

Behind Georgia's spy scandal: Growing conflicts between Russia and the US

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6 October 2006

Georgia's decision on October 3 to release four Russian military intelligence officers, arrested last week on charges of spying, has not lessened hostilities between the two states.

Georgia released the four officers into the custody of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It was a climbdown by the government of President Saakashvili, but one that still aimed to humiliate Moscow.

Georgian police marched the four past the ranked media before their handcuffs were removed in front of a clerk, who read out deportation orders to each one in turn. Speaking after the handover of the officers, Saakashvili declared, "We cannot be treated as a second-rate backyard of some kind of emerging empire."

The Russian government of President Vladimir Putin was not ready to compromise and responded aggressively, indefinitely cutting off all road, rail, air and sea links between Russia and Georgia. Flights to Russia from Tbilisi were cancelled and the ferry service from the Georgian Black Sea port of Poti to Sochi on the Russian shore remains in port.

Welcoming the four officers home, Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov thanked them for their "courage and honour, characteristic of Russian officers" before announcing that their flight would be "the last flight from Georgia this year."

Postal services have also been suspended and money transfers are under threat. Some Georgian businesses in Moscow have been shut down, including a Georgian-owned hotel and casino that was accused of money laundering.

Russian lawmakers are set to debate whether to bar Georgians living in Russia from cabling remittances home. Possibly as many as one million Georgians live

and work in Russia (Georgia's population is only 4.5 million). They send back to the Caucasus state an estimated \$1.5 to \$2 billion a year, an amount comparable to Georgia's entire state budget.

The Georgian economy is already labouring under a Russian ban on its top three agricultural exports—wine, mineral water and mandarin oranges. The punitive measures imposed upon Georgia will last indefinitely, according to Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov.

The OSCE, the European Union and the United States have called upon Moscow to reverse the punitive sanctions.

Russia's conflict with Georgia threatens to plunge the peoples of the South Caucasus into a bloody conflagration. It is difficult to ascertain if in arresting the four officers Georgia acted with Washington's agreement, or to what extent it was Washington that encouraged it to back down. In either case, Georgia would be acting as a regional proxy for the US in pursuit of its geo-political interests in the region.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has blamed the US and NATO for the crisis, and declared, "We are worried by the anti-Russian rhetoric coming from the Georgian leadership in terms that imply Russia is an enemy." He noted that Georgia's "provocations" had intensified since Saakashvili visited Washington and said that he considered Georgia's plans for membership in NATO to be the real catalyst for the current crisis.

Agreement was reached between NATO and Georgia last month on "intensified dialogue" as a first step towards membership.

The US and Britain had earlier blocked a Russian draft United Nations Security Council statement rebuking Georgia for its "provocation" and its stationing of troops in the breakaway province of

Abkhazia.

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack, speaking on September 29, said US authorities believed the issue did not require the attention of the UN and that the two sides should settle the issue themselves. Responding to press queries concerning the role of the Bush administration in recent events, he said, “I’ve heard news reports of all the, you know, various conspiracy theories involving the United States and the ‘hidden hand’ of the United States. Just frankly not true.”

For his part, Saakashvili said, “Some people could consider our action as something that has been coordinated by Washington. This is not true.”

However, such denials carry little weight. Georgian sources continually boast of US support while Russian sources routinely denounce it.

Georgian political analyst Ramaz Sakvatrelidze wrote, “We are not alone. There are many other countries opposing Russia. We are engaged in a difficult political fight, but we are supported as we are Russia’s opponent.” Gia Khukhashvili, writing in *Rezonansi*, insisted that “The United States is clearly a strategic partner of ours and it has proved this on a number of occasions through its support. We would have found ourselves in a most difficult situation today without it.”

Sergy Strokan commented in Russia’s *Kommersant*: “Georgia—and not Georgia alone—is guaranteed massive American support in the near future. The guarantee of this lies in the new rivalry between Moscow and Washington, through the prism of which one increasingly regards events involving third countries. It does not matter any more whether it is about Georgia or Ukraine, Syria or Iran, China or Venezuela. Russian-American relations, which are returning to the principle of an eye for an eye, have become a key to understanding a large part of international politics.”

Members of the Russian parliament have called for direct military action against Georgia. Speaker of the upper house Sergei Mironov described the spying charges as “either a load of bull or a peculiar pre-emptive strike on Russia.”

Russia has 4,000 troops at two military bases within Georgia. A further 2,500 are deployed within Georgia’s two breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Prior to the release of the four officers,

the commander of Russian forces within Georgia, General Andrei Popov, authorised the use of deadly force—“shoot-to-kill”—to counter any Georgian aggression.

Russia is intent on facing down what it sees as a US-inspired challenge to its authority in an area long viewed as its sphere of influence.

Last Sunday, before the release of the officers, Putin held an urgent meeting with ministers, leaders of the armed forces and heads of the intelligence services to discuss Russia’s response to the arrests. Directing his ire at Washington, he stated, “These people think that under the roof of their foreign sponsors they can feel comfortable... is it really so?”

Responding to Georgia’s declared intent to join NATO, Defence Minister Ivanov said on September 22, “We are actively developing two alpine brigades with the latest equipment. Both brigades will be stationed right by the border with Georgia. Therefore, Russian security will not suffer if Georgia joins NATO.”

The Georgian leadership has accused Moscow of supporting the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Putin met with Sergei Bagapsh and Eduard Kokity, the respective leaders of the two regions, on September 30 in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, which borders Georgia, at what was described as an “investment forum.”

A great deal is at stake in this conflict. The South Caucasus region is a geographic fulcrum for the entire Eurasian landmass. Georgia sits atop the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline running from the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan and ending on the Turkish Mediterranean coast. It is situated between the Black and Caspian Seas on the immediate periphery of the Middle East and Central Asia, where the overwhelming majority of remaining energy reserves are located.

The US government is determined to secure its control over Caspian oil and gas, which make up 3-4 percent of world reserves. But Russia has demonstrated that it is just as determined to hold onto them.



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