The Curious Case of Mikheil Saakashvili [*]

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Using natural language processing techniques (NLP) we examine a large sample of Mikhail Saakashvili's English-language public speeches between 2004 and the present day. Linkage clearly exists between three rhetorical focal points in (A) a set of geopolitical harms, specifically the claim that an externalized "other" (Russia) is the root cause of Georgian insecurity, (B) a set of "bottom-up" solutions (domestic institutional reforms targeting corruption and strengthening state capacity), and (C) a set of "top down" geopolitical solutions (involving NATO). We call this cluster of ideas *anti-Russian reform populism* and speculate on its consequences. Systematic comparisons of in-office (2004-2012) to out-of-office (2012-present) language suggests that though the stage changes, Saakashvili has played the same character all along.

"People compare my style with that of JFK, but in terms of substance, I feel much closer to Ata Turk or Ben Gurion, or General de Gaulle - people who had to build nation states."

– M. Saakashvili, 2004

Introduction

The August 2008 war pit Russia against Georgia: two non-consolidated democracies of vastly unequal capabilities. When distant observers ask "What was Georgia thinking?" the question, in practice, invites suppositions about the psychology of one particular person: Mikhail Saakashvili. Saakashvili's energetic and populist leadership style and character have been the source of a great deal of informed speculation by biographers, journalists, and historians. This paper presents preliminary results from systematic analysis of the content of a large sample (531) of Saakashvili's English language speech performances between 2004 and 2019 using natural language processing techniques (NLP hereafter).

The role of leader framing, storytelling, and narrative in crisis bargaining has received a great deal of attention in the post-Soviet space (Hopf (2002, 2013)). A review of the timeline of Saakashvili's presidency is beyond the scope of our ambition in this short paper, and we claim no private knowledge of his private beliefs.[1] Our thesis is that his aggregate public performances are a direct indicator of the domestic political coalition he believes himself to be constructing. Our assumptions mirror those of Snyder (1991, 41), in which elites deploy state institutional power to manipulate public attitudes by blurring the line between "fact and fiction ... sincere beliefs and tactical argument".[2] The paper contributes to a burgeoning literature on text-as-data, illustrating one way that relatively new NLP tools can complement interpretative approaches in the study of international

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[1] Goldstein and Keohane (1993) provide a typology that distinguishes "world beliefs" and "principled beliefs" that are publicly held, intersubjective, and have behavioral implications; "causal beliefs" are privately held or cognitive and may not directly affect behavior. Our methods in this study rely only on aggregated measures of the the first two types.

[2] While Snyder loads quite a bit into the word "propaganda" (17-30), we are sympathetic to his general thesis that leaders can become entrapped by their own words and the political reality they create. It is also plausible to us that in discussions that signal a willingness to use deadly force in international affairs, political actors are not just the users of words, but are somehow used by the words they use.

affairs.[3] Our study is a preliminary attempt to apply these techniques to the leader of a small country that steered his country into war against a militarily powerful neighbor.

This paper began as an exercise in barefoot empiricism, one component of an ongoing book project that describes the causes and consequences of the August War. The first section of this paper presents a few background observations in an expository manner to frame the rest of the paper. The second section presents the data and describes the computer-assisted induction techniques we use to establish linkage between three rhetorical focal points: (A) a set of geopolitical harms, specifically the claim that an externalized "other" (Russia) is the root cause of Georgian insecurity, (B) a set of "bottom-up" solutions (domestic institutional reforms targeting corruption and strengthening state capacity), and (C) a set of "top down" geopolitical solutions (NATO and the EU).

Among ourselves we call this cluster of ideas *anti-Russian reform populism*. Brubaker (2017) conceptualizes populism as a unifying analytic category for discourse and political performance anchored on four common components: (A) antagonistic re-politicization of politics based on the claim that certain points of view are under-represented among the ruling elite (B) majoritarian appeals (C) anti-institutionalization, and (D) nationalist protectionism (including immigration, emphasis on national defense, and the like). Given the dilapidated state of Georgian institutions in 2003, those four categories can be mapped onto the grievances that motivated the Rose Revolution quite closely. The adjective "reform" emphasizes the fact that, after ascending to power, Saakashvili dedicated himself to the project of systematically dismantling inherited post-Soviet institutions resuscitated associated with Shevardnadze and the 1990s. The goal was to visibly build a state apparatus, especially in Tbilisi, more recognize-ably democratic and European. The thesis guiding our data analysis is that an important part of his legitimacy was based on his oft-repeated argument that if they could build a state that was maximally respectable for Western European donors, they had the best chance of acquiring NATO security guaran-

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[3] Recent high-profiles applications of text-as-data to buttress high-stakes psychological claims include a study of jihadist clerics in Neilson (2017), a study establishing that U.S. circuit court opinions become more conservative in response to "economics in law" trainings (Elliot Ash and Naidu (2017)), and hundreds of descriptive studies of Congressional representative behavior (e.g., Matthew Gentzkow (2015), Jacob Jensen and Wilse-Samson (2012)).

tees. Previous work tracked *demand* for these arguments among the Georgian electorate; this paper tracks the *supply* of these arguments over time from Georgian elites.

