



In the Central Criminal Court

Rex

-v-

George Stana & Nandito Badea

Sentencing Remarks

1. On 5 June 2026, George Stana and Nandito Badea, were convicted by the jury of wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm contrary to section 18 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. The victim was Pouria Zeraati, a journalist living in the United Kingdom. On 29 March 2024 he was attacked outside his home in Wimbledon. The attack was not spontaneous. It followed extensive reconnaissance over a period of weeks and, in the case of George Stana, involvement in earlier activity directed at the victim dating back to March 2023.
2. On the morning of 29 March 2024, the three participants, George Stana, Nandito Badea and David Andrei, left their hotel in West Brompton in a Mazda motor vehicle. The car had been cleaned and preparations made for the commission of the offence and the avoidance of detection thereafter. You all travelled to Queensmere Road, Wimbledon, where you waited for several hours for Mr Zeraati to emerge from his home. When he did so, Nandito Badea approached from the front whilst David Andrei approached from behind. The victim was effectively trapped beside his vehicle. During that encounter he sustained three stab wounds to the upper right thigh from a knife with a 20cm blade.
3. The prosecution contend that it was Badea who wielded the knife. Badea continues to deny that. The jury's verdict does not identify which of the two assailants struck the blows. In accordance with the well-established principle that a defendant should not be sentenced for disputed criminal conduct unless the court is sure of it, I do not find that it has been established to the criminal standard that Badea was necessarily the stabber rather than Andrei. What is established beyond doubt is that he played a full and active role in a joint enterprise to inflict really serious injury upon the victim with a knife.

4. Following the attack, the two men ran back to the waiting vehicle driven by Stana. The group then undertook an orchestrated escape. Clothing and other items were discarded. The vehicle was abandoned. A taxi was taken to Heathrow Airport. The participants flew to Switzerland and then travelled onwards to Romania.
5. The victim survived. Despite their location at the top of the leg, by good fortune the wounds did not cause catastrophic vascular injury.

Who are you, George Stana?

11. George Stana you were born on 14 December 2000 and were 23 years old when this offence was committed. You come from an extremely disadvantaged background in Romania. A psychologist, Dr Dumitrache describes a childhood characterised by poverty, domestic violence, minimal education and exposure to alcohol-related abuse within the family. He concludes that you function within the range of borderline intellectual functioning. You are functionally illiterate, with significant limitations in comprehension and abstract reasoning. The report identifies vulnerabilities including suggestibility, a tendency to comply with dominant figures and susceptibility to exploitation.
12. I accept you are a man of limited intellectual resources whose development was profoundly impaired by your upbringing. I also accept that those characteristics may have increased your vulnerability to manipulation by others in some circumstances. However, those factors do not deprive you of responsibility for your actions and the others involved in this case are relatives including your sister and I do not accept that you were exploited by them. During the relevant period you were capable of travelling internationally, operating vehicles, participating in covert surveillance, maintaining contact with organisers and assisting in the planning and execution of a sophisticated criminal enterprise.
13. You have written a letter expressing regret for what you did, and the suffering caused to the victim and his family. I accept that those expressions are genuine and that the sentence the court must pass will separate you from your child for a significant proportion of her life.

Who are you Nandito Badea?

17. You were aged 19 at the time of the offence and have no previous convictions. After leaving school you had pursued a promising sporting career and had ambitions of becoming a professional footballer. The evidence suggests that you joined the conspiracy later than others and that your involvement was of shorter duration. Nevertheless, by the time of the attack you had become a committed participant and undertook an indispensable operational role. Following police activities in Romania you contacted the authorities and consented to extradition.
18. You have both spent a substantial period in custody awaiting trial and sentence.

