External Threats and Authoritarian Backlashes: A Retrospective on Internal Conflicts in Georgian Society After the August War

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In the years since the November 2003 Rose Revolution, popularly elected leaders in the Republic of Georgia have responded to organized protests with repressive tactics. These reactions suggest that former challengers to authoritarian elites may utilize similar methods of retaining power during crisis periods. Yet, the alleged involvement of agencies of the Russian Federation in fomenting domestic instability has also figured prominently in the policies of the Saakashvilli government. These conditions culminated disastrously in the Russian invasion of August 2008. The present study suggests a theoretical model for analyzing international influences on state-society relations in Georgia since 2003. The model provides a tool for examining the role of external threats in the relationship between the activities and strategies of opposition groups and the national security perceptions and practices of Georgian political elites.

ქართულ საზოგადოებაში არსებული შიდა კონფლიქტების რეტროსპექტივა აგვისტოს ომის შემდეგ

ჯეისონ სტრაიქსი
კლარემონტის უნივერსიტეტი

2003 წლის, ვარდების რევოლუციის შემდეგ არჩეულმა მთავრობამ ორგანიზებულ საპროტესტო გამოსვლებს რეპრესიული ტაქტიკით უპასუხა. მსგავსი რეაქცია ზრდის ალბათობას, რომ შესაძლებელია ავტორიტარული ელიტის ყოფილმა წარმომადგენლებმა გამოიყენონ მსგავსი მეთოდი კრიზისის განმავლობაში თავიანთი ძალაუფლების შესანარჩუნებლად. რუსეთის ფედერაციის ჩართულობა ადგილობრივი არასტაბილურობის გამომწვევის მიზნით თვალნათლივ აისახა საკაშვილის მთავრობის მიერ გატარებულ პოლიტიკაში. ამ მდგომარეობამ კულმინაციას მიაღწია 2008 წლის აგვისტოში, როდესაც რუსეთმა ქვეყანაში შემოჭრა განახორციელა. ნაშრომი გთავაზობთ 2003 წლიდან, სახელმწიფო-საზოგადოებრივი ურთიერთობების მიმართულებით საერთაშორისო გავლენის ანალიზის თეორიულ მოდელს. ის წარმოადგენს გარე საფრთხეების მნიშვნელობის განმსაზღვრელ საშუალებას, ოპოზიციური ჯგუფების, ეროვნული უსაფრთხოების და ქართული პოლიტიკური ელიტის ქმედებებსა და სტრატეგიებთან მიმართებაში.

In the years since the November 2003 Rose Revolution (*Vardebis Revolucia*), the popularly elected leadership of the Republic of Georgia has responded to organized political protests with tactics such as crackdowns by security services and militia, control of the media, mobilization of pro-regime counter-demonstrators and provocateurs, and the imposition of emergency laws. On one hand, these reactions suggest that once in office, former challengers to authoritarian elites may utilize similar methods of retaining power during crisis periods as their predecessors. Yet, allegations of involvement by agencies of the Russian Federation in fomenting domestic instability have also figured prominently in both the public discourse and actions taken by the Saakashvilli/United National Movement (*Ertiani Natsionaluri Modzraoba*) government. This is represented by the recurrent ploy of presenting intercepted telephone communications and video recordings as evidence of purported collusion between opposition and foreign elements. Significant examples of such instances are the suppression of the Ortachala Prison riot, the Kodori Gorge operation and related imprisonment of Forward Georgia! founder Irakli Batiashvili, the arrest of leaders of Igor Giorgadze's Samartlianoba (Justice) Party in an alleged coup attempt, and detainment of four Russian military officers and seven alleged Georgian accomplices in 2006, and the targeting and physical assault of opposition activists and raid and seizure of the Imedi and Caucasia television facilities by the Interior Ministry and police forces in 2007.

