

Vis-à-vis

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The Russian-Georgian War of August 2008 and its immediate consequences resulted in changes to the military-political configuration in the South Caucasus:

1. Dividing lines in the zones of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts were transformed into reinforced boundaries, like those that existed during the Cold War between Western and Eastern blocs.
2. The conflicting parties are left face-to-face with each other, while there are no peacekeepers in the border zones. The European Union Monitoring Mission, without access to territories controlled by Russia, is not able to perform functions that used to be fulfilled by UNOMIG in the zone of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, and by OSCE mission in the zone of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict;
3. The context of the concept of conflicting parties was changed; now Georgian and Russian military forces are first of all considered as such, and only after that come Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian. In the report of Tagliavini Commission, the events of August 2008 are described as a "combination of interstate conflict between Georgia and Russia and intra-state conflict"¹.
4. Russia's military presence in the South Caucasus, which was significantly reduced after the Istanbul Agreements (1999) on the withdrawal of Russian military units from Georgian territory, was increased and reinforced.

Like the direct confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which contains Karabakh elements, the direct confrontation between Georgia and Russia contains Abkhaz and South Ossetian elements. Diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia are severed, there is no direct dialogue between the countries, and authorities in Tbilisi and Moscow demonstrate their mutual disapproval. In the absence of military parity between Russia and Georgia, continuing the armistice mainly depends on political and geostrategic factors.

The sole document specifying the general format of the ceasefire is Sarkozy's plan of August 12, 2008. It is important however, that paragraph 5 of that document, saying specifically that the armed forces of the Russian Federation are to return to their pre-conflict positions, still is not fulfilled by the Russian side. Moreover, referring to a "new military-political reality"², Russian Federation does not even intend to implement the provisions of the Sarkozy-Medvedev agreement, without which advancing to a stable peace seems difficult at best. It could be concluded that Russia is trying to maintain maximal freedom and not feeling bound by bilateral and multilateral commitments regarding peace with Georgia.

It is indicted in the report of the Tagliavini Commission that during the time after the Russia-Georgia war, the situation in conflict zone did not improve, and the political environment for conflict resolution was worsened by Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is stated in the same report that the "threat and use of force are back in European politics. The principles of international law, such as respect of

¹ Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia – IIFFMCG, v.1 page 36 (Report of Tagliavini Commission)

² See statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia 1269-25-08-2009 www.mid.ru

sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states were ignored... The consequence of that is deviation from civilized standards for political relations in Europe". Finally it is mentioned in the report that none of underlying causes of the conflict defined by the geostrategic interests of leading international players (such as fight for influence in region and access to raw materials) has lost importance or influence on the development of events.

Even though the process of reducing tensions between Russia and the West became obvious after publication of the report, the parties' approaches to the conflicts on Georgia's territory remain unchanged. The policy of non-recognition remains the foundation of the West's (and not only the West's) position regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is significant that none of the CIS countries joined Russia in its decision regarding recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Even V. Yanukovych, who has already managed to sign numerous agreements with Russia in the early part of his term in office, stated that he will never recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia³.

It should be noted that current conditions are not the result of the policy of non-recognition; on the contrary, the policy of non-recognition, shared by a majority of the world's countries, is the result of unilateral steps taken by Russia. These steps contradicted the norms of international law⁴ and relevant practice, and upset the balance of power in the region, significantly escalating an alarming security situation in the South Caucasus. Moreover, it could be considered that the policy of non-recognition declared by the West is addressed rather to Russia than to Abkhazia and South Ossetia (their recognition was not an issue before August 2008). The West, united by the policy of non-recognition, highlights disapproval of the deeds of Russia, insists on full implementation of the provisions of Sarkozy's plan⁵, but does plan to participate in discussions (at the right stage and under proper conditions) regarding the possibility of recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as, potentially, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria and others.

