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GEORGIA RELATIONS AFTER THE 2008 WAR

Abstract:

The article discusses the role of NATO in the Russian-Georgian military conflict, their impact on regional security. The origin of the conflict was mainly caused by the new Geopolitical situation in the epoch of formation of multi-polar world order, where the main focus was made on the period of the establishment of new relations between the United States and Russia. The main reasons for the origin of the conflicts and the dynamics of their development are also presented in the work. The role of the countries involved in the conflict between the parties, which have a great impact on the geopolitical situation of the region. How did Georgia go through 10 years, what conclusions did it make or did not manage to make after the war with Russia, what has changed or has not changed in the country's domestic and foreign policy priorities. For the security system of Georgia tendencies existing in the relations between Russia and the West, internal political developments in Russia and Ukraine are particularly important. Research of the ways of originating the conflicts in the modern world is becoming increasingly important. The article analyzes the directions that have contributed to the origin and development of the conflict. For all the international turmoil and tensions, it caused, the Five-Day War in Georgia was a limited military operation for a military organization such as Russia's. On a strategic level, the war was combined with other measures such as diplomatic ones, but militarily it cannot qualify as a grand military operation. It was successful in that it reached the main military objective of the operation, to take irreversible control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but the Russian casualties and the deficiencies and problems it struggled with during the operation have implications for the future development of its military. This is obvious from the analyses made in Russia and from statements from its military and political leadership.

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The disappearance of the Soviet Union from the political map of the world has become a geopolitical catastrophe for certain groups of society. The new epoch of international relations, together with global geostrategic change, was established by the corrections of the world political map. New sovereign states appeared in the post-Soviet space. Conflict research and their problems in the modern system of international relations have become subjects of interest. Conflict settlement is one of the biggest problems in the modern world.

As a result of the military conflict in August 2008, an acute crisis emerged in Russian-Georgian relations that triggered termination of all institutional relations, the internal Georgian crisis was transformed into a crisis of bilateral relations. The concept of the foreign policy of Russia underlines the fact that being surrounded by NATO member states is directly threatening the Northern neighbour. On March 2, 2014², a special session was convened in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine, where all members of the North Atlantic Council agreed that Russian military actions were “a violation of international law and are contrary to the principles of the NATO-Russia Council, as well as the principles of the Partnership for Peace program”³. In March 2014, a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council was held, where the issue of Ukraine was discussed. Despite these attempts, Russia is more intentionally escalating aggression in Ukraine. All of the above-mentioned actions of Russia serve one main purpose – to return to its position of the main actor on the world stage.

The pro-Western course announced by the government of the National Movement and the policy towards NATO membership has caused great concern in Russia. The more intensified Georgian positive attitude towards the pro-Western and pro-European tendencies, the greater the resistance from Russia. In Russian-Georgian relations, perhaps the deceive role was played by the factor of Saakashvili's government, which was very irritating to Putin. The ruling government of the time has made Russia antagonistic towards Georgia⁴, followed by the change of power in 2012, the ‘reset’ policy pursued by the new government did not make any fundamental changes in Russian-Georgian

² K. Liik, M. Maigre, *NATO-Russia dialogue and the future of the NATO-Russia Council*, European Council on Foreign Relation, <https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_nato_russia_dialogue_and_the_future_of_the_nato_russia_council> (05.06.2016).

³ *NATO-Russia Council*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm> (09.07.2019).

⁴ R. Koiava, *Georgian-Russian Relations: Past, Present and Future*, Emerging Europe, <<https://emerging-europe.com/georgia-2017/georgian-russian-relations-past-present-future/>> (04.01.2018).

relations. In addition, the Kosovo factor is noteworthy⁵; Ronald Asmus argued that the military confrontation of 2008 was a sharp response of Russia to the Western and EU recognition of Kosovo. It was a strict step of Russia to show everybody that if they would continue their partnership policy with NATO, they would be exemplarily punished similar to Georgia. According to Asmus, Putin has chosen Georgia as an example of revenge on America; also, these processes were accelerated by refusing to grant Georgia an action plan by NATO at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008. For Georgia, the rapprochement with the West was considered a problem to some extent, as in 1995 NATO adopted a document entitled 'Research on NATO Expansion'. It states, "that are involved in ethnic disputes or territorial disputes outside of the country, including disputes relating to irredentism or in domestic disputes related to jurisdiction, shall resolve these disputes with peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles before they become members". The issue is undoubtedly a hindrance to the process of Georgia's integration into the NATO, the conflict with Russia for Georgia on the way to NATO integration is damaging, and the events of 2008 in negative context 'crowned' the long-term decline of relations between Georgia and Russia. Relations of Georgia with Russia must be consistent and non-confrontational. Georgia must change its attitude towards conflict resolution; it will be hard for the Alliance to accept a country where the conflict situation is raging.