Submissions on Sentence

23. On behalf of the Crown, Mr Kent submits that the offence falls within category A culpability and category 2 harm because of the very considerable degree of planning and premeditation, the prolonged reconnaissance, the targeted nature of the offending, the use of a knife to cause three wounds and the coordinated actions of a group acting together. This is grave injury within category 2 harm, towards the upper end of that category because of the inherent risk that multiple stab wounds to the upper leg causing heavy bleeding and requiring surgery to stem bleeding, might easily have resulted in life-threatening injury. Mr Zeratti's impact statement from 2024 records continuing pain and ongoing psychological impact. He has been left constantly in fear, disguising his appearance and being severely hampered in his social life as well as unable to work freely due to concerns for his security on his own part or by his employer. In addition, Mr Zeraati has had to move his family abroad for fear of further attacks.
24. The prosecution also contends that the foreign power condition contained in s.31 National Security Act 2023 is satisfied and pursuant to s. 69A Sentencing Act 2020, the offending must be treated as aggravated by that fact.
29. On behalf of Mr Stana, Mr Caldwell KC submits that the offence contains elements of both category A and category B culpability but falls within category 3 harm. The prosecution has not established that the knife should properly be described as a highly dangerous weapon within the meaning of the guideline and the injuries suffered by the victim were not life-threatening and are more appropriately categorised as category 3 harm. Reliance is placed upon the Court of Appeal's decision in *O'Bryan* [2021] EWCA Crim 1472 and the absence of expert evidence demonstrating that the victim's life was in imminent danger. Emphasis is placed on the psychological evidence to argue for diminished culpability on the part of Mr Stana. It is said that the court cannot safely conclude that the defendant knew or ought reasonably to have known that the attack was carried out on behalf of a foreign power.
35. On behalf of Mr Badea, Mr Spens KC accepts that the case falls within high culpability because of the use of a knife and the planned nature of the attack. However, a downward adjustment should be made within the sentencing range. Reliance is placed on youth, lack of previous convictions, limited period of involvement, a subservient role, absence of English language skills and relative dependence upon others who organised the operation. It is further submitted that there is insufficient evidence to establish that Mr Badea knew or ought reasonably to have known that the offence was carried out on behalf of a foreign power.

The Foreign Power Condition

40. I turn to the issue of the foreign power condition. The applicable provisions are contained in s. 31 National Security Act 2023 and s.69A Sentencing Act 2020. Before

the aggravating factor applies, the court must be sure that the condition is met. It is necessary to deal with some of the evidence in more detail.

41. The evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that this attack was ultimately carried out in the interests of, and on behalf of, the Iranian state. The victim, Pouria Zeraati, was not selected at random. He was a prominent journalist and broadcaster working for Iran International, a Persian-language television network which was highly critical of the Iranian regime and enjoyed a substantial audience both inside and outside Iran. Iran International has been the subject of persistent hostility from the Iranian authorities. Before this stabbing, threats directed at journalists associated with the broadcaster had become sufficiently serious that police warnings were issued to businesses where the network operated and enhanced security measures including the deployment of armed police, were considered necessary.
42. The jury heard expert evidence from Professor Ali Ansari of St Andrew's University, explaining the Iranian regime's longstanding hostility towards independent and critical journalism. He described how journalists and broadcasters viewed as hostile to the state, including those working for the BBC World Service, have been subjected to intimidation, harassment, imprisonment and violence. He further explained that, in recent years, the regime has increasingly relied upon criminal proxies and organised criminal groups abroad to carry out acts of intimidation and violence whilst maintaining a degree of distance and plausible deniability.
43. Pouria Zeraati himself was a well-known critic of the regime. He had previously been subjected to threats, as had members of his family. Evidence was adduced that his image had been displayed publicly in Tehran Iran alongside other journalists under a "wanted, dead or alive" banner. The prosecution case was and is that these matters provided the motive for the attack of 29 March 2024. There was evidence of activity directed towards the victim extending back to February and March 2023, when George Stana and a man called Marian Gogan were observed in the vicinity of the victim's home while communicating with an unidentified handler. Messages referred to establishing the victim's movements, ensuring that he was alone and carrying out a task once he emerged. They were arrested wearing a mask and gloves and carrying sharp scissors and a substantial amount of cash but released by the police as the connection with Mr Zeraati was not then appreciated.
44. In the weeks preceding the attack in March 2024, Nandito Badea and David Andrei repeatedly visited and hung around the victim's home. Phone data, CCTV evidence and eyewitness accounts demonstrated a pattern of prolonged reconnaissance, repeated visits to the same location, waiting for extended periods near the victim's address and maintaining contact with those directing the operation. Flights, accommodation, transport and living expenses were covered by transfers from accounts linked to Florina Stana and, indirectly, to businesses associated with men called Constantin Matache and Edgar Hakkopian. The latter is an Iranian/British

national and Matache is George Stana's brother-in-law. Edgar Hakkopian's DNA was found on the SIM card in the phone in the possession of Mr Stana when he was arrested in 2023.

