

The Implications of the Russian-Georgian War and its Consequences for Pan-European Security

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After almost two years after the Russian-Georgian war the situation in the region is quite calm from a military point of view but it is very tense from political point of view. Russian authorities communicate with the Georgian opposition leaders over the heads of the legitimate Georgian authorities. The West, unwilling to estrange Russia because of Georgia, is trying to engage Moscow at an even greater scale than before the war thus creating a dangerous precedent of appeasement. By attacking an OSCE member country Russia has breached the existing security architecture in Europe and there is no guarantee that Russia will not do the same thing again if it decides to capture Tbilisi using some pretext. There is hardly any chance that such an adventure would be punished by anyone but it is obvious that such an act would destroy the existing European security architecture.

The Georgian side has been accused of beginning the war. It is widely believed that the conflict began when Georgian artillery started shelling Tskhinvali, but everyone admits that this was preceded by days of shootings between Ossetian-controlled and Georgian-controlled villages. That means that the conflict actually was already going on, but because of shelling Tskhinvali the Georgian side is accused of having crossed some imaginary red line, thus triggering a major armed conflict. In response, Russia invaded Georgia, entering South Ossetia and then the rest of Georgia (and there is evidence that Russian regular troops were already present in South Ossetia) crossing all kinds of imaginary and real red lines. First Russians crossed the Roki tunnel that connects South Ossetia with Russia and later the administrative border between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia. The same happened on the administrative border between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, despite the fact that not a single shot was made by the Georgian side there.

From the beginning, the international community strongly condemned Russia's actions. Most probably Moscow would have gotten away without any criticism had not it crossed the administrative border with South Ossetia (in that case everything would have been justified by the need to protect the Russian peacekeepers). The Russian actions seemed to be illogical and irrational, which could have severe implications for Moscow. However, as almost two years have passed since the conflict it is becoming obvious that Russia has gotten away almost unharmed. The West has realized that Russia is too important, and it can not be estranged because of Georgia. The US decided to reset relations with Russia, thus tacitly agreeing to freeze the post-war status quo. As for Europe, it never seriously intended to offend Russia. European criticism did not go beyond the resolutions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe –resolutions that Russia rejected calmly, thus

making clear that it would give up its new territorial acquisitions only if seriously threatened by war.

Shortly after the conflict Russian President Medvedev announced what has come to be called his doctrine: Russia was entitled to privileged zones of interests. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russia had invaded another country and won a war. Of course, Georgia was no match for a great power like Russia, but for the Russian decision-makers war with Georgia was war against the Western encroachment in the former Soviet Union. Russia always considered the former Soviet Union its backyard, but always shrank from openly claiming it. The war made it possible. Wars change the status quo, and the winners benefit from the new situation. A jubilant Russia not only claimed the right to spheres of influence but also pushed a new security architecture project for Europe, arguing "the old ones proved themselves void and invalid during the war in Georgia." Russia asserted itself as a revisionist power that intended to overthrow the status quo not only for the former Soviet Union but also for the whole continent.

European security architecture was breached indeed during the war. It was breached by Russia. Although a member of OSCE, it attacked another OSCE member country. Russia acted unilaterally and after succeeding it announced that the existing order had to be changed. Moscow soon offered its project of a new security architecture, which, while rather vague and ambiguous, still stressed a few important points, such as obliging members of the new security architecture never to endanger each other. This can be understood as claiming a right to veto NATO expansion. Russia demonstrated resentment when the West chose to be unresponsive to this initiative and masterfully used this resentment to reject all accusations over the Georgian question (namely, for openly violating the Sarkozy-Medvedev agreement that obliged Moscow to withdraw troops to the pre-conflict positions). As the West became increasingly lenient and the Georgian question began to disappear from the agenda, Moscow began to forget about its own initiative. One can only guess whether Russia seriously expected to change the security architecture in Europe or whether pushing its initiative was just a tactical maneuver designed to neutralize accusations about Georgia.

The war in Georgia has been compared to Russian invasions in Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979), but in terms of consequences for European security the events of August 2008 are much more severe and momentous. In 1968 Czechoslovakia belonged to Socialist bloc and was considered within Moscow's sphere of influence. In less than a decade after the invasion, the Helsinki Accords were signed which established a post-World War Two security architecture in Europe. In 1968 there was no such architecture in Europe. In 1979, the Soviets invaded an Asian country which never belonged to any European security system. Georgia, a member of OSCE, Council of Europe and partner of NATO, was a part of already existing and well-established European security system.

It remains to be seen how the West will react to the attempt to overthrow the status quo. However, so far the developments in Western European relations are hardly encouraging. Western public opinion has focused on "who made the first shot" instead of asking who benefited from the war and what are the risks. The war created two no-entry zones, open only to Russia, thus turning them into exclusive zones of influence for Moscow. The EU has deployed its monitoring mission on Georgian soil after the war, but it can operate only on Georgian-controlled territories monitoring only Georgian activities. Russian leaders have stressed that they will not deal with Georgia unless the incumbent government is replaced. At the same time, the Russian government is talking to Georgian opposition leaders thus breaching all norms of interstate relations.

The EU only can re-affirm that it supports Georgia's territorial integrity but can not influence the developments in any way. The Western countries can rely on Russian goodwill and benevolence. But if Russia decides to "finish the business" that it began in August 2008, then it is not clear what the West can do to stop the Russian troops. The West has already created a precedent of appeasement. Russian actions were condemned but nothing concrete followed the condemnations. Today Russia may even enjoy better relations with the West than it did before the war, so it is not quite clear why Russia should be benevolent and refrain from sending its troops to capture the Georgian capital. Russia hardly has any fear of military intervention on the Western side, and the only thing it can be afraid of is serious Georgian armed resistance. The preservation of status quo is something that the West tacitly desires and something Russia has been tacitly granted, but there is no guarantee that Russia is not going to overthrow the current status quo in order to attain even better one.

Of course, Russia has to find some pretext for doing this and it will be able to do so if the Georgian authorities let down their guard – an armed provocation in Tbilisi can trigger civil discord, and Russians may move on the Georgian capital under the flag of "liberation from Saakashvili's regime." Such adventure has to be well-prepared. Russian authorities and Russian media must do their best to isolate the Georgian government and to discredit them in the Western eyes, so that the West will swallow another act of aggression. This is what exactly what Russian authorities and Russian media are trying to do right now, and if they succeed in it then the "liberation" can become reality. This will have much graver consequences for the existing security architecture that is maintained thanks to the fact that Georgia, as an independent state, still exists on the political map. But it is not clear how long Georgia can resist Russian political pressure if it is abandoned by its Western partners. Russian media abounds with different plans and studies on how to break up Georgia and destroy Georgian statehood in order to "finally solve the Georgian problem". However, so far Georgians seem to be the only ones who are alerted to such plans that are openly discussed in Russian political circles and media.