The war conducted in Ukraine by Russia once again demonstrates that Russia is trying to gain sphere of influences in a very aggressive manner. Georgia is one of the most important parts of the sphere of influence. In official documents, Russia has declared NATO expansion as a foreign political threat of Russia. Medvedev said in a statement in 2011 "if not the 2008 war, NATO would have already reached our borders"⁶. He clearly stated that Russia is categorically against Georgia's membership in NATO. Events of Ukraine, in particular, the Russian military reaction on signing of the Association Agreement by Ukraine, has deflected the illusion that Russia sees danger only in NATO. Threatening statements also sounded in Medvedev's extensive interview, where with respect to the Western integration of Georgia he reminded, that Russia is a nuclear state. Right after the Association Agreement was signed, official statement of Russia was made that they would take adequate measures. Today, in fact, no one in the world argues that strategic objective of Russia is a reconciliation of the Soviet Union-like formation, and therefore, any process that envisages the exclusion of the post-soviet countries from its sphere of influence is unacceptable for them. Medvedev spoke about the causes of the war over a decade after the Russian-Georgian military confrontation, accusing President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili of launching

⁵ R. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World*, New York 2010, pp. 88-89.

⁶ Dmitry Medvedev: "We do not welcome Georgia's membership in NATO", <<https://www.georgianjournal.ge/politics/24350-dmitry-medvedev-we-do-not-welcome-georgias-membership-in-nato.html>> (30.06.2020).

hostilities and pointed out that it was the choice of the government of Georgia. Selection of pro-Western course by Georgia became punishable.

Depending on the historical and geographical location of any country, we are able to talk about its geopolitical situation. Historically and even today, Georgia is a connecting hub between the countries of the West and the East. Transport highway – connecting Europe and Asia. All this makes Georgia strategically attractive. The control of the Caucasus region is part of the Russian plans, and somehow it is able to maintain power in this region. Russian control over Georgia is one of the main components of its neo-imperialistic doctrine. The Kremlin is well aware that Georgia and the South Caucasus region are perceived as a geopolitical area of influence. Control of Georgia allows Russia to control not only the South Caucasus but also to carry out its interests in the North Caucasus. Why does Russia want to control Georgia? This explains the fact that Russia to a certain extent hampers Turkey to implement its own interests, also to pull off the energy-rich Azerbaijan from the West, as well as to block Azerbaijan's access to the Black Sea through Georgia. Along with all this, the role of Armenia is growing in relation to Russia, which declare deep partnership to each other; historically the attitude of Armenia to Turkey is not good and is in antagonistic situation with Azerbaijan. Russia is considering Georgia not as a state, but a controllable buffer zone necessary for it.

The geopolitical situation of Georgia⁷ does not allow us to stay calm, the events of 2008, all of it were tryout of forces for Russia against sharply pro-Western course taken by us, which has not changed, it is perceived to be even more intimidating for Russia. We can also observe the slow progress of the North Atlantic Alliance towards expansion, which was supported by the ongoing processes in the Middle East. Geopolitical confrontation is gradually continuing between the West and Russia, from the Caucasus it has moved to the east of Ukraine and continues in Syria too. Straining relations of USA and Turkey should be noted, which is linked to coup organized in Turkey, for the incident Turkey accuses USA and Fethullah Gülen, leader of the movement 'Hizmet' who is under the protection of USA. Against this tense relationship, an assumption arose that Turkey would exist from NATO out and would play the role of an independent player. This scenario is ominous for Georgia; Russia in the North and Turkey in the Southwest, the two states whose interests are entirely in the Caucasus and Turkey will not be a member of NATO, membership of Georgia in NATO will lose all its values, because we will not have a partner country in the neighbourhood.

After several years, annexation of the territories of Ukraine were added to the events that happened in Georgia. According to some experts, Ukraine's crisis is similar to the developments in 2008. After the Russian-Georgian

⁷ *Geopolitical location of Georgia*, <<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/tavisupali-sivrtse-davit-kamladze-saqartvelos-geopolitikuri-mdgomareoba/28075927.html>> (29.06.2020).

military confrontation, Moscow hastily recognized the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. This action of Russia was aimed at making it clear to the West that was an accountable player, just like the West. This was another precedent of violation of international law⁸. Most of the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia have been imposed because of the annexation of Crimea with violation of international law. In addition, this step will eliminate all means of communication of Moscow with Tbilisi. Russia has been trying to re-establish relations with the new government of Georgia after disassociating the former hated President Mikheil Saakashvili from the government, but diplomatic relations between two countries have not yet been restored. Because of the actual control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia. If Russia officially annexes South Ossetia with the Crimea scenario, Georgia will be completely alienated, and Moscow will lose much more than it will gain. As for Abkhazia, it remains a problem for Russia, because Abkhazians are waiting for more funding, and demand increase of military and financial assistance. Apparently, after the Crimean accession, the importance of Abkhazia to Russia has been reduced. Crimea is a strategically important region in the Black Sea for Russia. This resulted in the strengthening of Russia in the Black Sea, which became the dominant force that threatened the small states of the region which are not distinguished with powerful defensive capabilities at sea⁹. Ukraine has lost 70 percent of the naval fleet because of Russian aggression, and in this regard, its defensive potential has greatly decreased. It is considered to be even more irritating to Russia, after all that NATO aims to strengthen military presence in the South-East territories of the Alliance, including the Black Sea¹⁰. For Ukraine as well as for Georgia border security is vitally crucial, especially after the annexation of Crimea, as the annexation of Crimea by Russia is considered in the Black Sea Security Context.

