

## **The Little War that Lifted the Fog**

*By Josef Janning*

To open up with the conclusion of this piece: The short war between Russian and Georgian forces in 2008 has not altered the strategic landscape of Europe. Rather, the clash has cleared the air from the smog of illusionary rhetoric about a new order for the continent. After the fact, the realities of power and dependence, of cooperation and conflict, the dilemmas of order and principle have become more obvious and debatable. The coming discussions about the structure of international affairs and the policy options for security, cooperation and prosperity in Europe can and should be built on the sober recognition of the opportunities and options of the major players on the European stage: the Russian Federation and the European Union. In this context, Georgia's role is likely to be that of an object rather than a subject. Like it or not, the country has lost from the war and will rather not be able to turn its aftermath to its own advantage. The ambivalences and ambiguities in the positions and priorities of both Russia and the EU – as discussed below – will weaken the transformation of the country's economy and polity, mostly by providing a diffuse, sometimes threatening, mostly discouraging international environment that will come as a welcome scapegoat for half-hearted reforms and personalized policies.

In his book, Ronald D. Asmus rightly points out the decisions, indecisions, conceptions and misconception that contributed to the build-up of the conflict well before its military escalation. As this essay will briefly argue, neither the EU nor Russia has been sensitive enough to the developments in the Caucasus, in large part because of each side's structural inability to bring about the desired outcome. Possibly, the EU or key member states could have provided better guidance to the Saakashvili presidency and key actors in Georgia that could have balanced the coaching from Washington. Under very different circumstances but somewhat similar in effect, both the assurances of US foreign policy to Turkey in its striving for EU accession and those to Georgia with regard to its future role in the West and the status of Russia have turned out to be dead-ends, but paved with good intentions. A more sober reading of Russian interests and perceptions on the one hand and European capabilities and constraints on the other would have made for a more cautious US policy and should have led to higher sensitivity to the earlier stages of conflict escalation.

## **Pivots of Order: Russia and the EU**

Evident since the EU's acceptance of a "big bang enlargement" approach and the return of order and power as cornerstones of Putin's Russia, it is these two actors that have inherited from the USSR the position of building and defending order across East-Central and Southeastern Europe. Between them a latent fundamental rivalry has emerged which has been papered over, rather than resolved, by the language of communiqué and the patterns of interaction. Both sides seem over-extended with regard to their respective structural impact on the overlap between their spheres of interest. This has become most obvious in the Caucasus region, in the Western Balkans or with Ukraine, but could as well come to the fore over Belarus or the Baltic states.

### **Russia – Prisoner of Its Mind**

In spite of visible fears in the Baltic States and parts of East Central Europe, Russia's approach to its Western EU neighbors today is post-Soviet. Moscow's concerns and grievances over the accession to EU and NATO seems to have been driven more by foreign policy tactics than by principled objections, however strong the Kremlin's desire may have been to preserve a zone of special influence in its western vicinity. Any rational analysis of Russia's policy options would conclude that dealing with its west as part of the EU lowers transaction costs and that neither the EU nor NATO poses a threat to the security and integrity of Russia. NATO, however, is perceived as being instrumental to American containment strategies that Moscow views as continuing, albeit in a non-antagonistic setting. With regard to its status as a great power, Russia needs a viable relationship to the EU as the only other principal actor of mutual dependence.

What keeps concerns about Russia's Europe policy alive and complicates relations with the EU and NATO, are the ambiguities of Russian policy vis-à-vis Belarus and Ukraine on the one hand, and Russia's apparent pursuit of defending, extending or enforcing its influence over the imperial acquisitions in the Caucasus and, for that matter, in Central Asia. The perspective taken here assumes that the Caucasus in particular poses a dilemma for Moscow. On the one hand, maintaining its status and role is costly, both in political and financial terms; it could well fuel anti-Russian sentiments and violence. On the other hand, there seems to be no other option than to secure an extended *droit de regard* and to control the southwest of Russia proper with its ethnic issues, memoirs of czarist times and anti-centralist tendencies. Thus,

Russia does what it does, because its strategic community sees no third way out, is aware of the price that has to be paid for its pursuit but remains willing to pay.

