

Spy Flap Lets Tbilisi Make Russia Look Foolish

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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For some time now, the activities of Russia's intelligence operatives have been a source of material for jokes rather than spy novels. Their foibles have become something of a "What Not to Do" textbook for foreign counterintelligence. The FBI only recently deported 10 failed Russian spies, and now Georgian intelligence is having a turn at uncovering Russian operatives in their midst. Georgian counterintelligence announced the arrest of 13 Russian spies, including Georgian air force pilots who were accused of providing Moscow with secret information on the flight schedules, military preparedness and weapons systems of all 10 aircraft in the Georgian air force.

The Georgian Interior Ministry says the other suspected agents — businessmen, four of whom hold Russian citizenship — gathered information about Georgia's armed forces, including the weapons it received and security measures at important installations. In a video released by Georgian intelligence, a stereotypical double agent nicknamed "Enver" vividly tells the story of how he was recruited at a meeting with senior commanders of Russia's

Foreign Intelligence Service. It should be noted, however, that the job titles of the Russian officers mentioned sound a bit strange. For example, one officer was identified as “the regional head of military intelligence in Sochi.” Ordinarily, intelligence units are based in military staff divisions, not territorial designations. What’s more, there are a number of nonstandard job titles in the Georgian statement.

The political motivation behind this incident is obvious. On one hand, Georgian counterintelligence has done its utmost to discredit people with ties to Russia. There are already indications that Valery Svarchuk — president of the Motherland Union of Russian Compatriots in Georgia and the recent recipient of the Pushkin Medal awarded by the Kremlin — had been scouting recruits. On the other hand, the announcement was timed to coincide with the upcoming NATO–Russia summit in Lisbon. Tbilisi is clearly upset that relations between Moscow and NATO are improving and that Brussels labels Russia as an “aggressor” with decreasing frequency. This is the time to instigate something that will lead to an exchange of inflammatory statements between Georgia and Russia and send a message to the participants of the Lisbon summit that it would be ill-advised to place their trust in President Dmitry Medvedev, who has agreed to attend the summit. And despite the absurdity of the Georgian version of events, the story has succeeded in causing considerable damage to Russia.

This raises a question: Is the information gathered by undercover agents worth the foreign policy risks that arise if the spies are exposed? As for the Russian agents in the United States, the only mystery the FBI was never able to unravel was whether they ever obtained a single secret. It would seem that the only thing the spies obtained was an all-expenses-paid opportunity to live in the United States for several years. Even though the White House did everything possible to minimize the fallout from the failure of the Russian agents, they ended up looking like laughingstocks anyway. Singing patriotic tunes with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin later did not help.

Could it be that the Georgian spy scandal is an orchestrated attempt by Tbilisi to make Russian agents look foolish and that Tbilisi went as far as to feed the suspects with intelligence information? If so, was it worth the risk? Of what value was the information about the Georgian army, which is miniscule compared with the Russian armed forces? What is the use of knowing the flight schedules of a handful of Georgian fighter jets and helicopters? What is the mysterious strategic advantage in obtaining information on the maneuvers of each of Georgia’s three brigades?

Information on arms shipments to Georgia can be obtained through official United Nations channels. One can hardly believe that a NATO state might be secretly supplying Tbilisi with weapons in some sort of special operation.

In fact, Russian military intelligence should be concerned with only one question: Will Georgia stage a surprise attack on the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, and the Abkhaz capital, Sukhumi? But with several thousand troops deployed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia has no reason to fear a surprise attack. Moscow should concentrate its efforts on creating an intelligence network within the border towns in the region, not inside Georgia’s army. After all, if military agents were to receive a sudden order, they might not be able to communicate with headquarters. And with the help of local residents, it would be fairly simple to control the major highways.

But recruiting villagers is a silly and humiliating task for someone trained to recruit military personnel and state politicians, people who are potential enemies. It is more prestigious to report the recruitment of a senior agent, even if it brings no real benefit.

Surprisingly, Russia's top political and military leaders now view intelligence gathering — normally a straightforward and even mundane exercise — as an end in itself. A significant amount of money was spent on maintaining an intelligence network in the United States, even though it provided no useful information. But a superpower needs to have a spy network in the United States the same way it needs to have a nuclear arsenal. And if the leadership labels any country — even a tiny one like Georgia — as a potential enemy, it is necessary to conduct intensive intelligence work there, even if there is no practical need for it.

But the more intensive such work becomes, the greater the likelihood that it will be discovered and come crashing down — as happened in Georgia. That has given Tbilisi a golden opportunity to discredit Russia.

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