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After the ‘Spy Scandal’ of 2006

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Introduction

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, relations between Georgia and Russia have been far from amicable, as disagreements over international alignments, territorial pretensions, and historical legacies have created a significant number of damaging rifts between the political elites of the two countries. However, prior to the arrest of four Russian citizens accused of espionage in Georgia in September 2006, it was thought that the elite political conflicts had only a marginal effect on relations between average Russians and Georgians, as manifested for example on the streets of Moscow or Tbilisi. However, the so-called ‘spy scandal’ of September-October 2006 set in motion an extended targeting and expulsion of ethnic Georgians from Russia, both those living legally in the country and those without official permission. Russian government officials, police officers, and mass media outlets alike were accused of fomenting this persecution, which has resulted in the closing of Georgian businesses alleged to be operating illegally and so far in the departure of an estimated 4-5,000 ethnic Georgians, either by order of expulsion or out of fear of the possible consequences of further life in Moscow.

The treatment of ethnic Georgians in Russia could have resulted in a backlash from the Georgian side against the considerable minority of ethnic Russians in Georgia. This Issue Brief examines the conduct of Georgian officials, journalists, and citizens towards ethnic Russians in the aftermath of the expulsions from Russia and intends to determine the extent of any appearances of discrimination in response. In the end, few such manifestations were found, as Georgian officials, possibly seizing the initiative only for political reasons, took steps to reassure the Russian minority in Georgia of their safety. Furthermore, the bans on transportation links, postal service, and money transfers levied

by Russia on Georgia have also had an adverse effect on ethnic Russian organizations and individuals.

In order to provide a background for the analysis of majority-minority relations, this Brief will first look at the formation and composition of the ethnic Georgian and Russian communities, in Russia and Georgia respectively. Next, an examination of the treatment of ethnic Russians will be undertaken, comparing events in Georgia to those which happened in Russia in the fall of 2006 and afterward. Over the course of the research on the ethnic Russian community in Georgia, a series of 20 interviews was undertaken among leaders of organizations, religious figures and ordinary citizens in order to obtain their views on the situation in Russia. The findings revealed a praiseworthy sense of judgment on the part of Georgian actors in response to the crisis, although overall rhetoric towards Russia still demonstrates negative tendencies, which increasingly may affect the level of tolerance in the country.

The Ethnic Georgian Community in Russia

Political ties between the two countries have resulted in several major waves of immigration of Georgians to Russia over the past several centuries. The largest of these movements occurred towards the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries as Georgia's incorporation into the Russian Empire brought a large influx of labor migrants northward into Russia. However, the majority of migrants since this initial flow were members of Georgia's political, cultural, and academic elite, looking for greater opportunities in the more developed and cosmopolitan urban centers in Russia. Throughout the Soviet period, the Georgian diaspora in Russia was largely made up of the professional classes who entered prestigious educational institutions and then took up permanent residence.¹

¹ "Bagration, Stalin, Borodin, Ivanov, and Other 'Russian Georgians'" *Vremya* 09.10.2006 <http://www.vremya.ru/2006/184/13/162749.html>. Accessed on 12 November 2007.

The collapse of the USSR caused both economic and political upheavals in the newly independent republics, especially Georgia. Suffering the effects of an economic crisis and an emergent civil war, Georgian citizens looked north to Russia for increased economic prosperity and employment opportunities. The 2002 Census of the Russian Federation put the number of ethnic Georgians living in Russia at 197,934 (up from 130,688 counted in the 1989 Soviet Census). However, these figures may underestimate the actual numbers of labor migrants, as hundreds of thousands of illegal workers are thought to have crossed the border and settled in Russia since the collapse of the USSR. Current estimates by Russian authorities claim that between 400,000 and one million ethnic Georgians currently reside in Russia.²

Of great importance, and due to difficult living conditions in Georgia, the Georgian diaspora in Russia sends an estimated \$4bn in remittances home to Georgia annually (Russian sources put the figure at over \$1bn), a significant aid to the welfare of relatives living in Georgia.³ The significance of Georgians for the Russian society and economy can be seen from the following. In addition to Georgians working in the professional, artistic, and culinary spheres, migrants as a whole from the Caucasus have entered the manual labor force in Russia to engage in work and perform tasks that the average Russian refuses to do. With organizations and cultural centers, ethnic Georgians in Russia have established themselves as a vibrant community, led by established Georgian leaders and public figures within Russian society.

