

## The Lobby Hobby

### HOW SMALL COUNTRIES BUY RESPECT ABROAD

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The post-Soviet states have recently begun to excel in the nebulous world of global public relations. The elements of this approach to foreign policy include, but are not limited to, hiring public relations firms, lobbying local legislatures, wining and dining opinion leaders, and actively engaging international media outlets. The goals are not always transparent but may include attracting foreign investment, winning membership in international organizations, changing laws, whitewashing violations of international norms, and changing other states' foreign policies. The lobby hobby is a global enterprise, one that is especially popular among authoritarian states—especially those with resource riches to spare—and it appears to be a permanent part of states' foreign policy portfolios.

This memo examines the recent lobbying efforts of Western governments by two Caucasus countries: Georgia and Azerbaijan. They are not the only states in the region to employ lobbying—Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, among others, are also known to burnish their reputations by hiring PR firms and prominent public figures. But these Caucasus cases are revealing of how small states with no exposure to Beltway practices until the 1990s can punch above their weight in shaping international opinion. Although these states have different objectives, they share a predilection for selectively and strategically focusing their resources to gain the greatest advantage—an approach I refer to as asymmetric diplomacy.

#### **Caucasian Frustration (and Retaliation)**

Like other dubiously democratic and unfairly stereotyped countries, Georgia and Azerbaijan have sought to shape both elite and public opinion in favorable ways. To that end, their rhetoric intended for external audiences emphasizes strategic significance (crossroads between Europe and Asia, corridor for oil and gas), history (ancient civilization, longstanding religious traditions, disrupted statehood, struggles for independence), and values (multiethnic tolerance, observance of international treaties,

efforts to protect human rights and conduct fair elections). In these tropes, they resemble not only other post-Soviet states, but many Middle Eastern and African ones as well.

However, Georgia and Azerbaijan do not face ordinary foreign policy challenges. Both share the distinction of having part of their internationally recognized territory occupied by foreign states. As a result, their objectives are not limited to improving their image. Lobbying is also a means of balancing *against* their adversaries: for Georgia, Russia (as well as rival domestic politicians); for Azerbaijan, Armenia.

Furthermore, both states perceive themselves as starting from a disadvantage. While Russia has had trouble getting a hearing in the court of American public opinion, what it lacks in soft power it more than compensates for in economic and military power, a fact that makes global persuasion all the more important for Georgia. Azerbaijan has the opposite problem, dominating Armenia economically but unsatisfied with the status quo of “frozen conflict” and lagging behind Armenia in lobbying the U.S. Congress. Asymmetric diplomacy helps both countries make up some of their perceived disadvantage by concentrating resources where their adversaries are weaker (soft power for Georgia) or where their most deployable asset can make the greatest impact (money for Azerbaijan).

### **The Emergence and Evanescence of Old-fashioned Diplomacy**

The peripheral post-Soviet states emerged onto the scene in 1991 with little wherewithal for diplomacy. Georgia and Azerbaijan had been independent states briefly in the 1920s, but this did not translate into infrastructure for the development of foreign ministries. As a result, they were forced to learn fast, even as they struggled with domestic and international conflict. These years were formative, as both lost pieces of their territory to states that would become foreign policy fixations: Russia, for Georgia; Armenia, and to a lesser extent Russia, for Azerbaijan. They also sought allies early on. Azerbaijan, under the leadership of Abulfaz Elchibey, saw Turkey as a kindred spirit, due to cultural ties and support in the war with Armenia. Georgia found common cause with Azerbaijan in resisting Russian pressure, as well as to an extent with Iran, due to trade ties.

The replacement of nationalist firebrands by Soviet-era officials with gravitas allowed both states to stabilize their foreign policy and build a diplomatic infrastructure. Both Eduard Shevardnadze and Heydar Aliyev worked to cultivate relations with actors outside the region and gain memberships in established international organizations. To this end, both sought and gained admission into the NATO Partnership for Peace program, while Azerbaijan signed a major deal with Western oil companies in 1994 and Georgia joined the World Trade Organization in 2000. In this period, both countries relied on conventional diplomacy to advance their interests.

In the subsequent decade, several changes led both countries to diversify their diplomatic portfolios. First, a younger generation of politicians with global awareness replaced Soviet-era apparatchiks and rose to positions of power, a result of the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the succession of Heydar Aliyev by his 41-year-old son Ilham, both in 2003. Second, both countries stabilized their political systems, freeing up resources to pursue a broader range of foreign policy goals. Third, the backlash against

Western democracy promotion in the 2000s produced a shared cynicism toward lofty rhetoric emanating from Washington, DC, and about politics in the West in general. As a result of these factors, we have seen states play by looser rules in their foreign relations, supplementing conventional diplomacy with money as a means to win friends and influence public opinion.

