

INTERVIEW

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT OF TRAFFICKING IN RADIOLOGICAL AND NUCLEAR MATERIAL THROUGH INTELLIGENCE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT OPERATIONS. THE GEORGIAN EXPERIENCE

Interview with Colonel Archil Pavlenishvili, Head of the Operations Division of the Counter-intelligence Department at the State Security Service

by Francesco Miorin

In a wide-ranging interview with UNICRI, Colonel Archil Pavlenishvili, Head of the Operations Division of the Counter-intelligence Department at the State Security Service of Georgia, talks about the importance of intelligence operations to thwart radiological and nuclear (RN) trafficking attempts, the risks connected with RN material falling into the wrong hands, and the challenges faced during his career.

SOMETIMES, WE REGARD THE THREAT OF RADIOACTIVE MATERIAL BEING SMUGGLED AS SOMETHING THAT COULD HAPPEN ONLY IN A JAMES BOND MOVIE. HOW REAL IS THE THREAT? CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE?

Short answer: the threat is real. Here in Georgia, and more generally in former Soviet Union countries, law enforcement organizations are engaged quite frequently in operations to counter smuggling of radiological and nu-

clear material. Just to quote a recent example, just few months ago, my unit successfully carried out an operation and seized a radioactive source which was intended to be smuggled. If we take into account only Georgian statistics, 29 law enforcement operations against smugglers were carried out since 2006, which means that on average one to two operations per year are conducted. Despite the efforts of law enforcement authorities and the high number of arrests,

there still are a lot of attempts to find and then smuggle and sell radioactive sources. Unfortunately, we are forced to spend the majority of our time on scams, on attempts to sell fake radioactive material (such as so-called "Red Mercury") but smuggling of genuine radioactive sources still happens quite often. Other evidence of the reality of the threat is related to the activities of our colleagues from the National Nuclear Regulatory authority: every month they manage to find and seize



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so-called “orphan sources”¹ in abandoned and active scientific and other civilian installations sometimes even in the field so the threat does exist, and it is quite actual.

**WHO ARE THE SMUGGLERS?
WHAT ARE THEIR MOTIVATIONS?**

That’s an interesting question. First of all, when I am talking about smugglers, I am talking about those whom we face in our region (Georgia, Armenia, southern Russia, Ukraine) so it is more or less possible to speak about a “typical” smuggler. The first interesting element is that the majority of the smugglers operating in the region are quite old: the young generations are generally not interesting in buying



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and selling radioactive materials. We refer to them as the “old school smugglers”: most of them are in their 60s and sometimes even in their 70s. Normally, they do not have any criminal background: they are either retired scientists or governmental employees from various organizations (mainly civilian), but it happened to us to deal also with retired policemen or retired military officers. Nevertheless, we have also found “professional criminals”, namely professional smugglers who are ready to smuggle any kind

of goods, from drugs to weapons and radioactive material.

Most of the “old school” smugglers appear to still live in the post-Soviet early 90s. Back then, the legend of radioactive material being extremely valuable and profitable was born. Most of them believe that even a single successful transaction can make them millionaires. As I said earlier, young people are rarely interested in this. However, in some instances we did face young smugglers, but these are typically the children

1 The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) defines an orphan source as “a radioactive source that poses sufficient radiological hazard to warrant regulatory control, but which is not under regulatory control because it has never been so, or because it has been abandoned, lost, misplaced, stolen or otherwise transferred without proper authorization”.



or grandchildren of former smugglers who continue their “family business”, if I may call it this way.

When it comes to motivations, the only motivation is virtually always money. Rumors that nuclear energy active sources, even the smallest ones, even the smallest quantities are very expensive and cost millions are hard to remove from the public imagination.

OFTENTIMES, POLITICAL LEADERS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS HAVE POINTED AT THE RISK OF NUCLEAR TERRORISM AS ONE OF THE MOST CONCERNING THREATS IN THE INTERNATIONAL AGENDA.

WHAT IS YOUR ASSESSMENT? DO TERRORIST GROUPS HAVE THE ABILITY AND WILLINGNESS TO CARRY OUT A TERRORIST ATTACK WITH RADIOACTIVE MATERIAL?

