

**PATHOLOGIES OF GEORGIAN POLITICS:
EXTREMISM, FACTIONALISM AND SECURITIZATION
IN THE POST-SAAKASHVILI ERA**

Jason E. Strakes, PhD

(Associate Researcher, Ilia State University, Georgia)

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Publication date: 10 June 2015

In the years since the South Ossetia War of 8-13 August 2008, Western observers have produced much alarmist commentary regarding the imminent Russian threat to Georgia's continued existence as an independent state, and the imperative of greater Euro-Atlantic commitment to its deterrence.¹ On one hand, this reflects the international public relations campaign launched by the former United National Movement (UNM) government to justify its unsuccessful strategy of reintegrating the disputed territories by force, which (in defiance of the 2009 EU Independent Fact Finding Mission Report) cast the conflict as a premeditated and expansionist gambit by Moscow.² Yet, this narrative followed upon an existing unofficial domestic security doctrine during its incumbency from 2004-2012 that identified all major instances of organized political opposition or unrest as Kremlin-orchestrated actions, which both preceded and was reinforced by the five-day invasion.³ This essential credulity on the part of some U.S. and European representatives has encouraged the drawing of spurious associations between the August War and the Russian annexation of Crimea and involvement in the ensuing insurgency in the eastern *oblasts* of Ukraine since February 2014, in turn fueling the trope of entitlement to “shortcuts” to NATO membership among Georgian societal elites.⁴

Yet, rather than the latest wave of Russian imperialism, it is arguable that the greatest threat to peace and stability in contemporary Georgia originates from the country's leaders themselves. This is due to the prevalence of two pathological conditions that continue to characterize political discourse and association at both the state and popular levels: 1), ideological extremism manifest in a profoundly conspiracist and essentialist view of international affairs, and 2), zero-sum factionalism between and within political parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which together keep Georgian society mired in its volatile post-Soviet situation. These factors further influence the formation of national security and threat perceptions by decision-makers, which negatively affects its prospects for evolution into a liberal European polity based upon norms of pluralism, accommodation and reasoned approaches to governance.

The first example is presented by the current activities of minority parties in the Georgian government. Although it has until recently retained 50 seats in the Parliament, with the departure from office and prosecution in absentia of former president Mikheil Saakashvili since 2013, UNM has become increasingly radicalized, targeting the majority Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GD) as a

“Russian collaborationist regime” in continuation of its effort to portray founder Bidzina Ivanishvili as “financed by the Kremlin” during the 2012 parliamentary election campaign, and in response to the incumbent policy of limited dialogue and normalization of trade and cultural relations between Russian and Georgian special representatives.⁵ The major UNM demonstrations of November 2014 and March 2015 also shifted from criticism related to specific policy issues (occupied territories, economic crisis, crime and corruption) to demanding the government's resignation, with insinuations of a coming popular revolution in which Saakashvili might play a symbolic role.⁶

At the same time, Free Zone NGO, the former youth activist wing of UNM founded by former MP Koba Khabazi, has adopted an ultranationalist orientation along with tactics of physical confrontation and public clashes with any it identifies as “pro-Russian” forces, as well as with rival conservative NGOs such as Free Generation, which have become a fixture in local Georgian media during the past two years. Most recently, members initiated a rumor via social media alleging plans by the Moscow-based Night Wolves biker gang to attend the 9 May Victory Day ceremonies in Tbilisi's Vake Park. This was accompanied by vandalism of vehicles owned by Russian tourists and harassment of individuals wearing the Ribbon of St. George, a monarchist-era symbol originally banned by the Bolsheviks but incorporated into WWII medals, and popularized by President Putin for the 60th Anniversary commemorations in 2005—an activity which involved former director of Georgian Public Broadcaster Giorgi Chanturia.⁷

Secondly, Iveria NGO founded by former UNM Minister of Culture and Monuments and deputy chair of parliamentary defense and security committee Nika Rurua (who also served in the *Mkhedrioni* paramilitary force during the 1992-1993 Abkhazia War) and former Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze has promoted a decidedly illiberal agenda of banning Russian-language television broadcasts⁸, outlawing “public display of Russian symbols” and criminalizing “denial of Russian aggression”.⁹ In March 2015, the chairmen announced their intention to field candidates in the 2016 parliamentary election.¹⁰