45. By 29 March 2024, the surveillance phase had concluded. Plainly, it was understood by then that Mr Zeraati recorded his show on Fridays and left his home to travel to do so. A third participant, George Stana, returned to the operation. Three new SIM cards were acquired and subsequently used. The men travelled together to Wimbledon, cleaned the vehicle they were using and waited for the victim to emerge. As soon as he did the attack was carried out. Three wounds were inflicted to the top of the leg.
46. I am sure this was an attack carried out for, or for the benefit of, a foreign power. The more difficult question is whether each defendant either knew, or having regard to matters known to him ought reasonably to have known, that this was a case of state sponsorship rather than ordinary criminality.
49. In Stana's case, I am satisfied so that I am sure that the condition is met. Stana's involvement was deeper, longer and more informed than that of Badea. He had direct involvement in activity targeted towards the victim dating back to 2023. On the day of the stabbing, he acted as organiser and driver, keeping out of the way in case he was recognised. He had direct connections with key intermediaries in the chain of command. He was linked, through those intermediaries I have listed, to Edgar Hakkopian who funded the activity leading to the assault. The scale and sophistication of the operation, the funding available, the duration of the surveillance, the choice of victim and the elaborate efforts at concealment were all matters known to him.
50. Taking those matters cumulatively, I am satisfied that Stana knew or at the very least ought reasonably to have known from all that was known to him due to the factors I have listed, that this was not conventional criminality but an operation being conducted on behalf of a foreign power. Accordingly, I find the offence is aggravated pursuant to section 69A.
59. I reach a different conclusion in relation to Badea. I accept that there is powerful evidence from which one may infer that the attack itself was state-sponsored and I have reached that inference. However, the question is not what the true position was. The question is what Badea knew, or ought reasonably to have known.
60. His involvement began substantially later than Stana's. There is no evidence that he possessed the same level of knowledge concerning the background to the operation. There is no evidence of any direct connection between him and those further up the chain of organisation. The only connection is payments to him by Florina Stana but there is no evidence on which I can be sure he even knew who that person was. The evidence in the case can support the conclusion that he was recruited to participate in a violent criminal attack for payment. It does not persuade me so that I am sure that he

knew, or ought reasonably to have known, of the involvement of a foreign power. Accordingly, I do not find the foreign power condition proved in relation to Badea.

Application of the Guideline and Conclusions

67. Turning to sentence, I reject the submission that the offence falls within category 3 harm. The injuries inflicted constituted grave injury. This is properly category 2 harm. I also reject the submission that this case falls below category A culpability. The attack involved extensive planning, surveillance over an extended period and the use of a dangerous knife in a coordinated group attack upon a targeted victim.
68. Accordingly, I place the offending in category 2A. The guideline identifies a starting point of seven years' custody with a range of six to ten years. This case is not an ordinary example of category 2A offending. The victim was specifically selected by those for whom you were in fact proxies. The attack followed extensive surveillance and was committed for reward. There were sophisticated efforts to prevent detection. In the case of Stana, there is the additional aggravating factor arising from the foreign power condition. Against those features I must balance the mitigating factors identified on behalf of each defendant including Mr Stana's history and disabilities, and the good character and relative youth of Mr Badea. Having weighed all those matters carefully the appropriate sentence for George Stana is outside the bracket in the guideline.
6. George Stana you were in England only to make money, and you would do anything for it. There can be no doubt at all that this was a targeted, organised and funded act of serious violence, carried out for reward, upon a journalist living peacefully in the United Kingdom, who had become a prominent critic of the Iranian regime. Oppressive regimes tend to do all they can to suppress opposition. They cannot abide the scrutiny that fearless journalists provide. Overall, the features I have identified place this stabbing among the most serious examples of section 18 offending. Whether or not you knew precisely what the target's employment was, I am sure you knew or ought to have known the stabbing was being carried out on behalf of a foreign power. This was a grave, cowardly attack involving the repeated use of a knife against an unsuspecting victim in a public street. The consequences for the victim, physically and psychologically, were substantial and enduring. In your case the sentence is one of **12 years'** imprisonment. Pursuant to s. 69A Sentencing Act 2020, I state that this offence was aggravated by the fact that the foreign power condition was met.
69. Nandito Badea your role and state of mind place you in a different position. The appropriate sentence in your case is one of **8 years'** detention. Both of you will be released at the two-thirds point of the sentence, because s.18 is a Schedule 15 serious violent offence carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment, and the sentence is at least seven years. The release provisions in s.244ZA Criminal Justice Act 2003 apply.

70. Time spent in custody awaiting trial and sentence in this jurisdiction will also count. Pursuant to s. 243 Criminal Justice Act 2003 and s.327 Sentencing Act 2020, I specify that George Stana spent **14 days** in custody in Romania awaiting extradition and Nandito Badea spent **13 days** awaiting extradition. Those periods are to be treated as counting in accordance with the statutory scheme governing extradited prisoners.

Mrs Justice Cheema-Grubb DBE

3 July 2026