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Russia Drops Info Bomb Into Georgia's Political Crisis

Both of Georgia's warring political factions interpreted the statement from Moscow's top spy as being targeted at them and aimed at boosting their respective enemies.

By Joshua Kucera for Eurasianet

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Shakh Aivazov / AP / TASS

Russia's intelligence service has claimed that the United States is dissatisfied with the ruling party in Georgia for not carrying out Washington's orders and that Washington is preparing to crack down and force Tbilisi into a more obedient position.

"In Washington, dissatisfaction is growing with the actions of the ruling Georgian Dream party, which is declining to submissively carry out American demands," reads the March 9 statement attributed to Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, known by its Russian acronym SVR.

“To restore order in Georgia, the Americans are planning to establish a system to support the opposition and at the same time undermine the position of Georgian Dream.”

It's unclear what Moscow thought it was accomplishing with the statement. The SVR regularly makes these sorts of statements about alleged American interference in Russian affairs, but it rarely involves third countries like Georgia.

Many in Georgia’s opposition took the statement at face value, as an expression of the Kremlin’s support for the ruling party.

"In an unprecedented statement, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service — the SVR — backs Georgian Dream, alludes to its 'resistance to Washington' and cautions Western support for Georgia's opposition," wrote Giorgi Kandelaki, a senior member of the European Georgia party, on Twitter.

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Any intelligence agency worth its salt would know that apparent support from Moscow would be a kiss of death in Georgia, where the electorate is broadly anti-Russia and pro-Russian political forces are marginal. And Georgian Dream itself immediately accused the SVR of backhandedly trying to support the opposition.

"Who benefits from these kinds of statements from the occupying force?" asked Mamuka Mdinaradze, the head of the party’s faction in parliament, on the pro-Georgian Dream channel Imedi TV. Russia strongly backs the de facto breakaway governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, support that many in Georgia call an "occupation."

"Why do these kinds of things with the occupant always happen at critical moments?" Mdinaradze continued. "Why is this happening now, when the Georgian radical opposition finds itself in a tight spot, that the intelligence service issues a statement that the opposition can use?"

Georgian politics is, in fact, in a hot phase of a political crisis that has been festering on and off for nearly two years since a Russian lawmaker made a scandalous appearance in the Georgian parliament. It has accelerated in recent weeks following the opposition’s failure to convert discontent with Georgian Dream into success in parliamentary elections. The opposition claims (without much evidence) that the vote was rigged and demands a new vote. The government has hit back by arresting a leader of the opposition and appointing a new, hardline prime minister when his predecessor balked at carrying out the arrest.

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The most recent flashpoint has been newly leaked audio recordings that appear to show the son of Georgian Dream’s founder Bidzina Ivanishvili discussing with state security officials how to take revenge against teenagers who insulted him on Facebook.

All the while, European and American officials have been trying to mediate between the government and the opposition, one of many things the SVR statement (deliberately or not,

it’s not clear) gets wrong.

While the main opposition forces, led by the former ruling United National Movement (UNM), have been trying to vocally position themselves as more pro-Western than the ruling party, most American and European policymakers don’t draw a strong distinction between the feuding sides.

In their mediation efforts, American and European officials have taken a largely neutral position, much to the chagrin of the opposition, which has been strongly lobbying their Western allies to take a stronger line on their claims that the election was rigged. In December, a segment on the opposition-friendly TV network Mtavari Arkhi attacked U.S. ambassador Kelly Degnan (along with other Western envoys in Tbilisi, though she got the worst of it) for allegedly appeasing Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream.

As German analyst Stefan Meister put it in a recent analysis: "On the one hand Western partners are asked for support in the current political crisis, while on the other hand they are accused of being partisan if one's own interests in power are disadvantaged. EU and U.S. representatives have thus become part of the spiral of escalation in Georgia without being able to resolve it."

So what might Russia really be trying to do here?

The statement may have more to do with Naryshkin’s own political ambitions than with Georgia, said Mark Galeotti, a senior associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute and an analyst of Russian intelligence.

Naryshkin "has of late been adopting a much higher profile, which I suspect is a sign of having ambitions to move to a more central political role," Galeotti told Eurasianet.

"Part of that process is burnishing his hawkish credentials, and I think this certainly is the case here. I think it is really intended for domestic political consumption rather than to be taken seriously as a statement on Georgia as such."

Other analysts drew attention to the SVR’s pointed reference to sovereignty.

"The example of Georgia is a vivid illustration of how the ambitions of certain national elites to seek Washington’s sponsorship for solving its own problems quickly turns into a loss of sovereignty and the ability to carry out an independent policy both externally and in its own country," the statement concluded.

The notion of "sovereignty" is a sensitive one in Georgia, said Kornely Kakachia, the head of the Tbilisi-based think tank Georgian Institute of Politics.

"The calculation probably is, knowing how much Georgians care about sovereignty, to strengthen skepticism of U.S. policy, depicting Georgia as a vassal state of the U.S.," Kakachia told Eurasianet.

While Georgian Dream has carried out the same pro-Western foreign policy as its predecessors, who now form the current opposition, it is less ideologically devoted to that position. Moscow may be hoping to weaken the devotion to Euro-Atlantic integration among

Georgian Dream’s voters, many of whom are socially conservative, Kakachia said.

"If the UNM manages to marginalize Georgian Dream at some point and they [Georgian Dream] don’t get backing from the West, which is what happened when UNM lost elections [in 2012], then Georgian Dream and its followers, at least some of them, may think the unthinkable," he said.

"In Georgian politics, it is only one step from love to hatred."

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