As an avatar of the Rose Revolution it is straightforward to find empirical evidence of Saakashvili as an energetic reformer. To what extent was this ferocious energy a reflection of Georgian domestic opinions, and to what extent did he *shape* those opinions? One way we begin to answer this question is to examine whether his rhetoric changed once the constraints imposed by calculating his re-election prospects were removed. After losing an election in 2012 and stepping down from power he "took his show on the road" with similar themes. The sample we analyze includes hundreds of post-2012 speeches, newspaper editorials, and other speech acts, targeted to residents of various Central and Eastern European countries, the United States, and, especially since 2014, Ukraine. In the third section, we test to see whether the removal of electoral constraints allowed him more freedom to dig in on more extreme positions, or moderate past stances. By comparing in-office behaviors to out-of-office behavior, we distinguish between a *brand maintenance* account and a *gambling for resurrection* account. Evidence is more consistent with brand maintenance. In colloquial terms, our methods suggest that though the stage changes, he has been playing the same provocative character all along. A final section concludes.

Background

When Georgia succumbed to state failure and civil war in the early 1990s, Russia intervened militarily to cauterize the fighting.[4] Over the next two generations, as frozen conflicts calcified in Georgia's rural periphery, the social fabric of Tbilisi was transformed by Georgian institutional innovation buoyed by substantial sums of Western aid.[5] The inflows of foreign money were first used to centralize political power by incorporating paramilitaries into the Georgian state. After the Rose Revolution of 2003 peacefully removed Eduard Shevardnadze from power, Georgia's government built an unusually strong

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[4]   Russia's military presence was subsequently legitimized under the auspices United Nations Security Council Resolutions, especially 849 and 858.

[5]   On the frozen conflicts, see King (2000) and Marten (2012). On foreign aid, see Jones (2013, 138), Blauvelt (2018), 172.

reputation – easily measurable in cross-national democracy indexes, anti-corruption indexes, and the like – for implementing unpopular civil service reforms. Saakashvili's larger-than-life bombastic personal style hung over these decisions:

> Mikheil Saakashvili brought in an entirely new style to the Georgian presidency, which contrasted strongly with his predecessor's aloofness, subtlety and (some would say) slyness. Saakashvili portrayed himself as a 'man of the people'. His style was one of dynamism, energy and, at times, authoritarianism. He saw himself as a man with a mission and his mission was first to restore Georgia's territorial integrity by winning back Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and then to build an effective, united and modern Georgian nation-state. His repeated references to the medieval King David the Builder reflect this vision of himself . . . Ghia Nodia classifies his style of leadership - correctly in my view - as a curious combination of liberal autocracy and illiberal democracy, where the latter serves as a cover for the former'.[6]

Saakashvili infused both domestic reform effots and foreign policy with a new energy – and drew on substantial public and Western support while doing so. In the heady aftermath of the Rose Revolution, an election was organized in which he received more than 97% of the votes cast. Mikheil Saakashvili also had astute instincts for the rhythms of American politics. His legal training at Columbia University allowed him to enter the Georgian presidential palace fluent in English and capable of understanding where Russia, Georgia, and "democracy promotion" fit into American self-conceptions of its role in the world. At the level of personal leadership he also cut a completely different mode than the brooding, calculating, aloof authority figure represented by Eduard Shevardnaze.

Saakashvili used his new authority to move quickly to re-negotiate the stats of Adjara (successfully) and re-visit South Ossetia (unsuccessfully). These moves were viewed by Russia as unilateral tinkering with bargains struck in the early 1990s. These foreign policy moves were immensely popular within Georgia.[7] Georgian votes were broadly supportive of his military and political leadership during the August 2008 war. Most Georgians believed – and survey data suggests most still believe – that they were the victims of unprovoked external aggression from Russia, "rallying 'round the flag" in a way that

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[6]   Wheatley (2005), 208. The quote from Ghia Nodia is sourced from an online debate organized by the Caucasian Institute for Peace Democracy and Development to coincide with the first anniversary of the Rose Revolution'.

