



# Security Services: Moscow's Fifth Column Across Eurasia

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Since Vladimir Putin came to power twenty years ago, much ink has been spent detailing the role of the security services in Russian politics, and it is generally accepted that the Putin regime essentially is a result of the Soviet-era KGB's takeover of the Russian state. But few have connected this to Russian foreign policy in its neighborhood. Meanwhile, many observers have puzzled over the reluctance of former Soviet states to embrace political reform or liberalization. Many have connected this to Russia's active opposition to greater openness and political participation in neighboring states. But few have ventured into specifics – how does Russia make its influence felt? Who is the “enforcer” with the power and resolve to translate Moscow's words into action?

The role of security services in foreign policy is a notoriously challenging subject of study. Acknowledging this, we contend that there is overwhelming circumstantial evidence to suggest that Moscow's manipulation of security services is a key instrument in its efforts to maintain its “sphere of privileged interests” in its neighborhood, and equally, a leading impediment to political reform. This is illustrated by an examination of those moments in the life of the new post-Soviet states in which the hand of Moscow appears to be present.

## Footprints of Enforcers

No post-Soviet state has so consistently been subjected to Russian pressure as Georgia, culminating in the 2008 invasion. But in 2003, Moscow had actually played a rather constructive role in the transition from Eduard Shevardnadze's government to the Rose revolutionaries led by Mikheil Saakashvili. What happened then?

The moment the relationship soured can actually be exactly pinpointed. When Putin and Saakashvili met for the first time in February 2004, Putin made two specific requests: first, not to demand the withdrawal of Russian military bases in Georgia. Second, to “take care of and not to touch” Georgia's State Security Minister, Valery Khaburdzania, a holdover from the Shevardnadze government whom high Georgian officials told us they suspected of channeling information to the Kremlin. Saakashvili, characteristically, immediately and unceremoniously dismissed Khaburdzania.

The fall of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 offers another such instance. In spite of Putin's strenuous efforts to court him, Bakiyev remained bent on following his own path. This included renegeing on a pledge to Moscow to oust the U.S. military presence at Manas airport. The April 2010 that overthrew Bakiyev did not come out of the blue: it followed a sharp downturn in Russian-Kyrgyz relations, after Bakiyev had become the target first of sharp Russian hikes in utilities prices, and then a state-orchestrated Russian media assault. Effectively, Moscow had given the green light for regime change. Bakiyev fled to Belarus, where President Lukashenko has protected him ever since.

Putin then made two bold moves: first, he unsuccessfully proposed to open a Russian military base in the South of Kyrgyzstan, immediately adjoining the borders of both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Second, as retold to the authors by a variety of Kyrgyz officials, he demanded that the top brass of Kyrgyzstan's security services be replaced with Moscow's appointees. As part of the second move he also recruited a cadre of young Kyrgyz to come to Moscow to study at the FSB's training facility.

Unlike the base, which Uzbekistan and China helped thwart, Kyrgyz officials confirm that this transformation of Kyrgyzstan's security services actually took place. As in Georgia in 2003, Moscow showed no similar concern for any other office of the government in Bishkek. Clearly, to have a strong hand in Kyrgyzstan's security services was a top priority in Moscow.

Far more publicized than these two incidents is Russia's meddling in Ukraine's internal affairs, and the priority Moscow assigned to infiltrating and undermining the Ukrainian Security Service, the SBU. During the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, Russia's FSB was permitted to infiltrate the SBU, and Yanukovich was instructed to curtail Ukrainian counter-espionage activities targeting Russian recruitment in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. The *coup de grâce* was administered when Yanukovich fled Kyiv in February 2014: the SBU's headquarters were ransacked, data on over 22,000 agents and informants were stolen, and every hard drive and flash drive in the building was destroyed. The former SBU Head and his entourage soon surfaced in Moscow. His successor, Valentyn Nalyvaichenko, concluded that Ukraine had lost “everything that forms a basis for a professional intelligence service.”

The Ukrainian case shows the importance Moscow assigns to preventing the emergence of serious counter-intelligence efforts in neighboring states. The same is true in Georgia: when the Georgian government arrested four Russian operatives of Russian military intelligence in 2006, Moscow was so upset at this affirmation of Georgian sovereignty that it curtailed all air, rail, road, and postal links to the country and began harassing Georgian immigrants in Russia.

