

The Politics of Foreign Intrigue in the Caucasus

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The South Caucasus has inherited deeply ingrained historical narratives of being a pawn in games of geopolitical intrigue, from the Persian-Russian wars of the early 19th century, to the region's forcible incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1921, to the Russia-Georgia War of 2008. In today's Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, issues of national identity, territorial control, and geopolitical alignment remain unresolved while contemporary great powers still seek to advance their interests in the region. It is therefore unsurprising that leaders frequently invoke hostile foreign powers as an explanation for national and personal insecurities.

It is difficult to know whether the surrounding great powers in fact actively meddle in nearby smaller states in games of international intrigue. But we do know that the *idea* of external meddling in these states is a major theme in domestic politics and that it follows a common script: Side A accuses side B of being in league with a malevolent outside power, while side B accuses side A of contriving threats and staging provocations to mask its own failings. The result is a mainstream politics of conspiracy, in which people are encouraged to believe that the adversaries of their favored leader are intent on selling out the country's interests. This dynamic complicates managing foreign relations by infusing ordinary decisions with the weight of national survival, enables politicians to evade accountability for bad behavior, and, by delegitimizing political rivals, forecloses debate about serious issues.

The Importance of Being Imperialist

When politicians invoke external scapegoats, they appeal to the public's desire to identify as victims and to locate a concrete source of their problems. If successful, such claims can strengthen the public's resolve and encourage collective action for difficult undertakings, such as mobilization for war or endurance in times of deprivation. But

they can also distract the public from scrutiny of unpopular regimes and unethical actions.

Recourse to external conspiracy claims is especially common among imperiled failed leaders of weak states. African leaders invoked their former colonial powers to explain away rampant corruption and lackluster growth. In the Middle East, Arab nationalism in the 1950s was sold as a way to strengthen the region against Western meddling. More recently, the imperiled Iranian regime accused those protesting against the fraudulent 2009 elections of being British agents. Finally, the presidents of Libya, Egypt, and Syria during the 2011-12 Arab uprisings laid the blame on the United States and Israel, tried and true agents of subversion.

The Soviet Union has a long history of accusing the United States and other “imperialists” of complicity in subversion, “wrecking,” and other transgressions. Indeed, during the Cold War the United States *was* guilty of sponsoring a number of plots that legitimately qualify as conspiracies, including attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro and the deposition of democratically elected leaders in Congo, Iran, and Guatemala. Of course, nothing prevented Soviet leaders from scapegoating the United States whenever such accusations were in their interest, even when the United States was not involved. It was therefore not surprising that, when Russia’s relations with the United States deteriorated, President Vladimir Putin accused the United States of meddling to Russia’s detriment, most notably in 2004, when he alleged that the CIA had engineered the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine; and in 2011, when he accused Hillary Clinton of sponsoring anti-Putin protests. While such charges may seem outlandish in the West, post-Soviet publics are a receptive audience for conspiracy theories.¹

Just as Russia uses the idea of American perfidy to its advantage, smaller post-Soviet states find it advantageous to make Russia the *bête noir* of their own politics, reflecting a nestled *matrioshka* configuration of foreign intrigue. In fact, the South Caucasus states represent a perfect storm for a politics of foreign intrigue, as they are a historical object of affection, suffer from a legacy of extreme distrust of the state, and have leaders who often lack legitimacy.

Russia on Georgia’s Mind

The value of malevolent foreign powers in domestic politics is nowhere better illustrated than in Georgia. The troubled relationship between Russian President Putin and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili is well known and need not be recounted here. Suffice it to say that one of the roots of their mutual dislike was Saakashvili’s deliberate realignment with the West, in particular the United States, after the 2003 Rose Revolution. This move had widespread support among the Georgian public, as it was identified with Saakashvili’s popular modernization and anti-corruption drive. Over the

¹ Steven Lee Myers, “There’s a Reason Russians are Paranoid,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2006. Of course, Americans are quite prone to believe their own conspiracy theories.

ensuing years, the looming Russian threat – which Saakashvili helped provoke – proved useful to him when opposition to his policies emerged.