[7]   Coppieters (2005); de Waal (2005).

validated Saakashvili's risky crisis bargaining behavior.[8]

What was Saakashvili's strategy for military success against the vastly superior Russian neighbor? The de Figueiredo and Weingast (1999) model of "leader as gambler" closely matches our intuitions in this case.[9] The best chance for a Georgian victory over Russia was the internationalization of negotiations over the frozen conflicts with assistance from Europe and the U.S., so the gamble was to escalate a conflict at the moment in which U.S. military intervention was most likely – during the 2008 presidential campaign.[10] In preparation for this risky gamble, and in its wake, he emphasized issue linkage between the promise of EU and NATO alliance membership and domestic reformers. The 2008 gamble did not fully pay off. The fighting produced about five hundred military casualties. Fighting took place over a five day period, was largely conventional, and, given the raw size of the Russian military, both decisive and one-sided. 25,000 ethnic Georgians were expelled from South Ossetia.

Saakashvili's political career did not end on that battlefield, however. It was conspicuous to observers that there was no strategy by the Kremlin to translate crushing military victory into lasting strategic gains, no mechanism for leveraging their power to alter Georgian domestic institutions.[11] Lacking the political will to occupy Tbilisi, but also lacking the requisite soft power or clandestine resources to facilitate a subtler ground game, Russians eventually went home, having inflicted some damage on Georgias military,

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[8]   See Driscoll and Maliniak (2015).

[9]   Leaning on the malleability of what Jervis (1978) calls "subjective security demands" (174-5) and the opportunistic constructivist account of Milosivic in Gagnon (1995), the model illuminates a mechanism by which leaders "activate" the external threat environment, wag the dog, and try to stay in power. Electorates in the model know that complex international negotiations have broken down and the leader is well-positioned to "create sufficient causal ambiguity about why hostilities and violence occurred." The authors emphasize the *rational* nature of the fear-based appeal conditional on the breakdown of negotiations – in the case of Georgia and Russia, aggressive Russian actions in South Ossetia "confirm" (in the formal Bayesian sense) that Russians really *are* the enemy, not to be trusted. 263-7, 277-280.

[10]   Driscoll and Maliniak (2016). A reasonable counter is that the Georgian masses were not duped at all, but rather attacked a time and manner of Russia's choosing (e.g., with Russia sending a clear message to NATO about the processes by which the Bucharest Declaration, which promised NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine, could accidentally initiate a great power war). It takes two to tango.

[11]   The Russian 24-hour news cycle presented a narrative calibrated to incite social unrest in Georgia: Heaping the blame on Saakashvili, making accusations of war crimes and atrocities, and emphasizing that their military presence was necessary to defend minorities. It didn't work at all. No "Peace Now" constituency emerged, suggesting that there were no efforts to pre-position fifth-columnists in Georgia, to engineer uprisings among ethnic Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti or ethnic Azeris in Kvemo Kartli.

facilitated *de facto* secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and sent a signal to NATO member-states about the possibility of accidental escalation. The NATO-Russia Council was suspended – but so was most of the high-level conversation about bringing Georgia into NATO (see Figure 1). By the 2012 presidential election, Saakashvili could campaign as the leader who had faced down Russia.

Figure 1: Third Image Structural Constraints: The Fully Specified Article 5 Game
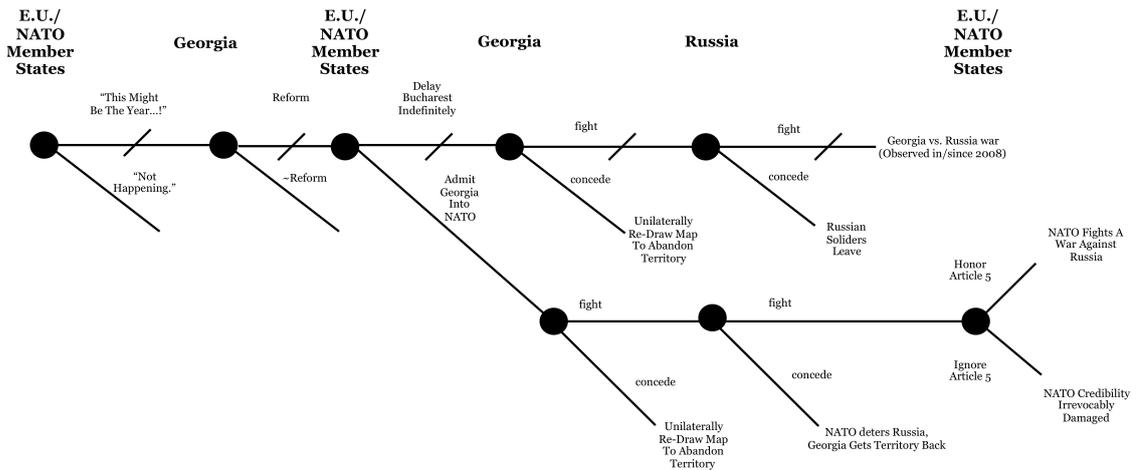
An interesting wrinkle in this melodrama is the role played by the European Union in the imaginations of Georgian voters. Charap and Colton (2017) introduce the concept of geopolitical "in-betweens" to describe countries like Georgia – too far East to have been welcomed early into NATO and the EU as Central Europe in the 1990s, but, unlike "the -stans", too far west for the aspiration of joining Europe to be out of the question – and the ambiguity introduced by this fact can be a powerful impetus to reform. Europe, with its markets governed by unelected Eurocrats, is cast as the idealized savior in the Georgian scenario. This is quite the opposite of the anti-European populism found in the partially-consolidated democratic polities of other Eastern European polities (e.g., Poland, Hungary, and Turkey). Mikheil Saakashivili's innovation, then, was to explicitly link Georgia's threat environment with the need for bottom-up institutional reforms, using dangled EU/NATO membership as a mechanism to make the future seem perhaps closer at hand than it really is. The EU and NATO have become aspirations, highly idealized

