yesse Baratashvili names King Erekle's Keshikchibash (the guard of the King) Ivane Abashidze, in whose tower Leon Batonishvili spent his last night, among the participants of the conspiracy (Ioseliani, 1950:70). In addition, if we take into account the strong group of conspirators mobilized at the royal court of Imereti, which has become a refuge for conspirators, and on the other hand, consider the real danger coming from the allied forces of Alexandre, the son of Bakari with Russia, Iran, and Fath-Ali-Khan Ibn Husain, the owner of Quba-Daruband, the king preferred not to resort to repressions as a counterweight. Therefore, the leader of the conspiracy was also forgiven for betrayal and freed from punishment, although he was no longer in the vicinity. Apparently, they failed to identify and properly evaluate the fateful target of the conspiratorial squad recruited by Russian intelligence agents.

The different and unsubstantiated versions of Leon Batonishvili's murder has been found in different sources. According to V. Karbelashvili, "the death of Leon Batonishvili in Vejin" dates the first days of May of 1782 (Iveria, 1892: N121). Levan Batonishvili was invited to Kakheti in Vejin by Keshikchibash (the guard of the King) *, in the family of Ioane Abashidze, where he met Asat Vachnadze's young wife. The woman was abducted from the wedding in Kardanakh, where Batonishvili followed her. The woman considered Batonishvili's behavior to be presumptuous and pushed the knife into his stomach. Batonishvili, wounded by the woman, immediately returned to the village Vejini. He slept without dinner in the Abashidze tower, where he died the same night. It is easy to recognize the traces of wild rumors spread to discredit the fearless Batonishvili, who participated in many battles, and to disguise the motive for political murder. According to the second version, Asat Vachnadze's men were accused of fatally wounding Leon Batonishvili. These apparent murderers were the serfs of Shermazan Abkhaz. The sources prefer to remain silent about their identity.

According to the archival document that has reached us, the king "cautiously investigated" Batonishvili's murder (Sakartvelos tsentraluri sakhelmtsifo saistorio arqivi F 1448: S 5524). He examined himself the poisoned Batonishvili's body, "his whole body was very blue and black." (Kakabadze, 1914:19)

Armenian Catholicos Gukas has a reference to a different intentional version of the murder of Leon Batonishvili: "In one of the villages, Lezgins stole sheep and robbed peasants... a brave prince, whose name was Levan, set off in pursuit of them with a small detachment. In hand-to-hand combat, Levan-Mirza went to the front and one of the opponents killed him with a shot from a rifle" (Grigorian, 1972:176).

According to one of the versions of Batonishvili's murder, Erekle was offended by his son's unworthy behavior, which probably should have been spread on purpose to avoid the expected turbulence. It seems that as usual the Russian intelligence, as it is wanted to erase traces in advance, prepared and quickly disseminated conflicting versions immediately after the assassination.

The king's grandson, Aleksandre Jambakur-Orbeliani, voices the version of the royal court about the purpose of Leon's shrouded murder: "These three grand men: King Irakli, Catholicos Anton and Levan Batonishvili were often together to plan wellbeing of Sakartvelo (Georgia). But the secret enemies of King Irakli were not ashamed of this, what could they do to disrupt their business? They made it up ... they killed him secretly with poison." He also suspiciously points to the time of death and the Russian trace of Leon's murder "Levan Batonishvili was defeated in 1782, that is, when King Irakli signed a treaty with Russia, a year and a half earlier" (Janashvili, 1898:7). Probably, according to new European sources, the "Council of the Three" was discussing the "Greek project" of the European road developed in secret. The main goal of Erekle's two-time embassy to Europe was also related to this project. This would allow the country to escape the constant threat of the Muslim encirclement of Iran and the Ottoman Empire, where, despite the efforts of the royal court, the population had become the main source of the captive market. In fact, the country was deprived of the means of economic and political development and the function of the Silk Road was lost. Now there was a prospect of the union of Western and Eastern Georgia and take over the Georgian territories under Ottoman rule.