The November 2007 protests were the first serious street demonstrations Saakashvili faced after the Rose Revolution. He reacted by insinuating a Russian conspiracy, claiming that “dark forces” were responsible and that “we know that alternative government has already been set up in Moscow.”² Soon after, he expelled three Russian diplomats on the charge that they had arranged a meeting of Georgian oppositionists with Russian counter-intelligence agents. The specter of Russia had become a lifeline for Saakashvili when his political fortunes were down.

In Saakashvili’s defense, Russia conspiracists had circumstantial evidence on their side. Among them was credible evidence of provocative Russian actions in the lead-up to the Russia-Georgia War, including blowing up a gas pipeline, spying, assisting rebels in the Kodori Gorge, and shooting down a Georgian spy plane. Russia’s actions in the near abroad also suggested a willingness to meddle in the politics of sovereign states. In 2004, Putin openly supported Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine’s presidential election and provided financial and technical assistance; Kremlin operatives were assumed to be behind his opponent’s poisoning. Russia has also been accused of engineering the 2010 uprising in Kyrgyzstan that overthrew President Kurmanbek Bakiev after the latter reneged on a deal to shut down the U.S. Transit Center near Bishkek. This, plus Putin’s stated policy of regime change in Georgia, gave conspiracy theories an air of credibility, even if proof was lacking.

But Saakashvili may have overplayed his hand, as actions taken against the putative Russian bogeyman appeared to many observers as authoritarian overreach. Thus, after his old ally Nino Burjanadze emerged as one of the focal points of the opposition by forming a new party in 2008, Saakashvili’s government cracked down under the pretext of a defending against a Russia plot. In March 2009, shortly before a planned protest organized by Burjanadze, the Interior Ministry arrested 10 activists from her party who were charged with illegal weapons purchases. In 2011, a warrant was put out for her husband’s arrest on dubious charges. In July 2011, four photographers were charged with spying for Russia but were later released after an international outcry.

The possibility of Saakashvili’s overreach in demonizing Russia gave the opposition an opening. Immediately after the war, when the population was more unified, rapprochement with Russia was taboo. But after some time, the opposition could argue that its pragmatic approach could better secure Georgian stability. By promising to work with Russia to resolve the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, politicians such as Burjanadze and former prime minister Zurab Noghaideli offered a pragmatic alternative to a citizenry that may have grown tired of Saakashvili’s adventurism.

A more serious threat to Saakashvili and his legacy presented the president with an easy target for insinuation. Bidzina (aka Boris) Ivanishvili, a billionaire who earned his wealth from metals and banking in Russia, returned to Georgia in 2004 and

² “Saakashvili Makes a Statement,” Civil Georgia, Nov 7, 2007.

announced in 2011 that his Georgian Dream party would compete in 2012 parliamentary elections. Saakashvili, whose party accused Ivanishvili of promoting Russia's interests, stripped him of his Georgian citizenship on a technicality, preventing him from holding political office. In May 2012, the Georgian parliament made a last-minute fix that would allow Ivanishvili to run despite not being a citizen, thus allowing the ruling party to avoid further international outcry while appearing to stand on principle. As the 2012-13 election cycle ramps up, the question of who represents Georgia's (or Russia's) national interests is a combustible issue. Should a member of Georgian Dream win the presidency, we can expect the slightest move toward reconciliation with Russia to be met with charges of selling out Georgia's sovereignty and seeking to restore the Soviet Union. Likewise, we can expect the new government to brand all opposition remonstrations against a more nuanced foreign policy as CIA or neoconservative subversion.

Let Baijans be Baijans?

Azerbaijan also finds itself in the midst of a geopolitical game, real or imagined, and even though it has not held a free and fair election in its recent history, the politics of foreign intrigue are salient there too. Besides its primary rival Armenia, Russia also earns its share of scorn, as few Azeris believe Russia is actually interested in resolving the conflict and many believe Russia actively works to prolong it.³ Unlike in Georgia, where the opposition has gained some favor by advocating a pragmatic approach toward Russia, in Azerbaijan the opposition sees no advantage in appealing for moderation due to the emotions associated with the Karabakh War. On the contrary, opposition politicians have sought to outflank the regime on nationalist appeals, advocating for war with Armenia to recover the territories.