However, establishment views of foreign sponsorship of popular unrest have longstanding precedents in post-Soviet Georgia. For instance: during the historic student protests against the policies of former president Eduard Shevardnadze in November 2001, news media widely characterized the events as being driven by "specific political forces", including alleged Russian influence (Manning, 2007. p. 194). Western observers have also frequently attributed these notions to the immediate challenges to Georgian sovereignty posed by the Russian-sponsored separatist states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which have fostered the perception of a continual threat to national security from external sources (Cornell et al, 2005. p. 12; Cornell et al, 2007. pp. 4, 18). These conditions culminated disastrously in Russia's retaliation to the Georgian Armed Forces intervention in Tskhinvali in August 2008, which may have altered the present government's perspective regarding the use of such preemptive responses. However symbolic, the recent expansion of sessions of the National Security Council to include dialogues with opposition leaders on the first anniversary of the invasion might exemplify this shift in orientation (Kvelashvili, 2009; Rustavi 2, 2009).

The present study therefore proposes a theoretical model of political conflict in order to scientifically examine the significance of external threats as an intervening variable in the relationship between the characteristics of Georgian opposition groups, and the public security policies exercised by Georgian elites. The model suggests a linkage between the orientations of domestic political actors, the influences generated by geopolitical forces, and the responses of an incumbent government to threats to its ability to remain in office caused by internal unrest. This modifies an approach developed in an earlier study of protest and policing in post-Soviet "color revolution" states to examine the state-society *and* international dynamics that have developed in Georgia between the Rose Revolution and the August War (Strakes, 2008). The following sections will 1), review previous studies that provide supporting logic and evidence for the theory, 2), present the main components of the model, and 3), discuss the empirical measures and data necessary for analysis of these issues.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual foundations for investigating the interactive relationships described above draw from several research agendas in political science and international studies, including the literature on domestic political conflict, the impact of interstate relations on internal political processes, and national security in post-Soviet Georgia. The first segment of this framework is based upon recent empirical findings that among developing nations, semi-democracies (or governments in the process of transition between regime types) are more likely to engage in repression than either fully consolidated democracies or authoritarian states (Fein, 1995; Regan and Henderson, 2002). This maintains that the extent of threats to incumbent leaders is equated with the type and scale of demands, strategies and tactics of opposition groups, and in turn the level of repressive force applied in response (Moore, 2000). The likelihood of the use of coercion during incomplete transitions to democracy is therefore greater because the opening of the political space increases opportunities to challenge the present regime, while at the same time the fragility of existing institutions limits the capacity to channel discontent, leaving it with a limited range of options to defend itself from removal. In addition, an action-reaction process may occur in which the suppression of nonviolent protests by the incumbent regime may intensify popular opposition and internal uprisings (Francisco, 1995).

Secondly, various studies by American political scientists have presented evidence of a significant association between the magnitude of external mil-

itary threats and the decline of liberal democracy in ethnically divided societies (Midlarsky, 2003); the negative impact of major regional security threats on the level of political tolerance in small states such as Taiwan (Wang and Chang, 2006) and Israel (Peffley et al, 2008); and a similarly negative effect of external threats to territorial integrity on prospects for democratization (Gibler and Thies, 2006) and recognition of dissident groups (Gibler and Hutchinson, 2007).

Lastly, since the 1990s, Georgian analysts have suggested that the nation's situation is characterized by a weak tradition of statehood and a significant connection between internal and external threats (Nodia, 1998, 2005: 65-68; Rondeli, 1998). Yet, while the official National Security Concept promulgated in July 2005 emphasizes the dangers posed by internal conflicts supported from outside the country, infringement of territorial integrity and spillover of conflicts from neighboring states (i.e., "the Russian Federation's military presence on the territory of Georgia would be a risk factor to the stability of the country in certain circumstances"), it does not make specific reference to the sponsorship of anti-government activities by foreign agencies (National Security Concept of the Republic of Georgia, 2005. pp. 3-5). Further, despite its emphasis on these conditions, the document states that "the likelihood of open military aggression against Georgia is low", and that, pending their final withdrawal, "[M]ilitary bases of the Russian Federation located in Georgia are no longer a direct threat to [its] sovereignty" (2005. p. 4).

