

# What the Georgian Spy and Bomb Stories Could Mean for the U.S.

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The Georgia photographer spy scandal seems to have concluded with the accused photographers making a deal with the authorities wherein in exchange for admitting their guilt, they would avoid lengthy jail sentences. Because of the agreement, the truth of the accusations, that four photographers including two who had worked closely with the Georgian government, notably Irakli Gedenidze, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's longtime photographer, had acted as Russian spies will remain largely unknown.

It is likely that this case will recede into the political background in Georgia relatively quickly. The photographer spy scandal has already been eclipsed by the Georgian suggestion that Russian intelligence agencies were responsible for an explosion near the U.S. Embassy in Georgia's capital of Tbilisi last fall. While this story has gotten some traction in the west, the U.S. administration has not stated that it agrees with the official Georgian views of those events.

The U.S. is, of course, Georgia's most important and powerful ally. Although there has been some discontent in Tbilisi with Washington's failure to either sell or give weapons to Georgia following the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, the two countries remain very close. The U.S. provides ample assistance to Georgia. Georgia, for its part, aligns itself with the U.S. on most major issues, and for a small country, is a major contributor to the NATO efforts in Afghanistan. Moreover, the two countries are exploring greater security cooperation on issues ranging from the war in Afghanistan, anti-terrorism and Georgia's aspirations to join NATO.

The spy case and the bombing case, individually and together, raise a number of important, if largely unstated, questions for the Georgian relationship with the U.S. The first question is what if these accusations are wrong? In this scenario, the photographers have been essentially framed and the bomb near the U.S. embassy was the result of one man's actions with no connection to the Russian embassy. This is a hypothetical scenario, as it certainly cannot be assumed that these accusations are wrong or unfounded. Nonetheless, if these accusations are false, than Georgia has again demonstrated a willingness to overstate Russian involvement in Georgian domestic affairs and to risk undermining relations between Russia and the US.

The second question, and perhaps more important one, is what if the Georgian government is right? What if Russia had managed to plant spies in, among other places, the President's office and come close to detonating an explosive that could have damaged the U.S. Embassy? If these accusations are accurate, they represent further evidence of

Russia's nefarious intentions towards Georgia as well as Russia's willingness to undermine Georgia through a variety of means. This much is relatively obvious.

It seems, however, that if the accusations are true, there is another issue that should be considered. That issue is how the U.S. can continue to discuss closer security cooperation with a country that allows Russian spies to penetrate the president's office and which cannot foil Russian plans to blow up an embassy in their country. If these accusations are true, it is a massive national security threat to Georgia, one which has probably been understated and which would lead the U.S. to question its confidence in Georgia. If the president's personal photographer is a Russian spy, then there really is no limit to Russia's presence in Georgia and, more significantly, no Georgian ability to counter that presence. While the Georgian security forces may seek recognition for breaking up this spy ring, if it was real, the fact of its long existence is far more significant.

Similarly, Georgia is generally viewed as a pro-American place where Americans can work, visit or study in safety. If a plot to damage the American Embassy can be hatched and escape the notice of the Georgian authorities, however, then this assumption also needs to be revisited. Thus, if these accusations are true, Georgia can no longer be relied upon as a security partner because of their inability to combat Russian influence in a timely way. Certainly, sewing this type of tension in the U.S.-Georgia relationship, and having the U.S. arrive at these types of conclusions would be one of Russia's aims if it were planting spies in the President's office and trying to bomb the U.S. Embassy in Georgia. This does not mean that these concerns should not inform U.S. policy.

Given the relative silence from the U.S., it is likely that American officials differ with the official Georgian explanation of the embassy incident. Clearly, if the U.S. really thought that Russia had sought to bomb its embassy in Tbilisi there would have been a stronger reaction. While this silence may be frustrating for Tbilisi, indicating that their most important ally does not support these allegations, Tbilisi should probably be grateful for this. If the U.S., sincerely believed these allegations, the fallout might be worse for Georgia which would have demonstrated itself to the U.S. to be completely porous to Russian espionage and troublemaking, despite assistance and support from the U.S.