### **Government Reactions: Dealing with Russian Infiltration**

Within the governments of the region, Moscow's interest in their security services is no secret. Smaller and poorer countries have been forced to accept the reality of what is in fact a Russian abrogation of their sovereignty. But larger states with greater resources have sought, ever so subtly, to counter this infiltration by reforming their security services – particularly in times of political transition.

After Ilham Aliyev succeeded his father as President of Azerbaijan in 2003, one of his first moves was to dismiss his Minister of National Security, a former Soviet-era Head of the KGB in Russia's Murmansk region. Like all officers of the newly formed security agencies, the Minister had close and personal links with former colleagues in Moscow, and carried on the culture of the old Soviet KGB. In the Azerbaijani case this was manageable as long as Aliyev Sr., himself a high KGB official, held the reins of power. But Aliyev Jr. had been formed by a life in business, not the KGB, making it that much harder for him to gain the loyalty of the security services. Following the dismissal, Aliyev appointed a police colonel to succeed as Minister of National Security. This was a highly unusual move: the Soviet legacy suggested the opposite, as security officials are frequently appointed to police jobs, not vice versa. But a police colonel would not have the Russian connections that a former KGB official was likely to have. In 2015, Aliyev took matters one step further and dissolved the Ministry of National Security, turning it into a state agency.

Two additional examples vividly indicate Central Asian governments' awareness of the problem security services constitute. In both cases the key actions were publicly announced and widely publicized through official channels by the governments themselves.

The first concerns the actions of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in the months after he succeeded Islam Karimov as President of Uzbekistan. In addition to delivering a dizzying round of speeches in which he laid out a bold and comprehensive program of reform, after a year in power he moved decisively against the country's National Security Service (SNB). Like its post-Soviet counterparts, Uzbekistan's SNB was responsible for the country's borders, the detection and eradication of threats to the state, and important areas of censorship, among other functions. To carry out these tasks it had a large and skilled staff of spies who worked at home and abroad and even its own paramilitary forces. In short, the realm led by SNB Chief Rustam Inoyatov since 1995 was a state within the state.

In a January 2018 speech in the ancient city of Bukhara, President Mirziyoyev called the SNB "mad dogs," called out the "atrocities" they had committed against innocent people, and observed that "no other country has given so much power to these unscrupulous people in uniform."

Mirziyoyev promptly dismissed Inoyatov, but he understood that prosecuting him could be an invitation for Moscow to react and stir up trouble. Around Tashkent, it was widely reported that Moscow had intervened on Inoyatov's behalf. Mirziyoyev instead thanked Inoyatov for his services and made him a personal "advisor."

A third set of "footprints" regards Kazakhstan and similarly occurred during a transition in national leadership. Few heads of state have ever planned their exit from office more carefully than President Nursultan Nazarbayev. His concern for stability caused him to propose a phased transition, during which he would continue to head the ruling party and be chairman for life of the National Security Council. In addition to these measures, he quietly appointed Karim Massimov, one of the country's most widely respected public sector leaders, to head the National Security Committee (NSC).

Over many years Nazarbayev had carefully groomed another former Prime Minister, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, to succeed him as president. Tokayev was of late speaker of the Senate, and thus next in line to the presidency. As for Massimov, besides giving him a range of senior governmental posts, Nazarbayev had appointed him to chair the board of trustees of his beloved Nazarbayev University, the first institution to which the president allowed his name to be attached. Some foreign observers, unaware of this deep relationship, speculated that Massimov had been demoted.

The reality was very different: Nazarbayev named Massimov to head what he clearly considered the most crucial governmental institution besides the presidency. Indeed, the Kazakh NSC fulfills most of the same functions as Uzbekistan's State Security Service. However, during the first quarter century of independence no one comparable to Uzbekistan's Inoyatov emerged at the Kazakh NSC. Indeed, the American CIA had considered the agency sufficiently trustworthy to pen a secret cooperation agreement with it in 2010. Nonetheless, Nazarbayev—clearly and understandably—understood that foreign governments would likely seek to interfere in Kazakhstan's transition, that the NSC would be an obvious point of entry, and that a strong hand at NSC was therefore needed to prevent this from happening. It is the general consensus among Kazakhs and foreign observers that such interference first and foremost would come from "the North," the general euphemism that officials across the region use when referring to Moscow.

