

Recognizing Alternatives

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The most important unresolved result of Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 was Dimitri Medvedev's decision of 26 August to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia made the world face new challenges. In particular, in violation of all possible norms of international law Russia began to implement its newly declared policy: restoration of Russia's influence in the post-Soviet realm.

Upon signing military agreements with the newly recognized territories, Russia restored and strengthened conditions for the long-term presence of its military bases in the Southern Caucasus. This was quite a clear message for Western democratic states, providing that realization of the interests of NATO were delayed until the withdrawal of Russian military bases from the region.

Furthermore, deliberately adjusting its geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus and Black Sea area, Russia used its international authority and influence to oust the UN and OSCE Missions from the conflict zones of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At present no independent international mission, which is capable of providing the international community with unbiased information, is operating on these partially acknowledged territories.

In addition, Russia's recognitions disrupted traditional forms of ethno-cultural relations based on a local concept of people residing in conflict areas. Such relations maintained individuality and peaceful coexistence among the people residing in the region, but the new circumstances imposed unclear prospects.

The only party that accepted the new challenges was the EU and its institutions. In August 2008, the relevant institutions of the UN and OSCE failed to stop armed conflict between Russia and Georgia. Consequently, EU efforts, led by French president Nicolas Sarkozy acting in his capacity as President of the European Council at that time, brought about a ceasefire agreement on the fifth day of armed conflict.

Such Russian success is conditioned by a number of factors. First of all, Russia wanted to show to the Bush administration that it trusted the EU more than the United States, and by recognizing the EU as a mediator, Russia humiliated the US. Encouraged by such success, Sarkozy lobbied for a ceasefire that was favorable for Russia.

Besides, Russia preferred to involve in the conflict resolution the institution that had less knowledge about the conflict. By involving the EU, Russia easily asserted its interests and admitted international participation. After ousting other international organizations from conflict zones, Russia allowed the EUMM to monitor along the borders forcibly determined by Russia.

The only EU deed in opposition to Russian policy was non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Of course this policy shall have some definite results after some time; however, the policy of non-recognition will not be successful if additional steps are not

taken. In particular, after recognizing the breakaway territories, Russia started to realize its own state interests by resolving military political or social issues. Similarly, the EU will be motivated to wrap non-recognition policy in social, economic, humanitarian, cultural or sport activities. If such activities are based on clearly identified strategy, the EU might weaken the territories' dependence on Russia. If that is the case, citizens residing in the non-recognized territories will have an opportunity to make their views known in a democratic system. Unfortunately, practically nothing is being done in this regard, while recognition would support even closer integration of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali in the Russian political and economic space.

It should be mentioned that if the activities of the EU continue just through projects and initiatives of the government of Georgia, we should not have positive expectations. It would be better if the EU had a more critical and demanding position regarding the "State Strategy Toward Occupied Territories" and "Action Plan", developed by the Government of Georgia. Unfortunately, these documents will not work in their current shape, since they do not consider the situation in the conflict regions and do not respond to existing challenges. It is obvious that these documents are prepared for European and American readers and are more for publicity than attempts at crisis resolution. European institutions should find different ways to cooperate with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which will persuade the Georgian government of the necessity of such cooperation.

After August 2008, the number of European visas issued for traveling for healthcare, education, cultural, sport or other purposes is significantly limited. There are so many refusals by European Consulates to persons residing in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region that they reject traveling with Georgia passports due to political motives.

Despite the fact that recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia is the gravest result of August 2008, a reasonable approach to this phenomenon might terminate negative processes and bring its effectiveness to zero.

At the start of the process, recognition was the wildest dream and an unachievable goal for the Abkhaz and the Ossetians. On 26 August 2008 this dream came true, and now they are in the euphoria of victory. Though time will pass and if the EU's non-recognition policy is effective, Abkhaz and Ossetians will face integration to Russia instead of their victorious expectations. This means becoming part of the unstable North Caucasus. There is only one positive side of this recognition: very soon Abkhazia and Ossetia will be frustrated and facing the disastrous results of absolute trust in Russia. We should try to use this.

By this time, Georgia and the Western community should have prepared alternatives to Russia. There should be real democratization. Georgia should not be authoritarian, but on the track of sustainable economic development and governed by democratic institutes and civic values.

Today citizens living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia get passports of another state, Russia. Abkhaz and Ossetians paid a very expensive cost for recognition and other temptations. The price includes Russian military bases and border army; management of internal political processes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russians; full transfer

of foreign policy to Russia; voluntary restriction of their own political alliances and prospects.

In such circumstances Georgia, supported by the European Union, has an additional chance in competition with Russia; to become the country that would be more reliable and attractive, and provide decent conditions for Abkhaz and Ossetians' self-determination, and satisfy their healthy and legitimate ambitions.

If Georgia fails in building a democratic state and remains in a state of permanent transition, we should not expect the EU policy of non-recognition to continue indefinitely. Georgia should understand that EU as institution is a flexible structure based on sustainable principles. It makes pragmatic decisions in compliance with its interests and circumstances. If, after some time, Georgia fails in peaceful influence of conflicts and their transformation, the EU might start to revise its non-recognition policy. EU members will pay attention, at least toward Abkhazia.

In fact, Black Sea and its neighborhood became a field of EU interest after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. Furthermore, the EU has close relations with Turkey that may become deeper over time. Ukraine and Georgia do not hide their desire to join European institutions. In that situation, just Russia and Abkhazia (the latter only recognized by the former) are left as non-EU states bordering the Black Sea. It would be absolutely natural if the question of illegitimate territory in the Black Sea region is raised, because such territories can provide space for accumulation of illegal weapons and military hardware, criminal groups and people seeking entry to Europe, in addition to providing a route for drugs and smuggling.

In the event that there is no progress to peaceful resolution of the conflict, European institutions might choose to offer more legitimacy to Abkhazia, to ensure control of processes taking place on the territory of Abkhazia and the security of Europe. It is not out of the question that a process of "Kosovozation" might start. In such a case, the independence of Abkhazia might not be recognized, but European institutions might be established directly on its territory. This is absolutely impossible today. The government of Georgia has enough authority to persuade European institutions that Georgia has sufficient resources for conflict resolution. But if this waiting continues indefinitely, conflict resolution does not gain sustainable dynamic and Georgia fails in establishing democracy, the European Union will make decisions in accordance with its interests.