

# Russia Hires Proxy Flacks in D.C.: How Foreign Policy Is Getting Outsourced to Lobbyists

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The news that the governments (to use the word broadly) of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have [hired a California-based public relations firm](#), the [Saylor Company](#), presumably to improve their image in Washington, is nothing very new. Many countries hire public relations firms to handle their image and government relations in Washington. Perhaps the most famous case of this was Hill and Knowlton, the firm hired by the government of Kuwait to drum up American support for the first Iraq war.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, however, aren't countries. They are disputed territories that have been substantially incorporated into Russia following the Georgia-Russia war of last year. It is almost certain that the money which will pay for these firms will be coming from Moscow, not Sukhumi or Tskhinvali, the capitals of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively. In this regard, the retention of the Saylor Company is unusual, but reflective of the way foreign policy is now done in Washington.

Lobbying on foreign policy issues has gone on for a long time in the U.S., but there have been different kinds of lobbying over the years. Ethnic lobbies of various kinds are a fact of American political life. Groups such as Cuban-Americans, Jewish (and Christian) Americans, Armenian-Americans, Indian-Americans, and many different European-Americans, are among the various American ethnic groups that have sought to influence American foreign policy against Castro, for Israel, for Armenia, against the USSR and in other ways. Similarly, non-ethnic lobbies have formed to push for various foreign policy goals such as ending apartheid in the 1980s or opposing U.S. intervention in many different countries over the years. While we can debate the impact of these various lobbies, they are largely made up of American citizens seeking to influence their own government. It is a sometimes messy, inconvenient way of making foreign policy, but that is often the nature of American democracy.

Foreign governments hiring firms to polish their image, build relationships with key American policy makers, or hiring think tanks to issue reports favorable to their view, is different. It is no longer about Americans trying to influence their own government, but foreign governments seeking to influence the American government, and in many cases, trying to influence American public opinion as well. These practices are now widespread in Washington and have become an important part of how policy is made. There is nothing illegal about any of this as long as the firms in question report their contracts as required by American law. Yet these practices take on something of an absurdist twist when countries which receive ample financial support from the U.S. hire firms to lobby on their behalf, creating a situation where the U.S. government is, at least in part, paying lobbying firms to lobby the U.S. government.

If the Saylor Company does their work well, reports on the historical independence of the Abkhaz people or opinion pieces about the democratic processes within South Ossetia, for example, will begin to appear in newspapers and other media. Abkhaz and South Ossetian politicians will begin to seem more polished when they come to Washington; and they will get access to bigger and better speaking opportunities. None of this will happen by accident, but it will be due to the work of the public relations firm. This is now the nature of the business in Washington, so while there is little cause for surprise, there is strong cause for awareness.

One of the collateral impacts of this rise in paid lobbyists, and the corollary phenomenon of foreign governments commissioning reports—which are always favorable—from think tanks and other institutes, is that it muddies the waters for the whole foreign policy community. Because some reports are now commissioned by foreign governments, and because some opinion pieces are placed by public relations firms, all reports, opinion pieces, speaking engagements and the like are now suspect. Again, this is not a terrible development which will cripple American democracy or American foreign policy, but it speaks to the nature and growing influence of money and political professionals, long regarded as very powerful in domestic politics, in foreign policy as well.