Using a chess analogy for this constellation (politics is often compared with chess) it could easily be said that "policy of non-recognition" is an adjourned game, which (like a chess game) might have three outcomes:

1. Resolution of Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts within the framework of the territorial integrity of Georgia – a victory for Georgia.
2. Future global recognition of the independence of Abkhazia – victory for Abkhazia. (Recognition of South Ossetia is unlikely to be seriously discussed.
3. Absorption of Abkhazia by Russia (whether *de facto*, *de jure* or both) – formally a draw between Georgia and Abkhazia, but in practice the defeat of both, as a result of which the winner is a third party: Russia.

This complicated adjourned position conceals risks for all parties, but the condition of Georgia is the most alarming. After leaving the Collective Security Treaty (refusing to enter the Collective Security Treaty Organization Georgia has stayed out of any multilateral system for international security (though membership in the Collective Security Treaty did not provide it with any dividends). Vague prospects for joining

³ <http://www.newsru.com/world/04jun2010/janukovitch.html> 04.06.2010

⁴ See report of Tagliavini Commission v. 1 p..17

⁵ During the visit of Medvedev in the USA, the White House stated that persuading Russia to withdraw its army from Abkhazia and South Ossetia is the long-term American goal.
<http://www.newsru.com/world/23jun2010/medamer.html>

NATO have not just been removed from the agenda for an indefinite time but Georgia has also lost the favorable position and trust of member states of North Atlantic Alliance that it enjoyed for several years. Rearmament of a Georgian army that suffered significant losses in the war of August 2008 faces significant obstacles. All of these factors, as well as relatively new elements of domestic political life make Georgia even more vulnerable vis-à-vis Russia.

But on the other hand Asian and Russian vectors are strengthened in Georgian politics (and economy). To compensate for cooling relations with the West (over the last 22 months, the President of Georgia made no state visits to any Western country, and the isolation was terminated only in June 2010 by visits to France and Romania) Saakashvili is trying to network contacts with Arab countries around the Persian Gulf and even with Iran. With falling Western investments, Turkish, Arab, Kazakh and even Russian investments in Georgia's economy and infrastructure are more visible. In light of the upcoming expiry of Saakashvili's term of office, European ways of transferring power are less discussed, while Russian or Singaporean models for its maintenance are appearing on the agenda. On the other hand the leaders of some opposition parties (former prime minister Z. Nougaideli, former speaker of the Parliament N. Burjanadze) have become frequent guests of Moscow, playing on the dissatisfaction of part of the population with relations with Russia. When more than half a million able-bodied Georgians work in Russia, without having the opportunity to come back to Georgia, while Russian markets are closed to Georgian products, while West has failed in stopping Russian expansion in Abkhazia and Ossetia, and now their hypothetical return to Georgia depends on Moscow — according to this part of the population maintaining normal relations with an immediate, strong neighbor is more important than abstract Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The European choice of Georgia that seemed immutable before August 2008 appears to face challenges.

Turkey's increased activeness in the region (and outside of it) deserves attention. Historically, Russian and Turkish interests have competed in the Caucasus, but at present, by virtue of a number of factors favorable for cooperation, both sides might develop their common interests, which might reduce Western influence in the Caucasus and create additional challenges to the pro-Western orientation of Georgia. It is notable in this context that the Turkish Platform for Stability and Cooperation in the South Caucasus was highlighted by Premier Erdogan in Moscow, in August 2008.

In the present situation, Western calls for "strategic patience" by Georgia may not be the most effective message for overcoming the crisis, because on the one hand patience is not the strong suit of Georgian authorities, and on the other hand it is not clear how this message will be interpreted by unpredictable and ambitious authorities in Moscow. However, it was difficult to expect anything different against the background of "strategic fatigue" of the European Union and the "reset" of relations between the USA and the Russian Federation. The "Eastern Partnership" is weak consolation for Georgia and other countries involved, because economic and military as well as political levers look much more efficient in hands of Kremlin in contrast to the "soft power" of Europe, wrapped in the new packaging of the Eastern Partnership.