The Ethnic Russian Community in Georgia

Russian settlements in Georgia over the 19th and 20th centuries were remarkably diverse, contributing to the development of a vibrant community in Georgia. Beginning with the deployment of Cossack warriors into the Caucasus to serve as border guards in the early

² “Georgia: Hundreds Left Stranded After Deportations From Russia” *RFE/RL* October 17, 2006 <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/10/5e22372a-7274-4e31-8c21-d6a52cf38689.html> Accessed on 17 December 2007.

³ Livny, Eric, Ott, Mack, and Torosyan, Karine “Impact of Russian Sanctions on the Georgian Economy” International School of Economics in Tbilisi (ISET), ISET Working Paper No 1, June 2007.

1800's, the Russian Empire also coordinated the resettlement of large groups of Sectarians into Georgia. Working professionals and military officers were also stationed in Georgia as part of Tsarist colonial policies directed towards the resettlement of loyal Slavs into the Caucasus. Such policies were later expanded during the Soviet period under the umbrella of 'Russification'; ethnically Russian specialists and technicians were brought into Georgia to assist with the industrialization and modernization of the country.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, the majority of ethnic Russians living in Georgia returned to the Russian Federation, partly as a result of the deterioration of economic conditions and partly because of the overt nationalism that was gaining prominence in Georgian politics. The closure of numerous military bases, as well as industrial and agricultural centers made many professional educated Russians redundant, leaving them little choice but to return to Russia in search of greater opportunities. In addition, the strength of the kin system and closely knit communities at work in Georgia contributed to an unwelcome atmosphere for Russians left out of these familial connections. Roughly 75% of the Russian population counted in the last Soviet Census of 1989 left Georgia in the following decade.

According to the 2002 Census, 67,671 Russians (down from 341,162 in 1989) are currently living in Georgia, concentrated mostly in the urban areas, but with smaller numbers, including those remaining Sectarians, residing in regional villages. Remaining Russians have founded several functioning civil society organizations to bring together members of the community and represent their mutual interests. Benefiting from some of the left-over privileges given to the Russian language during the Soviet period, schools, newspapers and television programs are still run in the Russian language, although with less and less frequency.

The 2006 "Spy Scandal" and Expulsions of Georgians from Moscow

In order to trace the immediate consequences of such international affairs on both the Georgian and Russian diaspora, one must first examine the series of events that have

inflated the tension between the two countries. Since achieving its independence in 1991, Georgia experienced a pair of disastrous civil wars concerning the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Throughout these conflicts, accusations were made that Russian forces, both volunteer and state-sponsored, were assisting rebels in the region to combat Georgian troops. When the West declined to send any peacekeeping troops into the conflict zone, President Shevardnadze was forced to sign a Russian-brokered peace agreement, which not only included the deployment of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping forces (with the majority being Russian) in the conflict zones, but also led to Georgia's accession into the CIS. Russia was now firmly entrenched between the Georgians and Abkhazians, but in sending in troops, had frozen the boundaries to allow for *de facto* Abkhaz independence. Relations between the two countries further deteriorated in 2001-2002 during the Second Chechen War, when the Russian government accused Georgian authorities of harboring Chechen militants who had crossed the Georgian border to seek a safe haven in the Pankisi Gorge from where they were supposedly planning attacks. To this day, tensions over the 'frozen conflicts' and military assistance have contributed to a sense of mistrust from both sides.

The overthrow of the Shevardnadze government and election of the decidedly Western-oriented Mikheil Saakashvili to the Georgian presidency aggravated relations to the Russian government, which saw this political shift as a direct affront to Moscow's interests in the region. Saakashvili's drive for inclusion into Western structures such as NATO and the EU and his anti-Russian rhetoric have contributed to this demise of healthy relations. Russia's responses to pro-Western politics have been pointed, including the introduction of sanctions on Georgian mineral water and wine, thereby closing off the largest market for two of Georgia's most significant exports commodities (wine and mineral water) in the spring of 2006, as well as continued overt support for the break-away territories.