The secret plan for the new redistribution of Europe - the "Greek project" although considered division of the European part of the Ottoman Empire and creation of the Dacian buffer state on the territories of Moldavia, Wallachia and Bessarabia and the restoration of the Byzantine Empire, but due to the change in international processes, it disappeared without even starting its realization. Russia, on the other hand, tried to wrap its imperial goals as a

Unveiling Political Dynamics: The Intricate Motive Behind the Murder...

desire to protect Christianity and took on the mantle of "savior and liberator" for the Christians being under the control of the Turks, because it needed the alliance of the peoples of the Balkans and the Caucasus in the upcoming war with the Ottomans. The main part of the project was the eventual capture of Crimea (as well as Taman and Kuban), complete expansion of the strategic location of the South Caucasus after dominating the Black Sea and the Straits.

According to Ivane Javakhishvili, "Russia had no intention of strengthening Georgia, but wanted to weaken it completely so that it would be easy to exterminate" (Javakhishvili, 2006:38).

According to the researcher O. Janelidze's correct remark, the South Caucasus, which was the key to the Eastern issue for Russia and was becoming a state of the Black Sea region, would not allow Erekle's political strengthening to disrupt Russia's expansionist project (Janelidze, 2010:68-69).

This is indicated in the "Supreme instructions for the conclusion of the Russo-Georgian treaty," compiled in 1782 by the emperor for Grigory Potemkin, where it was required: "To reject all their acquaintances with other Emperors (of Rome) and with other Christian powers, saying that he has the condition not to interfere in affairs that concern our Asian neighbors; Yes, and do not send letters to the emperor (Roman)" (Tsayareli, 1902:30).

The murder of Leon Batonishvili should be discussed in the prism of the contradictions of these expansionist goals of Russia.

Georgia was well positioned with its pragmatic national interests and connections with the Austrian Emperor Joseph II, who was also the Holy Roman Emperor, as the Caucasus issue represented Emperor's interest as well. At the same time the "Greek project" should be considered with its possibility of restoring the borders of the Roman Empire were Georgia hold a favorable opportunity to be directly involved in the new European political processes, as well as the cultural and trade relations with the Christian world (Natsvldze, 2021). Economic ties were to be restored and the path of European development was set. Information about this is preserved in the Georgian materials of the historical archive of Propaganda Fide (Doborjginidze, 2009:182-189). The materials reveal that in April of 1779, the term of service of the prefect of the mission in Georgia, Capuchin Domenico da Trieste who was close to King Erekle, expired.

The letter of March 14, 1781 of the Capuchin missionary, Mauri da Verona addressed to the Pope mentions about the embassy of Padre Domenico da Trieste: "Padre Domenico, the bearer of this letter, needs to urgently go to Vienna for very important matters. Definitely, in the phrase "important matters", it is not implied support for creation of "two regiments" only. The pathos of participation in the liberation struggle after the European modernization of the country can be heard in the words of Erekle, delivered by the missionary Mavro Veroneli to the Emperor Joseph II of Austria in 1782. From the letter: "In the past years the news arrived on our side of Asian countries that your highness and majesty has a cover for the Sultan of Turkey. This happy news awakened the loyalty in my mind and excited me with joy. And we sent the Patri so that we could be worthy of your highness's staff service" (Tabagua, 1979:100). Erekle's letter of instruction emphasized the secrecy of the mission, "... to be so secret and not disclosed that it would be to our great detriment to disclose the matter." The secret allied messages are a direct indication of an apparent attempt to escape Russia's constant intrigue. The letter is also important as it talks about sending Patri Domenico residing in Tbilisi as an ambassador. It also gives us an idea about the content of the letter as well as the oral accounts of the 1781 letter.

