A Fish Called Georgia

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March 26, 2010

Recent events in Georgia bring to mind the scene in the classic 1980s comedy *A Fish Called Wanda* when Otto, played by Kevin Kline, tackles a would be burglar robbing the home of Archie, played by John Cleese. Upon learning that the robber is actually Archie himself, Otto tries to apologize, but cannot resist asking the obvious question "I mean, what the f%ck are you doing robbing your own house."

After an attempt by Imedi Television, a network very close to the Georgian government, to remind the Georgian people, as if they needed reminding, of the threat posed by Russia, by showing a fake newscast of a Russian invasion, backfired causing panic and anger at the government for perpetrating the hoax, one is tempted to ask the Georgian government a similar question. "I mean, what the f%ck are you doing faking an invasion of your own country?"

The television program which was preceded by a disclaimer, but did not have a disclaimer during the broadcast itself, is said to have caused panic, rushes on banks, stores and gas station and even a few heart attacks and other medical emergencies. Many ordinary Georgians were angry at their government for what they perceived to be a trick while diplomats including ambassadors from France, the U.S. and the U.K. expressed surprise and dismay that footage of them was used dubbed over with language to suggest that the crisis was real. The initial reaction from Imedi and the Georgian government indicated that they did not understand what a strange and outrageous thing they had done. The first statements from those quarters suggested that Imedi had done simply done a public service by reminding their viewers of what might happen.

The controversy surrounding the program quickly switched to a what did the president know and when did he know it dynamic. Given the state of the media in Georgia as well as the close relationship between President Saakashvili and Giorgi Arveladze, the director of Imedi, it seemed axiomatic to many that Saakashvili knew about the program and approved of it in advance. However, the only evidence of this is a recorded phone conversation between the two men which Arveladze and others have asserted is a fake. It is not yet clear whether or not Arveladze's assertion is true, but it is certainly possible, particularly because recorded phone conversations and videotapes, real and fake, have become a central part of Georgian politics in recent years.

Focusing on the authenticity of the phone conversation draws attention away from just how strange and disturbing the whole incident was. The Imedi program had vague echoes of the *War of the Worlds* radio program aired in the US by CBS in 1938. However, the *War of the Worlds* program occurred more than 70 years ago and imagined an invasion of the U.S. by space aliens, an unlikely and certainly unprecedented event. The Imedi program aired a story of a Russia invasion in Georgia. This is

something that is both precedented and far more likely than an invasion from outer space. Moreover, the Imedi program faked footage of actual Georgian political leaders, those in opposition to the Saakashvili regime naturally, welcoming the invasion and the new Russian rulers of Georgia, something that *War of the Worlds*, which was nonpartisan in nature, did not do.

Importantly, the program showed a Georgian military defeat, thus highlighting the sense of fear and indeed victimhood that has come to define the Georgian government, and threatens to define the Georgian nation as well. While there is no question that fear of Russia is legitimate in Georgia, if that fear becomes the defining characteristic of that country, and cripples Georgia's ability to grow, develop or govern itself rationally, than Russia has won without firing an additional shot.

Since the conclusion of the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, talk of another Russian invasion has been almost constant in Georgia. Some of this has been legitimate; some driven by domestic political needs. The Imedi program is great fodder for those who would argue that the fear is not based on reality at all; and that it is just the machinations of a beleaguered and overmatched government.

The Imedi program also was poorly timed by those who broadcast it, as the program was aired when the domestic opposition forces were doing one of their semi-regular mass political suicide acts. Some opposition leaders were visiting Moscow strengthening rumors of Russian support for parts of the opposition, while a series of alliances and deals were being rumored, made and broken at almost record speed, leaving great doubt who or how many opposition candidates would seek the highly visible and important office of mayor in the upcoming local election in Tbilisi, while all but ensuring the winner of that election would be the incumbent, and Saakashvili loyalist, Gigi Ugulava. The program drew attention away from the opposition at a time when every moment the media spent focusing on the opposition's implosion was good for Saakashvili, Ugulava and their United National Movement Party.

The more general fallout from the program on Imedi is not yet clear. It is still possible that Arveladze a close and loyal supporter of Saakashvili's may have to fall on his sword, but that would neither be fair to Arveladze nor solve any problems. It would, however, give some satisfaction to those who are demanding some accountability, although few seem to believe that Arveladze was fully responsible for the decision to air the show. The reaction, from NATO and other diplomats indicates that the program has further alienated Georgia from its goal of being part of NATO. Capricious behavior like faking an invasion of their own country on a strongly pro-government television station pushes Georgia into a position where the U.S. and Europe will happily accept Georgia's contributions to the effort in Afghanistan and agreements to take Guantanamo prisoners, but will not be able to do much else to help Georgia reach its goal of being a valuable ally, rather than erratic dependent, for the west.