

# Who Is Really Doing Russia's Bidding in Tbilisi

Four years ago, Georgia and Russia fought a brief but significant war. Georgia lost the war in less than a week as Russia consolidated control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, territories recognized by most countries, including the U.S., as legally part of Georgia, but now under Russian occupation. Although the war ended less than a week after it started, it is still extremely central to domestic Georgian affairs as well as to U.S.-Georgia relations. Today, Georgia is approaching a battery of elections, for parliament in 2012 and president in 2013 that will not only have tremendous bearing on that country's future, but on the U.S. role and position in the region for years to come. These elections are, to a substantial extent, occurring in the shadow of the Georgia-Russia War of 2008.

In the years since the war Georgia's government has lost its identity as one led by bright-eyed democrats seeking to build a European style democracy deep in the heart of what used to be the Soviet Union. Instead, the government of President Mikheil Saakashvili has become another semi-authoritarian regime relying upon selectively enforced and crafted laws, media repression and harassment and intimidation of political opponents in order to hold on to power.

This approach has until recently worked well for the United National Movement (UNM), Georgia's ruling party, in recent elections from 2008-2010, but this year is different. For the first time, the UNM's main opponents have the resources to fight back. This is due to the presence of Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's richest man who the New York Times recently described as moving from "Philanthropist to Public Enemy in Georgia." Ivanishvili has brought together a coalition which includes leading Georgian diplomats, former Rose Revolutionaries who broke with Saakashvili as he moved away from democracy, and others.

The Georgian government has long benefitted from support from the west, particularly the U.S. This support has included ample foreign assistance and loans as well as a willingness to overlook Georgia's many shortcomings with regards to democracy and human rights. The latter issue is extremely important to the Georgian regime because strong U.S. pressure linked to meaningful consequences would make it very hard for the UNM to continue to commit the kinds of violations and abuses that they clearly believe are necessary in order to hold on to power, particularly as the election approaches.

Given the growing awareness in the west of Georgia's shortcomings with regards to democracy, Georgia's leaders have retooled their strategy, focusing less on seeking to present themselves to the west as democratic and more on their reputation as a bulwark against Russian influence in the region. This approach includes efforts to describe Ivanishvili, a billionaire who made money in Russia, as a Russian stooge. Not surprisingly, nobody in the Georgian government was concerned about the provenance of Ivanishvili's fortune, or had any doubts about his loyalty to Georgia, when he was using his money to voluntarily purchase boots and other equipment for the Georgian military, build Georgia's infrastructure or provide budget support to the national coffers. The irony that a government which, according to the official EU report and most analysts allowed itself to be provoked into a very damaging

war is now accusing somebody else of facilitating an increase in Russian influence appears to be lost on the propagandists in the Georgian government.

Nonetheless, the Saakashvili regime's credentials as a strong anti-Russian force, on the surface, are very strong. Saakashvili has steadfastly stated he wants Georgia to be part of NATO; the Georgian government's rhetoric is consistently strongly anti-Russia and pro-west; the government has, with a fair amount of success, launched a diplomatic campaign to have countries, including the U.S. refer to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, regions lost to Russia in 2008, as "occupied territories" and takes every possible opportunity to denounce Russian activities. Moreover, much of this rhetoric is appropriate. Russia presents a serious and profound threat to Georgia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are currently de facto Russian colonies. Russian ambition in the former Soviet Union is something that should be taken very seriously.

Accordingly, Saakashvili's rhetoric tells a very clear anti-Russian story, but if the Georgian government were to be judged by outcomes, rather than rhetoric, with regards to Russia, a very different story would emerge. Regardless of its intentions, the Georgian government has delivered a set of outcomes that are in Russia's clear interest in the region. After being in power for more than eight years, Saakashvili and his government have seen roughly 20 percent of Georgian territory ceded to Russia for the foreseeable future, allowed Georgia's NATO and EU aspirations to become little more than a pipe dream, have presided over very difficult economic times in Georgia, a country now beset by joblessness, inflation, and a debt problem which will become more serious in the next few years.

The Georgian government uses fear of Russia as a sharp political tool, accusing almost all domestic political opponents, as well as many international critics, of being Russian spies, stooges and the like. Even pro-western opposition politicians with strong ties to the U.S. and Europe have been attacked in this way. Georgia is a country where talk of Russian plots is common, but it is interesting to explore what a Russian plot in Georgia might have looked like.

Imagine that if, in late 2003, the Russian government had been able to send somebody to be president of Georgia, while secretly pursuing Russia's interests. This, of course, did not happen, but if it had, the president would have been charged by his Kremlin masters with losing territory to Russia, making sure that Georgia would not get into NATO, ensuring that Georgia's economy stayed weak and keeping the country polarized. That president might have also been asked to weaken American credibility in the region and to try to make the U.S. spend as much money as possible in Georgia. Saakashvili is, of course, not a secret Russian plant, but all of this has happened in Georgia during his tenure as president.

The next time Saakashvili tells the west that Russia is his sworn enemy, smart western policy makers would be wise to ask with enemies like Saakashvili, what does Russia need friends for. On a more serious note, the U.S. should avoid being drawn in by the Georgian government's anti-Russia rhetoric alone and consider more seriously what Russia has gained in Georgia under Saakashvili's watch, as well as benefits, for the U.S., of a different approach to Georgia, the ruling regime, fair elections and democracy in that country.