targets of adoration for the Georgian median voter. The argument articulated in countless speeches to Georgian citizens is that NATO is part of a total "Western" package: a mix of security, economic, and rights-related pleas.[12] Saakashvili's vision has helped many voters bridge the optimism gap, tighten their belts, and endure reform dislocations. Credible socioeconomic data suggests that Georgia today has a middle class that would have been fantastical in the Shevardnadze era.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Saakashvili's legacy is that he stepped down from power after losing an election in 2012. This decision cemented his populist legacy as a democrat all along. It also meant that our dataset of his public speech acts extends 6 years during which his performances were not calibrated towards maximizing the probability of re-election. The next section describes computer-assisted description of the systematic characteristics, then, of one populist leader's particular discursive and stylistic repertoire.[13] Common patterns of speech that were used throughout his career. We organize the inquiry that follows around a narrow question: After losing office, did Saakashvili engage in the well-analyzed strategy of "gambling for resurrection" by escalating his messages with the hopes of re-entering Georgian politics (Downs and Rocke (1995); Romer and Weingast (1991)? Or it is closer to the truth to say that he is a political party unto himself, seeking (and shaping) the values of the median voter, maintaining consistency to bind voters to his brand (Wittman (1973); Roemer (1997); Persson and Tabellini (2000))?

Data and Design

To understand how Georgia's most prominent showman presented himself publicly, we collected the English-language text of all speeches made by Mikheil Saakashvili from February 4, 2004 to October 29, 2013, as well as all English-Language writings made publicly available between February 12, 2014 and March 3, 2019.[14] The post-presidential

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[12]   See Ó Beacháin and Coene (2014), especially 935, but the entire article supports these claims. See also Driscoll and Maliniak (2018).

[13]   This phrase is found on Brubaker (2017), 360.

[14]   The speeches are housed in the Saakashvili's Presidential Library archive. While the original language of the speech is not provided, given the context of the speeches, some were given in English and

statements are collected from articles or transcripts of speeches, or from outward facing communication (e.g., op-eds, Facebook or Twitter posts, etc.). In the end, this produced a total of 531 separate documents.

While we focus on the text as data in this preliminary exploratory note, and in particular the choice of words, there is a great deal of other metadata that could contextualize these communications further. We do not yet have the original language or location of the speeches, but do have the date when the speech was made or the writing was published. We include the latter in our analysis to inform the way we think about how the issues are discussed and also as a convenient way to see if important changes occur over time.

We use a standard dictionary to remove common stop words that appear too frequently to give information about the topic, like "the", "or, or "and". We also remove the word "will", "Georgia", "Georgian", "ladies", and "gentlemen" because these terms tend to occur in almost all speeches at similar rates, and tell us little informative about the topic of the speech. After the data were cleaned, we are left with a dictionary of 11,546 words, with a total of 160,050 words in the total corpus. We utilize the *stm* package to create a structural topic model (Roberts, Stewart, Tingley, Lucas, Leder-Luis, Gadarian, Albertson and Rand 2014; Roberts, Stewart, Tingley et al. 2014). Structural topic models (STMs hereafter) essentially train a computer to search patterns in the use of text to define topics by those words that commonly appear near each other within and across documents. STMs have the advantage of being able to utilize metadata (such as whether it was given after Saakashvili left office) to inform the analysis, as we shall see.