Recently, Azerbaijan has acquired a new *bête noir*—Iran. This rivalry defies conventional wisdom, as both countries are Shiite. Their mutual dislike stems from two causes. First, Azeri nationalists claim the territory of northern Azerbaijan, which is inhabited by (mostly assimilated) ethnic Azeris. In 1946, Azeri intellectuals urged the Soviet Union to occupy northern Iran in vain, as the United States and Britain threatened military intervention, one of the events that precipitated the start of the Cold War. There continues to be revanchist sentiment in Azerbaijan to recover Tabriz, or “southern Azerbaijan.” Second, the staunchly secular Azeri government fears the spread of radical Shia Islam from Iran. The government closely monitors religious practice and uses heavy-handed methods against perceived extremists. An aggravating factor is Azerbaijan's close relationship with Israel, which sells Azerbaijan military hardware and buys its oil. Israeli leaders have made several high-profile visits to Azerbaijan, and recent reports allege that Azerbaijan is allowing Israelis use of a military base that could assist in a bombing campaign against Iran.

³ See Anar Valiyev, “Neither Friend Nor Foe: Azerbaijanis' Perceptions of Russia,” PONARS Eurasia [Policy Memo No. 147](#), George Washington University (May 2011).

As the West has put pressure on Iran over its nuclear program and rumors abound of a preventive Israeli strike, Azerbaijan has been drawn into the intrigue. Both Iran and Azerbaijan have claimed to uncover plots hatched by the other side, in tit-for-tat salvos reminiscent of the Russia-Great Britain diplomatic spat of 2006. Both countries have aired videotaped “confessions” by purported spies on television. Whether or not the Iranian threat is real—and similar plots revealed in Georgia, Thailand, and India lend credence to the accusation that it is—the Azerbaijani regime has hastened to use the threat as a pretext to weaken domestic Islamists.

It is ironic that Azerbaijan, alone among Muslim states, celebrates what other regimes are ominously accused of doing—collaborating closely with Israel. While this relationship is a strategic and economic boon to the Azerbaijani government, the decision could come back to haunt it. Like in Georgia, the regime’s domestic legitimacy is linked conceptually in the public’s mind with its foreign policy. Just as the regime has used the specter of Iranian intrigue to crack down on domestic opponents, the relationship with Israel could be exploited by opposition Islamist movements seeking to delegitimize the regime. Even the secular opposition, which has no grievances against Israel, might find it useful to demonize Israel if such an appeal could boost its domestic standing. This strategy would be most likely to bear fruit if the military alliance were to pull the country into an unnecessary foreign entanglement (with Iran) just as Saakashvili’s alliances, although popular, led to destabilizing follies (with Russia) that emboldened his domestic opponents.

Conclusion

In one sense, the politics of foreign intrigue in the South Caucasus is perfectly natural and possibly even healthy. As there are few genuine ideological differences among factions in most post-Soviet states, foreign orientation may be the only meaningful policy issue that is widely discussed and may give the public a reason to engage in politics. Accusations of government perfidy can offer oppositions some much-needed leverage in a lopsided game in which the president’s party controls all three branches of government, as in the South Caucasus.

But there are two caveats that underline the downside risk of intrigue-based politics to governance and stability. First, the intense focus on foreign alignments crowds out debate on important domestic issues. Politics becomes a farce in which people criticize their opponents on the basis of trying to destroy the country. Some governments prefer it this way, so as to distract people’s attention from their malfeasance and domestic failings. But as a result, politics becomes a winner-take-all struggle for the nation’s future existence, leaving little room for mobilization around less dire but still important political issues that are critical for these young states to address.

Second, in order to get people’s attention in environments where conspiracies are the background noise, politicians must make their allegations increasingly strident and outlandish. This, in turn, might polarize politics along an axis based on foreign orientation, potentially pushing the opposition (anti-Saakashvili activists, Islamists) into the arms of the external meddler (Russia, Iran) to which it was (initially) falsely linked,

in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Such a dynamic could work to the advantage of foreign powers that actually have designs on the weaker state.

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