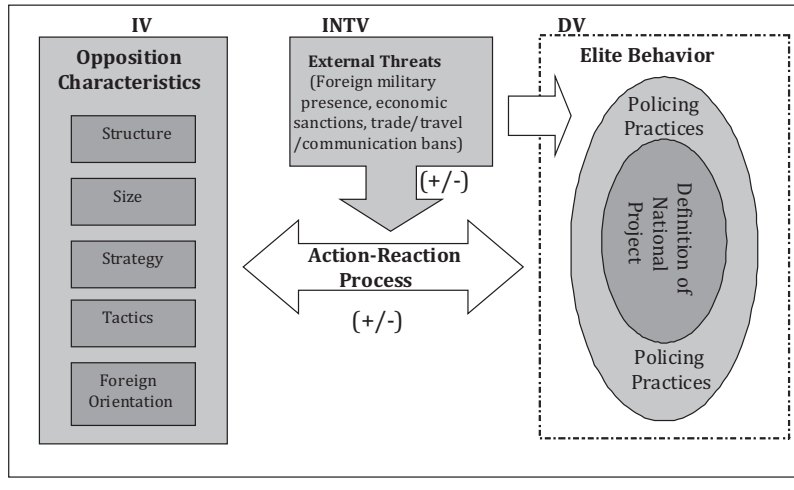
Thus, in order to address the problem of *indirect* threats, it is useful to interpret elite security perceptions in terms of the difference between "objective" and "subjective" challenges (Nodia, 2005.p. 41). The first are based on pre-existing conditions that cannot be directly controlled, such as a state's geography, size and resources, while the second involves the policies chosen in response to threats and the ability of decision-makers to implement them. In turn, each of these factors plays a role in defining the "national project", or the concept of public order and its supporting institutions held by a government. In the Georgian context, the combination of ethnic and territorial divisions, economic and administrative incapacity and unresolved questions of national identity have made it imperative for leaders to consolidate and maintain their control of the polity. This linkage between the definition of the national interest and the resort by elites to whatever actions deemed necessary to remain in office is expressed in the following quotation:

"Politicians, especially when in government, like to frame many issues as security threats, because it is easier to mobilize people on matters said to endanger core national interests (and to enhance the incumbent government's standing or influence in the process)." (Nodia, 2005. p. 42).

Model of Post-2003 Georgian State-Society Relations

The resulting theoretical synthesis is specified as follows: the schematic displayed in Figure 1 below presents a conceptual model of post-Rose Revolution Georgian politics containing three essential elements: the independent variable (IV), or the characteristics of political opposition groups, including structure (organization and leadership), size (number of participants in public actions), strategies (political objective), tactics (methods), and foreign orientation (policy toward Russia); the intervening variable (IV), or the level of threats or challenges to domestic interests that have emanated from the international system; and the dependent variable (DV), or elite behavior, which is composed of two factors: the definition of vital national interests by the governing elite, and the policing practices administered to protect and preserve those interests. Together, these represent the situational context of Georgian perceptions of national security. In turn, the upper right-hand block arrow indicates a positive association between the presence of external challenges and the security perceptions and practices of the incumbent government. Finally, the central arrow represents the bi-directional process of challenge and response between opposition and authority structures. The definition of primary indicators and sources of empirical data for each of these variables are discussed in the following section.

Figure 1. Internal/external threats and state responses in post-2003 Georgia.