Many of the decisions in NLP, given that it is all so new, are ones of aesthetic taste and judgment rather than established rules.[15] For instance, the correct number of topics within a given corpus of text is not a straightforward issue. We tested a variety of different numbers of topics and found relatively stable results around 20 topics.[16] This judgment

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the majority in Georgian. Translations into English occurred prior to collection by the Library.

[15] For discussion, see Grimmer and Stewart (2013).

[16] While the *stm* package has a function to determine an "optimal" number of topics, Roberts, Stewart, Tingley et al. (2014) warn that this should not be viewed as a statistically deterministic answer both because some level of randomness in the procedure can lead to different numbers of topics, and that a users substantive knowledge of the topic should take precedence. When we used this method we found that roughly 50 topics would optimize these metrics, but would provide little substantive advantage in

was based on both the fit of the model to the data (which can be validated using statistical metrics – see foontote 16) and also the intuition that the meaning conveyed in the topics that appeared was useful (which is a subjective assessment). Figure 2 shows 20 topics in the order of their relative prevalence in the data.

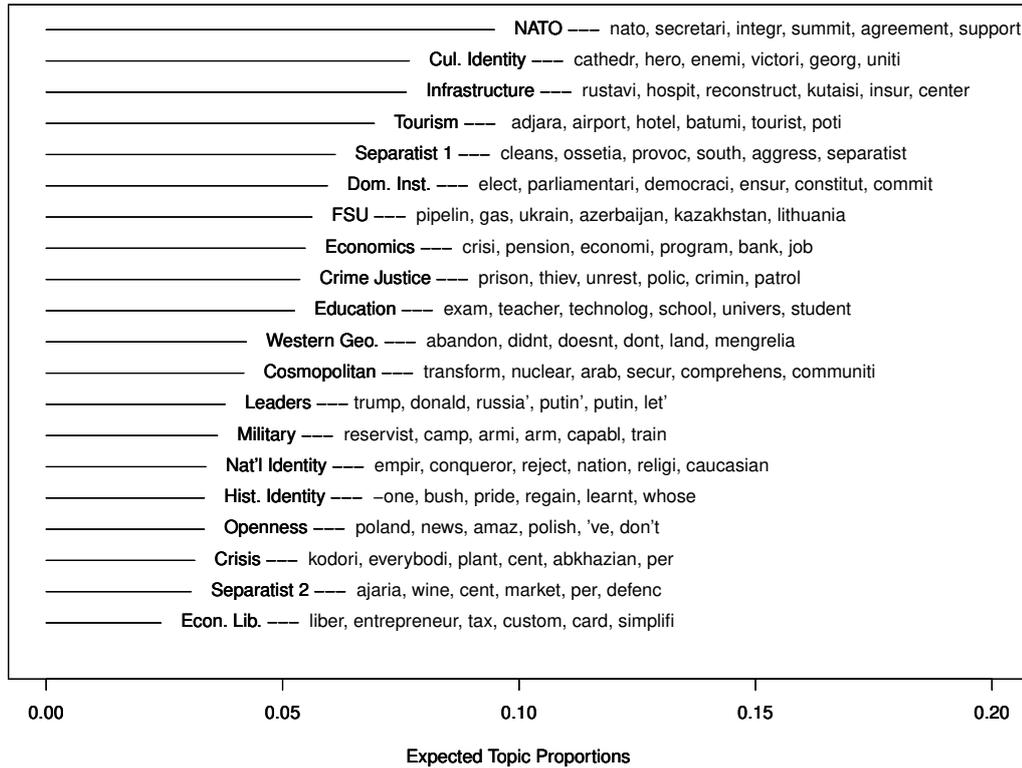Figure 2: Proportions of Topics Across Saakashvili's Speeches and Writing, by Topic

NATO ––– nato, secretari, integr, summit, agreement, support
Cul. Identity ––– cathedr, hero, enemi, victori, georg, uniti
Infrastructure ––– rustavi, hospit, reconstruct, kutaisi, insur, center
Tourism ––– adjara, airport, hotel, batumi, tourist, poti
Separatist 1 ––– cleans, ossetia, provoc, south, aggress, separatist
Dom. Inst. ––– elect, parliamentari, democraci, ensur, constitut, commit
FSU ––– pipelin, gas, ukrain, azerbaijan, kazakhstan, lithuania
Economics ––– crisi, pension, economi, program, bank, job
Crime Justice ––– prison, thiev, unrest, polic, crimin, patrol
Education ––– exam, teacher, technolog, school, univers, student
Western Geo. ––– abandon, didnt, doesnt, dont, land, mengrelia
Cosmopolitan ––– transform, nuclear, arab, secur, comprehens, communiti
Leaders ––– trump, donald, russia', putin', putin, let'
Military ––– reservist, camp, armi, arm, capabl, train
Nat'l Identity ––– empir, conqueror, reject, nation, religi, caucasian
Hist. Identity ––– –one, bush, pride, regain, learnt, whose
Openness ––– poland, news, amaz, polish, 've, don't
Crisis ––– kodori, everybodi, plant, cent, abkhazian, per
Separatist 2 ––– ajaria, wine, cent, market, per, defenc
Econ. Lib. ––– liber, entrepreneur, tax, custom, card, simplifi