The question of the relation between nuclear smuggling and terrorism is a very important and interesting one, but what I can tell you based on my unit’s experience is that we have never faced real attempts from extremists or terrorist groups to obtain radioactive material.

Typically, here in Georgia we face mainly so-called “middlemen”: for example, a Georgian criminal is going to sell



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radioactive material, but the potential buyer is not the final end-user. Generally, those middlemen are citizens of foreign countries (especially southern neighbors) and they always claim that they are not the final recipients: they either represent someone else or they are going to sell the material in a third country. In light of this, it is difficult to claim that there are no attempts made by terrorist organizations to get their hands on radioactive material. So far, no terrorist or extremist group tried to sell radioactive sources in our territory, we mostly deal with independent individuals, but of course I would not rule out this possibility. Theoretically, it is possible, but in my opinion the main threat is self-radicalized individuals rather than structured terrorist organizations.

These “lone wolves” may believe that they belong to a certain terrorist network, but in fact they are not directly connected with an organization.

Nevertheless, they are potential terrorists. For them, an attack with radioactive material may sound attractive. This is why preventing nuclear and radiological smuggling is very important from our perspective.

YOU SPOKE ABOUT THE LINK BETWEEN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS AND RADIOLOGICAL AND NUCLEAR SMUGGLERS. WHAT ABOUT ORGANIZED CRIME? HAVE YOU RECORDED ANY INTEREST BY ORGANIZED CRIMINAL GROUPS IN THIS BUSINESS, OR IS THIS MORE RELATED TO INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL GROUPS?

We mainly deal with small groups or sometimes even individuals, although we have had cases involving more complex criminal networks. A few years ago, an organized criminal group led by Valmer Butba in Russian-occupied Abkhazia obtained no less than 10 containers with Cesium-137 sources and tried to sell them. They had found the radioactive material in a coal mine and they were interested in this business though later they abandoned their plans because all their attempts were prevented by our Service.

In our most recent operation, in 2021, we arrested two smugglers who were connected with Georgian criminal authorities living in Turkey, in "exile" let's say. Those professional criminals were super-

vising the activities of the smugglers and had agreed on a percentage from the successful transaction. So, definitely there are connections between organized crime and nuclear and radioactive smugglers.

WHAT IS THE ROLE PLAYED BY INTELLIGENCE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AUTHORITIES IN COUNTERING THIS PHENOMENON?

You may think I am biased, since I represent a law enforcement organization, but believe me, my words are not an exaggeration. I do not want to over-empha-





size the importance of our work, but the reality is that out of the 29 cases I mentioned, all 29 successful seizures were intelligence-driven, so all of them were full-scale law enforcement operations with the involvement of confidential informants, undercover officers, as well as technical intelligence and other sources of information. I can hardly think of any other tool that is as successful as good intelligence. Of course, there is the so-called “Second line of defense” as our U.S. colleagues call it, namely radiation detection equipment installed at borders and mobile detection equipment, but it is not always effective because you cannot install these devices

■ A typical container for highly-radioactive Cesium-137, referred to as “piglet” in smugglers’ jargon (Credit: State Security Service of Georgia).



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everywhere and whenever you want. Smugglers have become familiar with these detectors, the locations where they are installed and all the different roads between the countries. In the case of Georgia, we have the additional problem of Russian-occupied territories² where there are no State borders at all. So, without good intelligence and law enforcement operations it is absolutely impossible to prevent such type of crimes to and from those territories.

OVER THE PAST YEARS, IT HAS BEEN STRESSED THAT TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS HAVE HAD AN IMPORTANT IMPACT ON THE WAY INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION IS GATHERED AND ON HOW LAW ENFORCEMENT OPERATIONS ARE CARRIED OUT. IS THE MORE TRADITIONAL TYPE OF INTELLIGENCE, THE SO-CALLED "HUMAN INTELLIGENCE", STILL RELEVANT NOWADAYS, WHEN IT COMES TO COUNTERING RADIOLOGICAL AND NUCLEAR SMUGGLING?