In Georgia, President Mikheil Saakashvili and his cohort of Western-educated revolutionaries entered the government intending a radical reorientation of Georgia's foreign policy. Saakashvili faced an open door in gaining access to the highest levels of the U.S. government. He was highly regarded by President George W. Bush, who saw the reformer as both a vindication of his "freedom agenda" and a bulwark against Russia. Saakashvili also cultivated ties with leaders in Congress, conservative think tanks, and the media. He enjoyed the enthusiastic support of influential senator (and future presidential candidate) John McCain and hired neoconservative Randy Scheunemann as a foreign policy advisor to cultivate contacts inside the Beltway.<sup>1</sup> Saakashvili also appeared in Western media outlets including BBC and CNN's Larry King touting democracy in Georgia and lashing out at Russian imperial designs for the benefit of English-speaking audiences.

After 2008, Saakashvili expanded the use of lobbying firms to influence opinion for two reasons. First, Saakashvili's friend George W. Bush was no longer president, having been succeeded by Barack Obama, who was not an ideological bedfellow and was pursuing a "reset" to smooth over relations with Russia. Second, following the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Saakashvili's stock dropped in the United States after the authoritative EU fact-finding report on the Georgia-Russia war assigned much of the blame to Georgia. In 2010, the Georgian government retained the Podesta Group and the Gephardt Group, lobbying firms comprising former Democratic Party heavyweights who also had close ties to the Obama administration.<sup>2</sup>

These new channels of communication became critical for Saakashvili when his party found itself facing serious competition from the Georgian Dream party, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. The 2012 election, pitting two larger-than-life personalities against one another and having geopolitical ramifications, was filtered through global lobbying firms. Ivanishvili used a small part of his massive resources to counter his rival's message, retaining London-based lobbying firm BGR (for \$25,000 a month), Washington-based National Strategies to manage his Twitter account and website and sponsor a documentary, and Patton Boggs, a "powerful" lobbying firm in Washington, DC.<sup>3</sup> Saakashvili secured a face-to-face meeting with President Obama in the White House before the election. Ivanishvili responded by buying full-page ads in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* lambasting the incumbent's policies and stoking doubts about his intentions. This PR arms race may have developed because both

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<sup>1</sup> <http://harpers.org/blog/2013/10/the-bloom-comes-off-the-georgian-rose/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21965>; <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22061>

<sup>3</sup> <http://thehill.com/blogs/global-affairs/asia-pacific/286425-k-streets-gravy-train-runs-dry-as-georgia-moves-past-election>;  
[http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/01/30/inside\\_the\\_other\\_georgian\\_lobbying\\_effort\\_in\\_washington](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/01/30/inside_the_other_georgian_lobbying_effort_in_washington)

figures intended to deter election fraud by the other, or to preemptively cultivate allies in case an inconclusive election result required international mediation.

In Azerbaijan, the adoption of lobbying did not come about so abruptly. As the Caspian oil deals began generating revenues and a younger generation entered the foreign service, the government began investing in improving the country's image abroad. Part of the effort was intended to soften the rough edges of the younger Aliyev's authoritarian regime. To this end, officials from the Council of Europe would be wined and dined in Baku as part of a campaign of "caviar diplomacy." According to the European Stability Initiative, this strategy succeeded in coaxing members of the parliamentary assembly of the Council to whitewash the conduct of Azerbaijan's elections, beginning in 2006.<sup>4</sup>

To get its voice heard in American politics, Azerbaijan, with the help of energy companies, has been able to assemble formidable coalitions of political heavy-hitters. The U.S.-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1995, boasted Henry Kissinger and James Baker as advisors. More recently, the Azerbaijan America Alliance (AAA) was founded by the son of Azerbaijan's transportation minister and a former chair of the Bank of Azerbaijan.<sup>5</sup> According to its website, its mission is to "foster an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect between the people of Azerbaijan and America." It seeks to highlight three issues: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia; Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act of 1992, which prohibits democracy aid to Azerbaijan without a presidential waiver; and the Khojaly massacre.<sup>6</sup> The AAA has not only held "gala dinners" with influential policymakers in Washington, including John Boehner and at least four U.S. Senators, it has also hosted a convention in Baku that included, among others, former senator Richard Lugar, Ambassadors Richard Morningstar and Matthew Bryza, and former governor and commerce secretary Bill Richardson.<sup>7</sup> Azerbaijan has also, like Georgia, hired a number of Washington-based lobbying firms, including the Podesta Group and the Livingston Group, to influence U.S. politics. Its lobbyists aggressively countered media criticism of Azerbaijan's 2013 presidential election, which independent observers deemed highly flawed.<sup>8</sup>