0.00   0.05   0.10   0.15   0.20

Expected Topic Proportions

Figure 2 presents the twenty topics, as well as the top six words associated with the term.[17] The algorithm cannot tell researchers what a topic is, only the words most associated with that topic. We applied labels based on our own interpretation to determine a subject. Through these most prevalent six words, the themes of these topics generally are recognizable – even to those who know little about Saakashvili and the context of

terms of topic produced, making for greater difficult in presentation and interpretation of results.

[17]   We use the FREX measure to determine these words. FREX looks for words that both appear frequently in a given topic and weights frequency by how exclusively the word appears in a given topic.

Georgia. The most prevalent topic is concerned generally with *NATO*, with references to the secretariat, various summits, and support for territorial integrity.[18]

Another way to perform a face-validity check on the categorization is to look more broadly at the words used in these topics (as compared to just those with a high FREX score – see footnote 17). Word clouds are a common tool to illustrate the frequency and breadth of words used in summarizing a corpus of text. In Figure 3 we present four word clouds for terms that appear often in and are highly associated with a given topic. Pane A presents the information for the *NATO* topic. We see evidence of some coherence in the topic around issues related to NATO, with the term NATO being prominent, as well as secretary, general, and Afghanistan (where Georgian troops served along with NATO forces). For the *Separatist* topic, Russia plays a pertinent role, as well as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, ethnic, people, territories, attack, and civilian. The *FSU/Energy* topic focuses on natural gas, pipelines, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Russia, cooperation, power, supply, and other words that seem to focus on the region, and in particular, how that region relates to energy. The *Leader* topic mentions Putin, Trump, and Ivanishvili, along with language about elections, popularity, leaders, and perceptions.

One reason we focus on these six topics is their relation to each other in the way they co-occur in the speeches. Obviously even short and focused speeches cover multiple topics. While a speech at the opening of a local school might focus on education, a similar speech at a university commencement might start with issues related to education and then venture into other themes (such as the economy, foreign policy, etc.). How these different topics co-appear in speeches is a valuable insight. For instance, if the NATO topic generally co-occurs with talk of Georgia's progress on its domestic institutions, this may be evidence that Saakashvili was trying to link these two both for domestic and foreign audiences. Figure 4 presents a network-style graphical representation of the topics. Lines

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[18] The second largest topic references what we refer to as *Cultural Identity*. It references cathedrals, heroes and enemies of Georgia, and uniting the country. A third topic, referencing some of Georgia's major cities, construction, and public works projects, we call *Infrastructure*. *Tourism* is a topic mentioning Adjara and it's seaside capital of Batumi, but also airports, hotel, and tourist. The fifth category is one we call *Separatist 1*, which mentions South Ossetia, ethnic cleansing, provocation, aggression and separatists, as well as Russia. The *Domestic Institutions* topic refers to the legitimacy-providing democratic institutions that support his rule. *Leaders* includes familiar proper nouns often found together.

Figure 3: Word Clouds of Six Topics

(a) NATO

(b) Separatist 1

(c) FSU/Energy

(d) Leaders

(e) Openness

(f) Domestic Institutions

between topics indicate relatively higher levels of co-occurrence within speeches. The topics are then spaced so that those that are connected are closer than those with which they have little or no connection. We also vary the color of the nodes based generally on the themes to which they correspond. Some of the results of this clustering provide a helpful face validity check to the measure. The topic associated with separatist issues in Adjara, *Separist 2*, is not connected closely with the corresponding *Separatist 1* topic, which is clustered in with the discussion of NATO. *Tourism* and *Infrastructure* are linked, but they are separate from a topic that mentions economic liberalization, economic conditions, or Western Georgia. A number of topics tend to dominate speeches separately, such as *Military* which focuses on Georgian armed services, often mentioning past military heroes (e.g., Pyotr Bagration). Similarly, *Criminal Justice* issues tend to occur in isolation – suggesting limited attempts at issue-linkage with high politics and foreign affairs.