Thirdly, on 27 May 2015, four senior UNM MPs including Zurab Japaridze, Pavle Kublashvili, Gocha Khachidze and Giorgi Meladze, announced their defection from the party due to its stagnation and inability to mount an effective platform to challenge the “oligarch puppet regime”, while stating that they will not contest the 2016 elections, instead establishing a program to “save the country from pro-Russian forces” by initiating a socioeconomic revival strategy at the popular level.¹¹

Yet despite these characterizations, in reality the majority GD coalition is at the same time composed of several parties—in particular the Republicans, Conservatives and formerly Our Georgia-Free Democrats—whom share the ideological platform of UNM in attributing domestic problems to the presence of malign Russian and “Soviet” influence (purportedly represented by a *mélange* of intelligence services, oligarchs, “thieves-in-law” and Stalin-era monuments), yet remain fundamentally polarized due to diverging loyalties to influential personalities. Amid continued instability resulting from tensions between the President and Prime Minister and a wave of dismissals and resignations since late 2014, representatives of both parties have publicly endorsed and sought legal support for extreme Georgian nationalists serving in private militias in eastern Ukraine¹², and manufactured scandals alleging Russian interference in the Ministry of Defense.¹³

A third development has been the potential pursuit of state sanctions against citizens that advertise differing preferences and perspectives regarding Russian-Georgian relations. Since the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the fashionable strategic concepts of “Russian soft power”, and “information/hybrid war” have

become increasingly popular in national security circles, as endorsed by figures such as former head of Georgian Public Broadcaster and UNM-affiliated Liberty Institute think tank Tamar Kintsurashvili.¹⁴ In response to a series of recent demonstrations held by opposition NGOs such as Eurasia Institute, Irakli II Society, Earth is Our Home, the coalition Eurasian Choice, and Georgian Peace Committee, the national branch of the Athens, Greece-based World Peace Council (which attracted counteractions by Free Zone), journalists and political analysts have deployed the phrase “popping up like mushrooms” to imply their sudden appearance in the country through infiltration by the Russian intelligence services.¹⁵

Yet, each of these groups are in fact of local origin, founded by Georgian citizens in the period immediately following the August War that advocate reconciliation with Russia, a position regarded as treasonous by the Saakashvili government. Their activities have included providing open Russian language courses, meeting with refugees, organizing conferences on Russian-Georgian relations and developing public opinion surveys on regional geopolitics as an alternative to those administered by the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute (NDI/IRI), which have long been cited uncritically by commentators as evidence of overwhelming support for NATO membership among the Georgian population.¹⁶ In addition, they interact with long-established and benign organizations representing the interests of ethnic Russian and Russophone minority communities that have been negatively impacted by state policies, including “Yaroslav” Union of Russian Women of Georgia, Union of Russian Youth of Georgia, and Center for Legal Protection of Russian Compatriots in Georgia. Amid typical charges of “Kremlin funding”, these NGOs also jointly perform little-recognized cultural, educational and humanitarian functions, as evidenced by language courses organized by Irakli II Society with Union of Greek Communities of Georgia¹⁷ and charity events with Earth is Our Home chairman Elguja Khodeli and “Diabetikon” Union of Diabetes Sufferers, whose president Mikheil Elizbarashvili also heads the press office of Union of Russian Youth.¹⁸

Yet recently, the above groups have been publicly identified by the Ministry of Defense as a threat against which investigative resources must be prepared to counter their presence. As stated by intelligence officer and former defense minister Mindia Janelidze: “[Russia’s] “soft power” in Georgia is “mainly demonstrated in increase of number of entities (sic), which are loyal towards our adversary”.¹⁹ However, this represents a misapplication of the concept of soft power, as they are being classified as direct appendages of the Russian security agencies that seek to attack Georgian society from within, rather than the use by the Russian government of alternative instruments of cultural or economic influence. Further, this doctrine makes no distinction between elements of civil society that maintain differing political views regarding Georgia's relationship with Russia than those of national elites, and real or alleged intelligence operations by a hostile neighboring power. In sum, rather than an impending Russian doom, these conditions represent the essentially aspirational nature of liberal democratic politics in Georgia, as well as the enduring chasm between the nation's ideological and technocratic leadership and the popular landscape which they seek to transform.

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