The list of examples can be extended. Instances abound of the present authors being privately cautioned about the questionable loyalty of security services to their national leaders, and the use of Moscow's influence on those services to prevent the development of effective counter-intelligence, undermine political reforms, and sabotage the improvement of relations with the West. Indeed, on more than one occasion, security services in the former Soviet republics have engaged in such blatant human rights abuses as beating or jailing political opponents for the very purpose of generating outrage in Western capitals. This leaves their own government with the option of pushing back against the services, at great risk, or to defend or deny the abuses committed – a lose-lose proposition.

### **Implications for U.S. Policy**

If the picture presented here is correct, what is its relevance for U.S. policy? There are at least three significant implications.

First, both the U.S. government and analytic community should pay much closer attention to the role of security services in post-Soviet states, and to Moscow's use of this element as part of its "hybrid warfare." In other words, this should be included in the volume of sophisticated analysis produced on many of its components – e.g. manipulating elections, cyber-warfare, energy warfare, and the manipulation of ethnic conflicts. Indeed, the role of security services has concrete implications. If, to take a concrete example, a dissident is jailed or beaten in a given post-Soviet country just before a high-level U.S. delegation is to visit, the knee-jerk reaction of the State Department is to publicly berate that country's government and threaten consequences for bilateral relations. The incident will then poison a diplomatic visit that would otherwise have provided opportunities to deepen relations, thereby handing a victory to the retrograde forces in the security services – and their friends in Moscow. Conversely, if the U.S. government has sufficient analytic acumen to determine that the incident was an effort to derail its relations with the country, it would conclude instead that public berating of the partner government would in fact weaken the very forces in that government that America supports, while strengthening retrograde elements. This would lead Washington to instead adopt a more low-key approach that allows the government a way to save face, and perhaps help it deal with the disloyal elements in its own midst.

Second, as already noted, the U.S. government rarely interacts with security services, aside from very specific and compartmentalized cooperation in the sphere of counter-terrorism. Rarely, if ever, do matters pertaining to the local security services and Russia's influence over them come up in bilateral dialogues with partner governments. This is understandable: for the U.S. to raise such matter could be construed as an inappropriate intervention in internal affairs, while admitting to such problems could be highly embarrassing for the partner government. But if the U.S. appears unaware of this vector of Russian influence, pro-Western and reformist forces in the government will feel isolated and alone. To cite a concrete example, several years ago a presidential advisor from one regional state confided to the present authors his shock when trying to explain Russian and Iranian subversive activities to a high-ranking State Department official. The response: "we think you should have good relations with your neighbors." The poor advisor was at a loss how to transmit this American response to his President.

The solution is for the U.S. to focus to a much greater extent on matters of sovereignty and security in its dialogue with Eurasian states, and to indicate to its trusted partners that Americans truly understand these internal complexities.

Further, the U.S. should offer to support efforts to reform the security services. In fact, there is a powerful incentive for political leaders to do so. Within just the past five years both Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have sought to revamp their security services and turn them into modern forces that serve only the interests of the national government. Unfortunately, there has been very little American or European support for these reform efforts, reducing the likelihood of their success. Western powers understandably fear that reformed security services could become the unaccountable tools of capricious presidents and their entourage. Still, given the outsize role of such services in the region, it is distinctly in the U.S. interest to ensure their modernization and their full subservience to the legitimate national governments. There should be more American interaction with them, not less. Events in Ukraine and elsewhere show the need for the U.S. to support the development of professional counter-intelligence capacities in Eurasian countries. Only in this way can it reduce or eliminate Russia's ability to influence the most sensitive sectors of government in the region.

In the final analysis, two countervailing tendencies are visible across Eurasia today. On one hand, governments in countries as diverse as Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are working feverishly to implement reforms that would promote economic development, make governments more responsive to their citizens and less susceptible to foreign influence. At the same time, Moscow is working to nullify these trends by coercing regional states to join its Eurasian Union. In this effort, the role of the security services is a key lever that has so far escaped attention. If the U.S. is serious about stopping Putin's project in its tracks, it would do well to pay much greater attention to this neglected area.

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