

Ten Theses about the Russian-Georgian Conflict: A View from Ukraine

1. The question about Ukraine's reaction to the events in Caucasus makes little sense because there was no joint position of Ukraine and no such position could have existed, taking into account that there are different, sometimes diametrically opposed, political orientations in the country. Indeed, President Yushchenko immediately went to Tbilisi and expressed his full support of the actions of his Georgian counterpart and the country's territorial integrity. At the same time, leader of the Party of Regions Yanukovich proclaimed support of Russia's actions and called upon Ukraine to recognize the state independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Similar appeals were made by the Communist Party's representatives in the Crimean parliament. Between these two polar positions, there is a multitude of intermediate estimations of the situation – one could think of the very cautious position of Yulia Tymoshenko, who was afraid to mention the Russia's role in the conflict, or the viewpoint of another Ukrainian political player – former Minister of Defense Anatoliy Grytsenko, who condemned President Saakashvili for starting the military actions against South Ossetia but, at the same time, denounced Russia's actions against Georgia.

Public opinion regarding the conflict within the Ukrainian society was also quite ambiguous: only 10,3% citizens supported the use of armed forces by Georgia and 23,5% approved the military actions of Russians. 29,2% of respondents considered Georgia as aggressor and 24,7% blamed Russia, while 19,6% condemned both countries (all the data are from the public opinion poll conducted by Razumkov center in August 2008).

2. The war in Caucasus attested that frozen conflicts, preserving tensions around them, pose a constant threat and, under the influence of interested parties, can explode despite international regimes and limitations, thus causing geopolitical changes in the region. This refers not only to Caucasus but also to Balkans, Transdnistria and other similar regions of the world.

3. The Russian-Georgian war became the first war between the member-states of the Commonwealth of Independent States and, as such, has actually put an end to the post-Soviet, post-Belovezzian world, which was grounded on the interests of the fSU republics and their recognition of the Russia's leading role.

4. Compared to Ukrainian political parties, the Ukrainian civil and expert society has made a more sober assessment of the causes and consequences of this 5-day war. Among the main conclusions are the following:

- by conducting the so-called soft ethnical cleansing (moving the Georgian population out of the self-proclaimed republics) and issuing passports of the Russian Federation to Abkhazians and Ossetians, for 17 years Russia has been deliberately preparing the recognition of the puppet regimes in order to undermine the integrity of Georgia and prohibit it from joining NATO;
- the events in Caucasus demonstrate the dangerous ignoring of international norms by the Russian leadership (Helsinki accords and international treaties) for the sake of reaching their geopolitical goals;
- the strategic objective of Russia is to establish control over the routes of Caspian oil and gas transportation on the territory of Georgia and to prevent creation of independent routes for transferring energy carriers beyond Russia's area of influence;

- there is a strong possibility of a growing threat from Russia to Ukraine to be realized by artificial creation of a conflict, most likely on the territory of Crimea, to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO.

5. The current harsh financial and economic crisis with unpredictable geopolitical and social consequences is a new destructive element affecting the situation in the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Caucasus states and the whole European region. There is a danger of neo-totalitarian regimes appearing on the continent, xenophobia and aggressive nationalism growing stronger and new isolationism adopted as main political philosophy. All of these developments could dramatically change the political map of Europe.

6. One of the results of the war between Georgia and Russia is a new challenge of Russia to Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova, NATO and EU member states, which can mean abandonment of the post-Helsinki world and returning to the 19th-20th-century style division of spheres of influence among superpowers.

7. Taking into account the deep political crisis, conflict in leadership and division in society, the situation in Ukraine is chaotic and unbalanced. No one, except for the President and the National Security and Defense Council, stands against the Russian doctrine of Putin-Medvedev regarding the legitimacy of Russia's military actions towards its closest neighbors on the grounds of protecting "Russian citizens" on the territory of sovereign states. The official Kyiv has no uniform action strategy regarding the existing threats from Moscow.

The Ukrainian expert community considers the following optional strategies that Ukraine could adhere to in this situation:

- increase efforts to ensure that Ukraine joins NATO as soon as possible;
- withdraw the issue of NATO membership from the country's agenda and instead concentrate on making progress in relationship with the European Union, following the advice of German and French experts;
- start rearmament and modernization of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, with some experts calling for renewal of the nuclear-missile potential of Ukraine;
- conclude a separate military pact between Ukraine and the United States;
- give in to Moscow's pressure and proclaim a neutral, non-bloc state of Ukraine.

8. An important factor of the Russian pressure on Ukraine is the Black Sea Military Fleet of the Russian Federation, consisting of more than 100 warships and based in Sevastopol, which took part in the military operations in Caucasus.

Moscow will insist on the prolongation of its stay in Sevastopol after 2017 (the final date of the stay provided for in the current bilateral treaty).

At present, Ukraine has little means of control over the movement of the Russian warships on its own territory.

9. As a result of the massive campaign of Russian media, which could be considered an information war against Ukraine, 56% of Russians believe that Ukraine is hostile to Russia. Meanwhile only 8% Ukrainians consider Russia hostile to Ukraine.

10. The uniform position of the EU and NATO regarding common energy and security policy, involving participation of Ukraine and Georgia, could stop the Russia's expansion in the post-Soviet area.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The war between Georgia and Russia opened a new dangerous phase of political instability. Russia took the road of building a new empire in the post-Soviet space and ignoring international legal norms. The use of force by a great nuclear power against its weak neighbors can lead to a new global conflict.
2. The events of the Russian-Georgian conflict and its causes should be carefully examined by an international commission of independent observers and the investigation results should be published as a report, similarly to what has been done in case of U.S. actions in the aftermath of 9/11.
3. Non-governmental organizations of EU, NATO and GUAM member-states (including Ukraine and Georgia) should create a Caucasus information and coordination center aimed at monitoring developments related to the Russian-Georgian conflict and – wider – to the neo-imperial threats emanating from Russia, and at providing timely information about those developments to their societies.

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