Data and Measures

Opposition Characteristics

The post-2003 Georgian political opposition can be classified according to three main categories: 1), those groups and entities which have representation in the Parliament and embody the institutionalized momentum of the Rose Revolution, 2), pre-2003 groupings which advocate pragmatism or have maintained separation from the broader public protest movement, and 3), those which were established by former members of the country's administrative and business elite who have become political opponents or personal foes of the incumbent president. The trajectory that these groups have followed during the post-Revolution period is also affected by broader conditions of popular unrest generated by economic hardship, perceptions of unaccountability or indifference by the national leadership, and undesirable government policies. In the present instance, a further significant factor in identifying their influence on elite reactions is their policy orientation toward Georgian bilateral relations with Russia, which can be discerned from the programmes or manifestos of the individual parties. Table 1 presents a basic summary of data on eight major opposition groups active in Georgia during the period between the presidential elections of January 2004 and January 2008. This information is drawn from a range of public media sources, *including Civil Georgia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the* Georgian Young Lawyers' Association. The columns indicate whether opposition groups and actions are initiated by individuals (elite-led) or are broadly-based (popular), small (less than 5,000 participants) or large (greater than 10,000 participants) in size, whether strategic goals are limited (e.g., constitutional reforms) or maximalist (e.g., resignation demands), whether tactics used are non-violent (e.g., negotiations, hunger strikes, "tent cities") or violent (e.g., riots, attacks on police, property damage), and foreign orientation (cooperation with or opposition toward Russia). *For each group that falls into a respective category, the matrix cell is marked by an X. Finally, each marked category in which a change occurred in a particular characteristic over time is indicated by a subscript denoting its first (X_1) and second (X_2) position.*

Opposition Group	Elite-led	Popular	Small < 5000	Large > 10000	Limited	Maximalist	Non-Violent	Violent	Foreign Orientation
Democratic Front	X			X	X		X		Normalization of relations with Russia
Conservative Party	X		X		X		X		No stated position
Industry Will Save Georgia	X		X		X		X		Ties to Russian business, anti-IMF and World Bank
Republican Party of Georgia	X		X		X		X		No stated position
Georgian Labour Party		X	X		X_1	X_2	X_1	X_2	Partnership with Russia
Movement for a United Georgia	X_1	X_2		X		X			No stated position
New Conservatives /New Rights	X		X		X_1	X_2	X		Improved relationship with Russian Federation; withdrawal from CIS and removal of peacekeepers from Abkhazia
National Council of Unified Public Movement	X			X		X	X		No stated position

External Threats

In the post-Soviet era, Russia has been identified as the only state from which Georgia has received serious external threats. Even prior to the August War, post-independence relations had ranged from poor to tense, verging periodically on military confrontation (Nodia, 2005. pp. 39-40). Yet, it is important to note that despite some popular characterizations of the August events (as well as primordialist understandings of identity-based conflict), Georgian resistance to Russian influence in the Caucasus has not followed a singular pattern of historical precedents. During the late 18th century, the kings of Kartli-Kakheti sought direct intervention by the Romanovs and subsequent integration into the imperium of Catherine II in order to resist the advancing forces of the Ottoman and Qajar empires (Polyevktov, 1930. p. 368; Jones, 1987. pp. 53-54). Similarly, although the Russian annexation of the Georgian territories in the early 19h century and the resultant consolidation of the na-

tionalist movement was analogous with the manner in which the later establishment of the Czarist *gubiernas* of Baku and Elizavetpol galvanized the Azerbaijani bourgeoisie to campaign for Transcaucasian independence, the 1832 revolt of Georgian nobles sought the restoration of the royal oligarchy rather than the ideal of popular sovereignty (Jones, 1987; Çağla, 2003. pp. 119, 122-123). Instead, it was the Georgian Mensheviks/Social Democrats during the 1920s that expressed the most intense rejection of Russian/Soviet centralization of control (Jones, 1988).