The low point of this process of deterioration, which almost led to military conflict, was the so-called 'spy scandal' that occurred in the fall of 2006. On September, 27, 2006, Georgian security officials arrested four Russian military officers in Georgia on charges

of espionage. Although the suspects were handed over to the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) within a week after their arrest, anger and outrage lingered on the side of the Russian government, which vehemently denounced the charges as purely politically motivated and completely unsubstantiated. All air, sea, land, and postal links from Georgia into Russia were halted, a coastal blockade was imposed and the Russian embassy in Georgia abolished the visa regime for Georgian citizens looking to travel and/or work in Russia.⁴ In addition, Russia decided to close its Caucasian Military headquarters in Tbilisi, which was at the center of the crisis, as Georgian policemen surrounded the facility in a show of force for western consumption while one of the alleged Russian spies remained inside. In response to the ‘parading of the spies’ on TV stations and initial reluctance to hand them over to the Russians, Russian state officials and media outlets deliberately filled the airwaves with derogatory language and stereotypes of economic affairs of Georgian nationals in Moscow.

Adding to the atmosphere of persecution, Russian authorities began to physically target Georgian citizens living both legally and illegally in the Russian Federation. Georgian businesses, restaurants, and casinos were subject to intrusive searches and arbitrary investigations, leading in some cases to the permanent closure of such enterprises. Police targeted places where Georgian nationals frequented in Moscow, even going as far as requesting school lists to verify documents with those with Georgian-sounding last names. Basic rights were denied to the detainees, who were handed expulsion decisions without having access to a lawyer or opportunity to appeal. Over the course of October and November 2006, over 2,300 Georgian nationals were expelled from Russia, another 2,000 left on their own means after being given expulsion decisions, and an additional undefined number more left for Georgia because of the climate of harassment.⁵ Polls taken at the time show that support for the expulsions went far beyond the official level, as according to the Levada Center, 38% of Russian respondents supported the idea of

⁴ Meyers, Steven Lee “Russian Officials Pledge More Sanctions to Cut Off Cash to Georgia” *New York Times* 04.10.2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/04/world/europe/04georgia.html?n=Top/News/World/Countries%20and%20Territories/Russia>. Accessed on 12 November 2007

⁵ “Singled Out: Russia’s Detention and Expulsion of Georgians” *Human Rights Watch Report* October 2007 Volume 19, No. 5(D)

deporting all Georgians from Russia.⁶ The selective targeting of ethnic Georgians, although explicitly denied by Russian officials, has led to international condemnation of the expulsions.⁷

Treatment of Ethnic Russians in Georgia

During the process of the campaign targeting Georgians in Russia, reciprocal actions against Russian citizens living in Georgia would not have been an unlikely development in the political relations between the two countries. However, interviews with numerous representatives of the Russian community in Tbilisi indicate that a deterioration of their situation was not experienced as a result of the crisis. First, the Georgian government took specific steps, though most likely as public relations stunts, to display their tolerance for ethnic Russians still living in Georgia. What is more, the Georgian population did not retaliate in the same manner against Russians living in Georgia, looking beyond the political conflict and staying away from further inflammatory actions.

At the outset of the scandal, Russian authorities saw a possibility of the tense situation becoming hostile and took precautionary steps to decrease the presence of Russians in Georgia. The Russian embassy in Tbilisi was closed, the ambassador was recalled to Moscow, and a 'partial evacuation' of diplomatic families was undertaken to Russia.⁸ Notices were sent out to Russian citizens living in Georgia, advising about the tense relations and recommending that they leave. Georgian officials, including President Saakashvili, were quick to respond with statements welcoming their presence in Georgia and promising no threats from Georgian society.⁹ When air links were cut, an additional

⁶ "Poll on Russians' Attitude towards Georgians Reveals Xenophobia" *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union* 22.10.2006

⁷ Abdullaev, Nabi "European Envoys Turn Up the Heat" *The Moscow Times* October 18, 2006, "European Parliament Resolution on the Situation in South Ossetia" European Parliament, 25 October 2006 <http://www.delgeo.cec.eu.int/en/press/25October2006.html>. Accessed on 17 December 2007.