## **EU – Strategic Limbo**

If that assessment of Russia is adequate, the West and, in particular, the European Union also faces a dilemma. The EU could neither effectively influence the transformation of Georgia, nor would it be able to significantly modify Russia's position and behavior in the Caucasus region. Brussels could also not credibly push for specific change in the region because it could neither externalize the implications of such a policy nor internalize the region by way of membership.

The EU's order-building potential largely consists of the membership option. Wherever this is in doubt or does not apply the structural capacities of the semi-actor in Brussels appear to be rather weak. In practical terms, this holds true for the entire Eastern and Southeastern neighborhood of the current EU-27. Nowhere, not even with regard to the Turkish quest for membership, have the EU and its members been able to pursue a consistent policy that could live up to the stated goals of EU summits. Beyond the grand enlargement of 2004, the EU has neither the will nor the capacity to cash in checks written out by NATO. This would have applied to 2004 as well, had it not been in the overarching interest of EU members to maintain the Union's defining power in the shaping of post-cold war Europe. In turn, this means that NATO should not, under the lead of the United States, write out checks that the EU is supposed to cash in.

The immediate reaction and the aftermath of the war have demonstrated that the key issue of the EU's approach to the conflict lies in its Russia policy. Not only does Europe's *ostpolitik* suffer from the lack of a strategic approach vis-à-vis Russia, it also suffers from internal struggles among member states about the goals and strategies towards Russia.

In principle, a European strategy could take three different paths. First, the EU could seek to position itself as a post-modern network of interdependence, consciously seeking to transcend the logic of great power relations and their strategic implications, relying on the longer term transformation of the impact of great power. In consequence, the EU would seek to expand its structures as far as its membership principles would allow, through full or partial membership or by creating concentric circles of differentiated integration. Such an approach would then have to apply from the Barents Sea to the Mediterranean, including Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia,

Armenia, Turkey – and not excluding Russia or, eventually, applicants from North Africa.

Secondly, the EU could define its role and strategy as being the key integration force for the continent, seeking to unite as much of the continent as possible under its rules, institutions and policies but exclude Russia in light of Russia's own ambition for status and power. While the first approach would rely on the gradual transformation of the meaning of power and status, and thus remain indifferent to the ambition for power, the second would conflict with Russia's interests and ambitions directly.

A third option for the EU would be to position itself as one of the major powers in the international arena, seeking to secure its role and to optimize its influence in relations with the other major powers. Such an EU would necessarily have to balance its normative preferences against its status and coalition interests, and act under the realities of the limits of its own power options. Among the major powers of the current world order, Russia would be the one with the strongest strategic focus on Europe, both challenged by the current EU-27 and depending on economic and political relations with that Europe. Recognizing Russia as a strategic partner in this sense would clearly restrain the role of the EU beyond its current Eastern borders. Rather than confronting Russia in soft terms by denying the privileges of power or in hard terms by pushing integration forward to the East, such an EU strategy would seek to gradually modify Russia's preferences and policies through a bilateral strategic relationship.

The circumstances after the war between Russia and Georgia strongly speak against the viability of the second option for Europe. Also, the assumption of a waning of power in the classic sense and a withering away of the strategies and tactics of great power policy has lost ground. The post-modern paradigm of interdependence in a globalized world has to factor in the continued presence and logic of great powers. Russia's Caucasus policy is evidence to that, but by far not the only or most significant one. The role of the United States and China at the Copenhagen Summit in 2009 has been a defining moment for the intertwining of the paradigms of power and interdependence. Moscow has chosen to participate in a globalized world based on its claim for power and status. Brussels still has to make a choice. For now, the EU seems neither able nor willing to pick any of the three options.

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