In addition, Moscow and Tbilisi have maintained intimate economic and infrastructural ties in the post-Soviet period, and domestic producers have remained highly dependent on Russian consumer markets as a primary source of revenue, while until recent years Russia had remained Georgia's largest trading partner, at a total volume of $637.4 million in 2006 (AmCham, 2009)

Thus, Russian-Georgian relations should be examined as a series of complex historical interactions rather than as a continual struggle against imperial ambitions. The involvement of the Russian Federation on Georgian territory and its indirect influence within national society continued in both accommodative and coercive forms after the consolidation of the Rose Revolution. These have included the presence of Russian troops in the military bases at Gudauta (Abkhazia), Batumi (Ajaria), and Akhalkalaki (Javakheti), all but one of which were officially closed ahead of the three-year deadline set in the May 2005 withdrawal agreement, which generated resistance from local businesses dependent on their patronage (Niklas Nilsson and Johanna Popjanevski, 2009: 30-31); and conversely, a combination of import bans on agricultural and trade goods (e.g., "wine wars"), broad economic sanctions, including restrictions on air, land and sea transit (e.g., closure of the Kazbegi-Zemo Larsi customs checkpoint) and postal and banking communications, and visa cancellations and deportation of remittance laborers, all which were imposed from March-October 2006 (Anjaparidze, 2006).

Elite Behavior

One of the primary indicators of how political leaders in a transitional country perceive national security is the practices through which they police society. A central concern in reforming domestic security agencies in the former Soviet countries has been the reorientation of their function and operations from the safeguarding of elites to the protection of the rights and safety of citizens. Recent studies on the political economy of institutions posit that the longevity of an authoritarian government is dependent on its continued

ability to provide private goods or patronage to a small "winning coalition" of regime supporters, while public goods such as welfare subsidies and social guarantees are distributed broadly to rest of society (Bueno de Mesquita, 1999, 2000; Bueno de Mesquita et al, 2003). Yet, while monarchies and military juntas completely exclude their subject populations from politics, Soviet-style or Leninist systems purposively expand the "selectorate", or that proportion of the society that chooses its leaders by introducing membership in an official party and establishing universal voting rights. Therefore, citizens of post-socialist states have historically enjoyed a limited degree of inclusion in the political process, despite the fact that elections and candidates were formerly the sole purview of the Communist elite.

Yet, as the size of the winning coalition gradually increases during the initial stages of democratization, it becomes progressively more difficult for leaders to maintain their incumbency, as supporters receive greater incentives to defect from the elite, while potential challengers gain greater access to resources for seeking to replace the leadership. Further, there is a possible corollary relationship between increased popular mobilization and social instability. Because they offer a greater chance that citizens might gain access to exclusive benefits, efforts to expand the selectorate may eventually increase popular pressures to introduce further reforms. If formal institutions or electoral systems are weak or insufficiently representative, expressions of discontent or conflicts of interest will occur outside of the political system in the form of strikes, riots or antigovernment demonstrations (Zak, 2000).

These conditions are in turn linked to policing patterns and the suppression of conflict as symbolized by public opposition to central authorities. For the military/defense establishment and security services additionally constitute the immediate supporters of an incumbent leadership in authoritarian and newly democratizing polities. As such, the basic structure of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) and police forces remained virtually unchanged from their Soviet-era format during the period from independence in 1991 until after the Rose Revolution (Transparency International Georgia, 2005: 1-2). Security and law enforcement agencies are especially difficult and costly to reform, as they have historically served as the guarantors of state power and protection of elite interests. This concerns not simply the ordained roles and functions of individual ministries and police forces, but their actual employment and conduct, particularly during periods of transition or crisis.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to introduce a social scientific mechanics to critically and systematically address the controversial issue of external interference in the internal affairs of the Georgian state during the Saakashvili era. The model defined above aims to provide a foundation for analyzing these relationships using both qualitative (i.e., historical and ethnographic) and quantitative (i.e., statistical) methodologies. It is hoped that its application in further studies will help to increase the understanding of post-Rose Revolution and post-August War Georgian political conditions as the nation continues the process of reconciliation, social evolution and institutional reform.

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