Figure 4: Plot of the Correlation of Topics Between Each Other
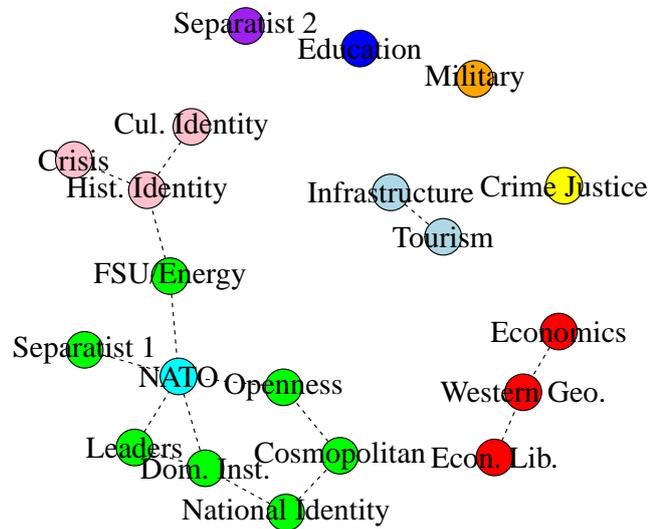
The main cluster of analytic interest is the green cluster, with NATO – the most prevalent topic of all – located centrally. These topics most closely approximate issues related

to the foreign affairs of Georgia. Not surprisingly, the *Separatist 1* topic and *Leaders* topic both include a heavy dose of anti-Russia and anti-Putin sentiment. The linking of these topics, in hundreds of speeches, articulates a set of inter-related arguments for why the West should care about Georgia. Georgia is important for those whose worldview is informed by the logic of security, as well as those who may want to move energy resources from the Caspian Sea region to Western Europe while avoiding Russia. Focusing on this topic in conjunction with discussions of NATO specifically, and Western integration more generally, resonates with some foreign audiences looking for more regional involvement. The focus on reforms of domestic institutions (*Openness*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Domestic Institutions*) plays to a different crowd, one that speaks in the language of grants and accountability and deliverables, that can be counted on to demand tangible evidence of democratic consolidation as a prerequisite for EU admission and NATO membership. Among ourselves, we have come to call this cluster of ideas *anti-Russian reform populism* – linking domestic institutional reforms to the interstate threat environment in the imaginations of Georgian voters by constantly making the pitch, in the same way, in English, to international donors.

Results

The simplest test to see how Saakashvili's public discussion of these topic changes over time is to model topic prevalence over time. The STM prevalence package was used to create Figure 5, which illustrates how the prevalence changes by topic before and after Saakashvili vacated the presidential mansion. The dotted line at zero represents no statistically significant difference in topic prevalence between the two time periods. Points to the left are more prevalent in the time when Saakashvili was President of Georgia. Those to the right were more prevalent when he was "on the road" outside of Georgia. We focus on the five topics we are most interested in: NATO, Separatist 1, FSU, Domestic Institutions, and Leaders.

Two results stand out. First, the discussion of the NATO topic and the *Separatist 1*

topic are essentially equally prevalent in either period. This may seem counter-intuitive, since the separatist issues are a specifically Georgian problem, and NATO membership was a focus for him a President. The *Separatist 1* topic includes anti-Russian language calibrated to raise the salience of the Russian threat in the minds of listeners. Similarly, the discussion of NATO and integration with the West was often couched in terms of helping out states on the periphery of Russia. These issues seem to dominate his rhetoric. We see this as evidence commitment to strategically calibrated public profile: anti-Russian, populist, pro-reform, pro-NATO, and anti-Putin. Second, note that the topic of domestic institutions remains part of his post-presidential communication package. Our supposition is that is because geopolitical success depends on a unified understanding in the Anglophone world that positions Georgia as a "good ally" in the minds of distant audiences. This language is meant to differentiate his nation from other nations on the Russian periphery that are lesser allies that have delayed post-Socialist reforms.

Figure 5: Prevalence of Speech Topics in Presidential and Post-Presidential Time Periods
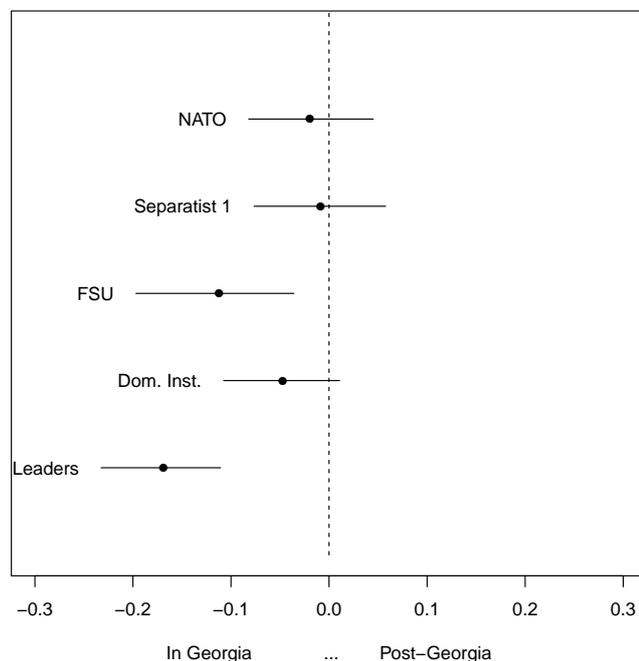
These new methods admittedly shed little new light on the direction of the causal arrow between leaders and followers. Nothing in these models identifies the extent to