Erekle's ambassador, who arrived in Constantinople on June 20, 1781 and was supposed to appeal for help to the states of Western Europe: The Emperor of Austria, the

King of France, the King of Sardinia, the Senate of the Republic of Venice and the Pope, died suddenly on July 3. His death, connected with the political purpose of the embassy to Europe, is detailed in the letter of Padre Fortunato da Trento. It also describes the great objection that Erekle's letters are not sent as intended to the Pope and the Emperor of Austria. The missionary is so scared and blackmailed that he does not dare to reveal the identity of this person. Researcher I. Tabagua, in line with archival materials documents claims that there was a contact of the Catholic missionary in Constantinople with the Consulate of Vienna and a representative of the Austrian Kingdom - Dr. Rheinegs and Count Janos Kohar. It also indicates the connection of Count Kohar with the Austrian representative in Constantinople, Baron Herbert (Rheinegs, 2002: 17). It needs to be mentioned that Rheinegs (Christian Rudolph Ellich) is known for secret intrigues with the Russian intelligence that intensifies the suspicion of Russian interference. The suspicion is strengthened by the historical facts that coincide in time while reconstructing the historical events in chronological order of the research period, including the period of preparations for the first embassy in Europe, 1779. Rheinegs' visit to the royal court of Erekle II, with a well-fitting mask, "for the treatment" of Giorgi Batonishvili and "for the purpose of helping in royal affairs (Rheinegs, 2002: 10-35)." Shortly after the murder of Padre Dominic, he leaves for Russia on July 10. On August 4, 1781, Rheinegs is in the border fortress in Mozdok, from where Field Marshal Grigol Potemkin invited him to St. Petersburg. Afterwards he is sent on a special mission to convince King Erekle to ask for "protection" from Russia.

His presence at Erekle's royal court in November 1782 is confirmed by Erekle's letter to Grigol Potemkin dated December 27, where Erekle expresses his satisfaction over the transfer of the Order of Alexander Nevelli by Captain Bagdatlu Solaghov (Sologhashvili) to Giorgi Batonishvili and mentions Rheinegs, who had already arrived at the royal court as an official representative of Russia. On the one hand, the letter is another proof of Rheinegs' relationship with the imperial court, on the other hand, it clearly indicates the radically changed attitude of the Russian government towards the royal court of Kartl-Kakheti.

The secret message of Padre Fortunato da Trento, dated 10 January 1782, received from Constantinople which is preserved in the archive of the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda of Fide) speaks about intensification of the Russian intelligence and the proliferation of adventurers of various enemies of the Georgian mission, especially the European missionaries at the door of Erekle II.

4. Results

The analysis and interpretation of the primary sources provide a logical explanation for the results of the research. It became clear that, following Totleben's failed adventure at the imperial court, the Russian scenario of Kartl-Kakheti expansion was activated, leading to political events throughout the years 1781-1782, analyzed in this research. After the initial failure of King Erekle's pragmatic political plan with the European orientation in 1781, the next step of Russian imperial policy involved exerting psychological pressure on him. This aimed to disrupt the defense, security, and strong support of the country, notably including the murder of Leon Batonishvili, a key supporter of the King's plans. This perfidious plan ultimately forced King Erekle into a "dead end." The overwhelming sadness of his son's death, coupled with the failure of the Polish Catholic missionary Mavro Veroneli's embassy sent through Russia on November 14, 1782, further pushed Erekle towards seeking Russia's protection, driven by a common faith. Additionally, Alexander Batonishvili, under the guise of legitimacy, sought refuge with Fath-Ali-Khan, intentionally simulating the scenario of "protracted negotiations." This played a role in King Erekle's decision to officially request protection from Russia, as hinted in the letter asking for patronage sent by Erekle II to the

Unveiling Political Dynamics: The Intricate Motive Behind the Murder...

Russian Imperial Court on December 21, 1782. Thus, this research's findings contradict the shared opinion in earlier Georgian historiography that Leon Batonishvili's death was an accident unrelated to political processes. The analysis of primary sources proves that Leon Batonishvili's death significantly altered the country's European path, bringing it under the "protection of a single-minded Russia".

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