⁸ In a public statement, "Russian embassy spokesman Mikhail Svirin said that the evacuation of their embassy staff was justified as the 'security threat is credible.'" Topuria, Maya "Russia Spying Row Hots Up" *The Sunday Mail* October 1, 2006, "Russia Recalls Envoy, Plans Evacuation of Citizens" *Civil Georgia* 28.09.2006 <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13676>. Accessed November 12, 2007

⁹ "Russian Citizens are Running From Georgia" *Dengi* 04.10.2006 <http://www.dengi-info.com/news/?nid=41118>. Accessed on 12 November 2007.

178 Russian citizens were stranded in Georgia, and upon their arrival to the airport, they were handed a basket of grapes and two bottles of wine, one white and one red, by Georgian officials before their departure.¹⁰ Furthermore, as the processing of visas was being halted from the Russian side, Georgian officials acted to simplify the procedures for Russians applying for Georgian visas and open more points at the border for Russian citizens to receive Georgian visas.¹¹

The measures taken by Russian authorities against Georgia also hurt Russian citizens in Georgia who rely on close ties between the two countries. The abolition of the visa regime and transport links affected every citizen of Georgia, regardless of their ethnicity. Actions by Russia to cut off all transport and communication links with Georgia significantly affected ethnic Russians living in Georgia who are in close contact with relatives in Russia. Ethnic Russians looking to attend weddings, funerals and other family events in Russia were prevented from making the trip, besides spending exorbitant money on passage through a third country. Most could simply not afford the travel, and some with set itineraries were left without compensation. The severing of postal service cut off communication links between ethnic Russians in Georgia and their relatives in Russia, as many were forced to spend much higher sums of money on long-distance telephone calls to communicate. Moreover, remittances from Russia to relatives in Georgia were cut off, except when an alternate route was found through Ukraine. The Russian embassy, which distributes most of the funding for Russian societal organizations in Georgia, ceased its cultural and humanitarian activities when it was evacuated. Russians in Georgia were left without the benefits of such programs; many of the budgets and activities of these organizations simply dried up, devoid of any other sources of funding. The situation was reversed upon the Russian ambassador's return in late January.

In the end, the Georgian public as a whole was able to separate the discord of the political arena from its own everyday interactions with ethnic Russians. Upon analysis of

¹⁰ "Rights Activists Say Anti-Georgian Campaign Continuing in Russia" *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union* 14.11.2006

¹¹ "No Difficulties Will Occur for Russians to get Georgian Visas" *Resonansi* October 15, 2006 <http://www.opentext.org.ge/06/resonance/280/280-26.htm>. Accessed on 11 November 2007.

Georgian mass media outlets beginning in late September 2006, no analogous statements from officials or journalists, deprecating ethnic Russians or calls for steps to be taken against them were discovered in Georgia. No Russian representatives reported examples of ill-treatment or discrimination during the months of the scandal, and in fact most made a point of emphasizing the high level of tolerance expressed by the Georgian people towards them.¹² Cases of harassment or discrimination against Russians living in Georgia were not reported over the course of the campaign being carried out in Moscow. This being said, the anti-Russian rhetoric propagated by Georgian officials over recent years has not helped the perception among the Georgian public that Russia is an enemy state and any cooperation with it is tantamount to treason. One Russian NGO representative expressed his dismay over this attitude and thought that this state of affairs would ultimately negatively affect the remaining Russian community in Georgia. Sporadic incidents have been reported of discrimination against the ethnic Russian population of Georgia, but links and patterns between such cases are much harder to prove.

Conclusion

Upon comparison of the treatment of one another's ethnic community following the 'spy scandal,' clear differences emerge between Russia's and Georgia's approaches to the issue. In contrast to the full-fledged targeting and expulsion of both legal and illegal residents on the part of Russia, Georgian officials, media outlets, and citizens responded admirably to the tenuous situation, with few reported incidents of discrimination. However, anti-Russian sentiments, at least at the elite political level, are still very much present among Georgian society, and the consequences of the agitated, negative rhetoric towards Russia by several Georgian leaders could lead to an environment of increased animosity towards Russian speakers. Without specific steps taken by the Georgian government, media outlets, and society as a whole to reduce anti-Russian sentiment, there is a danger of further incensed political relations negatively affecting interpersonal relations between the ethnic Russian minority and the Georgian majority.

¹² See also "Round-up of Current State of Relations as Russians Queue to Flee Georgia" BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union – Political *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, 6 October 2006.