which Saakashvili's language drew upon on or drove Georgia's public discourse. Nor do they provide any particular insight into whether the English-language content we analyze was essentially gestated in, and intended for, the domestic Georgian polity (or the sentiments of its English-speaking members – his "youth base") or if they were rather intended for the cosmopolitan English-language milieu that Saakashvili's international patrons inhabit.

Future work will extend analysis in two directions. First, we are interested in exploring whether the the concepts discussed publicly by Saakashvili in the Georgian language (for a narrower domestic audience) reveal different systematic patterns than communications in English. Second, we are interested in expanding our sample to the major speeches of Georgia's other heads of state in order to establish the originality, and enduring impact, of the populist turn in Georgian politics that Saakashvili exemplified.

Discussion

We believe exercise is illuminating for three reasons. First, though the international system surely imposes constraints on leaders' scope of action, this study emphasizes the agency of leaders of small states. Even relatively weak states now control mass media technologies capable of projecting images and words across vast distances. This allows leaders to generate common knowledge among their citizens (Chwe (2013)) and thereby imbue certain catch phrases with symbolic authority (Bourdieu (1991)). If Gal and Woolard (1995, 129) are broadly correct that "linguistic representation produces not only individualized 'speakers' and hearers' as the agents of communication, but also larger, imagined and emergent social groupings", it follows that the language that leaders choose probably matters. Skilled leaders can, and do, shape national consciousness in constitutive ways.[19] When Camber Warren (2015, 117) declared that "the nation is spoken into existence," he couched this constructivist assertion in a realist vein of social theory that runs from E.H.

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[19] Snyder (2000), Chapter 2, which usefully reviews a set of arguments common in the literature on ethnic outbidding and media assisted elite manipulation. For defenses of the more polarizing phrase "constitutive", see also Woolard (1998) 3-4, Burke (1987), 14, Crowley (1996), 183.

Carr through Joseph Nye by way of such titans as Max Weber and Karl Deutsch.

Second, as political scientists with an interest in crisis bargaining, we continue to find first-image explanations for the Russo-Georgia 2008 war compelling. Since military decision-making authority in Georgia is centralized in the office of the executive, it is functionally impossible to tell the story of the August War without making suppositions about what the man in the chair might have been thinking. It is taken for granted that when state leaders give speeches, their performances are designed to communicate information to both domestic publics and other states (Putnam (1988); Fearon (1994)).[20] Since non-consolidated democracies are particularly war-prone actors in international affairs (Snyder (2000); Mansfield and Snyder (2005)), the communicative behavior of populist leaders in active conflict dyads is particularly interesting.[21] Studying a setting where neither institutions or democratic culture provided much of a check on the leader makes first-image analysis inevitable, and we see this paper as an exploratory effort to apply text-as-data tools as a compliment to expert assessments of leadership psychology.

Third and finally, as students of post-Communist political reform Georgia under Saakashvili is an unusual success story. These data reveal a persistent effort to link domestic reform to NATO – and this is immensely interesting, with potential applications for contemporary Ukraine. Saakashvili's brand of reform leveraged by the promise of NATO and EU membership has not been convincingly replicated successfully anywhere else in the South Caucasus or Central Asia. The links between Saakashvili's personalist leadership style, his anti-Russian reform populist message, and the self-enforcing nature of the reforms initiated in the wake of the Rose Revolution will continue to be debated, but as of now Georgian economic reforms appear to have stuck. Part of Saakashvili's charismatic authority was a confident belief that future historians would be study his actions as a template for future reformers in other post-Soviet states. This paper demonstrates how emergent machine-learning techniques can assist historians in that project.

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[20]   Useful IR literature reviews on the links between domestic public opinion, regime types, interstate signaling, and war can be found in Slantchev (2006); Weeks (2008); Debs and Weiss (2016).

[21]   Since the Georgia-Russia conflict is at least in part an outgrowth of civil conflict in post-independence Georgia, it is also relevant to note that numerous studies have linked partial democratization ("anocracy") with civil war onset. See for instance Fearon and Laitin (2003) especially 84-85.

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