Another component in Azerbaijan's PR strategy involves increasing name recognition abroad, devoid of any context about the country or its politics. To this end, the younger Aliyev's regime took it upon itself, bizarrely, to export the elder Aliyev's cult of personality: there are now at least 15 statues and busts of the late Heydar Aliyev in parks across the world.<sup>9</sup> The regime also aims to set insignificant but splashy world records, including the world's tallest flagpole (until it was outdone by Tajikistan in 2011) and a notional kilometer-high building planned as the centerpiece of a \$100 billion city of artificial islands in the Caspian Sea.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi\\_document\\_id\\_131.pdf](http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_131.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/197681-azerbaijan-plants-flag-in-dc-lobbying-scene->

<sup>6</sup> The Khojaly massacre refers to a 1992 episode in the Nagorno-Karabakh war in which Armenian irregular soldiers attacked and killed over 150 ethnic Azeri civilians.

<sup>7</sup> <http://usazconvention.org/sessions.html>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/11/world/asia/observers-say-azerbaijan-election-marred-by-fraud.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/11/world/asia/observers-say-azerbaijan-election-marred-by-fraud.html?_r=0)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-biggest-export-heydar-aliyev/24727872.html>

The Azerbaijani government has also worked to disseminate information specifically about the Khojaly massacre by taking out advertising space in Times Square in New York and the Washington subway system, among other sites.<sup>10</sup> More intriguingly, it has lobbied foreign national and sub-national legislatures to pass resolutions recognizing the event as a genocide or crime against humanity. To date, such resolutions have been passed by 11 countries and 12 U.S. states, including Arkansas, New Mexico, West Virginia, and New Jersey.<sup>11</sup> This campaign mirrors longstanding efforts by Armenian lobbies to gain recognition for the 1915 Armenian genocide.

### **The Future of Asymmetric Diplomacy**

All of these activities beg the question of whether asymmetric diplomacy is worth the expense. On the one hand, the costs are small. A few million dollars a year is a small outlay compared with the cost of foreign missions and increased military spending, especially for Azerbaijan. Part of the perceived benefit comes from simply putting their countries “on the map” for publics that know close to nothing about them. With such a low base of knowledge, the investment to create positive associations in the minds of U.S. voters and pressure groups might yield long-run returns. Likewise, having a few sympathetic congressmen or political reporters on one’s side might make some difference when relevant legislation is being considered, especially if most lawmakers have no stake in the matter.

On the other hand, the tangible payoffs are negligible. Although Karabakh is Azerbaijan’s foremost foreign policy concern, neither occasional speeches by Congressmen nor legislative resolutions about Khojaly are likely to change U.S. policy, which advocates a negotiated solution. Nor will it change the regional balance of forces, which, with presumed Russian involvement, favors Armenia. Saakashvili’s lobbying in the United States did not secure U.S. defensive action for Georgia after Russia invaded its territory (although it may have contributed to the Bush administration’s push to prematurely bring Georgia closer to NATO, which probably helped precipitate the war). Neither did Saakashvili’s scaremongering about his opponent sway the 2012 election in his favor.

And yet lobbying will likely persist. Even if there are few measurable outputs, politicians take a certain glee, difficult to quantify, in bringing their adversaries down a peg. This argument is supported by a new development in old-fashioned diplomacy: the opening in 2006 of an Azerbaijani consulate in Los Angeles, a city with few Azerbaijanis but the largest concentration of Armenians outside Armenia. The first consul-general at that posting made that rationale explicit: “One of our objectives is to make the Azerbaijan point of view known here.”<sup>12</sup> Having one’s talking points circulating in the public sphere, whether in the *New York Times* or U.S. subway stations, brings psychic benefits to self-proclaimed Davids when they finally strike back against perceived Goliaths, whether their adversaries be the Armenian lobby or Vladimir Putin (and his

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<sup>10</sup> <http://azerbaijanamericaalliance.org/2013-khojaly-awareness-campaign>

<sup>11</sup> <http://files.preslib.az/projects/khojali/rukhojali/gl5.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/ai143\\_folder/143\\_articles/143\\_suleymanov\\_elin.html](http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/ai143_folder/143_articles/143_suleymanov_elin.html)

proxies). Meanwhile, influential and high-priced lobbying firms benefit when rivals on both sides of a conflict engage in a communications arms race and seek more of their services; perhaps they are the true winners.

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