It definitely is and it will be. Of course, we live in the 21st century and this is the century of technologies, but from a law enforcement perspective I can tell you that the majority of successful operations are based on human intelligence. Technical intelligence is very

important, but it is more of an auxiliary tool in our job. Smugglers are smart enough: they know about the capabilities of special services and police forces to intercept phone calls, break the emails and so on. They do not completely trust their communication systems. The typical conversation between smuggler A and smuggler B is as follows: "Hey, how are you? let's meet and at our place, we need to discuss something", that is it. What can you infer from this sentence? Maybe this is important just to know that some person A is connected with person B, but what are they talking about? Without human intelligence, it is impossible to find out. Out of the famous 29 seizures, only in two cases we relied only on technical intelligence. All the other cases are the result of operations in which confidential informants or undercover officers were involved.

HOW IMPORTANT IS TO COOPERATE REGIONALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY ON RN TRAFFICKING INVESTIGATIONS? WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES IN THIS REGARD?

As to the first part of the question, the answer is: it is definitely important. An example: as I mentioned earlier, here in Georgia we deal most-

ly with middlemen. It could be a good idea to give them the chance of smuggling the material to track all the chain (technically, we call these operations "controlled delivery"). It is also very important to identify possible smugglers and possible middlemen in the neighboring countries. But this is the theory: sometimes, the practice is that the relations with some neighboring countries are far from ideal. The first type of challenge is related to the geopolitical situation of the country: it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to set up an effective system of information sharing with countries that do not have good and stable political relationships.

Bureaucracy and complexity of information-sharing mechanisms are major challenges: the process of obtaining required approvals for sharing information often results in delays which may render the information obsolete. We have to understand that information associated with radioactive smuggling does not belong to police but is considered "national security-level information": limitations are therefore quite strict. Unfortunately, one cannot just simply pick up the phone and call their counterparts in a neighboring country and tell them "Hey, a smuggler is going to travel from our

2 The breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

country to your country and he is looking for radioactive material". Notwithstanding these obstacles, we have managed to successfully carry out cross-border joint operations with some neighboring countries, where our operatives actively cooperated to seize radioactive material and arrest the smugglers.

WHAT ARE THE MOST CHALLENGING FACTORS WHEN DEALING WITH RADIOLOGICAL AND NUCLEAR SMUGGLING?

There are a number of challenges, and most of them are not specific to countering nuclear trafficking but are common to virtually all areas of operation of an intelligence or law enforcement agency. The first challenge I would mention is funding: funds are never enough, and we always need more to effectively perform our functions. Another important challenge is related to Georgia's specific situation with its breakaway regions, and the absence of State borders and detection capabilities, which makes these territories a safe haven for smugglers. In addition to this, high turnover of staff, especially in border police forces represents an issue: trained personnel who underwent training on radiation detection equipment very often move to other positions where salaries are higher or

there are more chances for promotion.

Another challenge we are still facing is the lack of coordination between different State agencies involved in countering RN trafficking: in the past this was a major challenge here, nowadays the situation has improved substantially because all the main actors now know each other personally and there are much fewer issues.

HOW CAN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS ASSIST STATES IN TACKLING THIS ISSUE?

International organizations and partners, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Interpol and UNICRI, as well as partner countries, have helped us a lot in establishing our counter RN trafficking system and in providing radiation detection equipment. What I see as very important is to reinforce training capabilities which many Member States lack: although we do have some training facilities in Georgia, a sustainable and effective training system needs to be put in place, especially considering the high turnover in many State agencies and ministries.

About the Cooperation between Georgia and UNICRI

In 2019, UNICRI launched the CONTACT initiative, thanks to

the generous financial contributions of the Governments of Canada, Norway, United Kingdom and United States of America. The CONTACT initiative is aimed at enhancing capacities of State security, law enforcement and nuclear regulatory authorities of Member States to devise, plan and carry out intelligence and law enforcement operations aimed at thwarting radiological and nuclear trafficking attempts. The initiative is currently being implemented in selected countries in the Middle East, Black Sea region and Southeast Asia.

After graduating from Georgian Technical University in 2006, Colonel Archil Pavlenishvili joined the Georgian Ministry of State Security (MSS, later SSSG - State Security Service of Georgia). He served in counter-terrorism, special operations and counterintelligence units. Since 2005, he heads the specialized counter nuclear/radioactive smuggling unit at the SSSG. A. Pavlenishvili graduated from the George C. Marshall European school for Security Studies (CTC and WMD-T classes) in Germany and Undercover Operations Course in Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in the U.S. He holds a Master's degree in chemistry.



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