Putin's interview with Fox News in Helsinki should also be noted, Putin has given a long interview after the meeting with Trump. Asked by the journalist what kind of reaction would Russia have if Georgia and Ukraine entered NATO, he replied: "I know very well how the decision making mechanisms work. Of course, there everything is decided on the basis of consensus, but before making consensus based decisions in the format of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, it is possible to work with individual NATO member

⁸ T. de Waal, *Crimea, Russia and involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, Heinrich Boll Stiftung, <<https://ge.boell.org/ka/2015/11/26/qirimi-ruseti-da-chartuloba-apxazeta-da-samxret-osetshi>> (26.06.2020).

⁹ S. Celac, S. Crepsey, D. Dungaciu, I. Fota, C. Ionita, *Why The Black Sea Matters*, New Strategy Center, Center for American Seapower, Hudson Institute 2017, pp. 10-11, <<https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Policy-Paper-NSC-and-Center-for-American-Sea-Power-III-May-2017.pdf>> (10.05.2020).

¹⁰ *NATO Parliamentary Assembly Resolution nr 437 on Stability and Security in the Black Sea Region*, Civil Dimension of Security, <<https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file.pdf>> (09.10.2019).

states on a bilateral basis, as it happened in case of Poland and Romania, where today US strategic missile defence elements are located. This is a direct threat to our security, therefore the approaching of NATO infrastructure to our borders is hazardous to us and obviously, we will have a sharp negative attitude towards this”¹¹. Due to this statement, Putin does not believe in accepting Georgia and Ukraine in NATO in an accelerated manner, because considers Germany as one of the hindering parties. Putin once again touched upon the issue of NATO expansion at the meeting of Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives, once again calling the NATO enlargement policy a big mistake and criticized NATO's policy towards Russia¹². To such aggressive steps that threaten Russia directly, we will have equal reaction. Our colleagues who go for aggravation and try to involve, for example Ukraine and Georgia into the military orbit of the Alliance, should think of the possible consequences of this irresponsible policy. There are some opinions about willingness of Russia to restore relations with Georgia, and full preparedness is declared from the Russian side, but all this depends on the political will of Tbilisi, this is how the Russian politicians assess the situation. In addition, they say that Georgia represents the strategic element of the Western Strategy of Russian containment in the Black Sea and South Caucasus regions. NATO is making statements, which say, “Georgia and 29 member countries of NATO will decide themselves when it will become a member”¹³. The contents of the statement are not quite clear, as it is widely known that a large number of European countries are blocking the entrance of Georgia into NATO due to the possibility of engaging in conflict with Russia.

Although open door policy of NATO and its support for Georgia deserves praise only, but such a policy faces a major obstacle in face of Russia. Russia puts a big veto with its aggressive defensive policies on the integration of Georgia into NATO, all of which is easily perceived as Putin tells NATO “no”. When the Baltic States were accepted in NATO, this fact was not so irritating for Russia, but the 2008 military situation had a groundbreaking effect on the NATO – Russia relations. It also made clear to everyone that its interests in Caucasus is one of the priorities for Russia. Therefore, Russia is considering the Black Sea region and the Caucasus as area of its actions, and its plans do not include sharing the governance of the region with anyone. Despite the threats faced by our country, it is necessary to cooperate deeply with the

¹¹ K. Harris, *Chris Wallace interviews Russian President Vladimir Putin*, <<https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/chris-wallace-interviews-russian-president-vladimir-putin>> (16.06.2020).

¹² A. Osborn, *Putin warns NATO against closer ties with Ukraine and Georgia*, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-putin/putin-warns-nato-against-closer-ties-with-ukraine-and-georgia>> (30.06.2020).

¹³ Stoltenberg: *Georgia Will Join NATO, And Russia Can Do Nothing About It*, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/stoltenberg-georgia-will-join-nato-and-russia-can-do-nothing-about-it.html>> (25.04.2020).

Alliance because the aim of the Russian strategy is to weaken and divide the Georgian statehood¹⁴. For this purpose, Russia was encouraging separatism and directly appealing to military aggression, a clear example of which was the 2008 military confrontation.

After the war, Russia and Georgia signed the six-point ceasefire agreement, however, with flagrant violation of the terms of the agreement and the principles of international law illegally acknowledged the separatist regions as independent states, ten years later, Russian troops continue to occupy the territories of Georgia, it is accompanied by a permanent 'borderization' process with the aim of separating the rest of the territories of Georgia.

From abovementioned, we should conclude that the war between Russia and Georgia, as well as Russia-Georgia relations, has a complex character that implies Russian attitude to the West. The aggressive policy against Georgia is important for it because it perceives Georgia as one of the main factors of control over the Caucasus region. The result of its openly expressed aggression was that Georgia chose to join the European and Euro-Atlantic direction. It is also problematic that Georgia cannot adequately answer to the aggressive actions of Russia and there is no guarantee that NATO will be able to completely stop the Russian aggression. Therefore, the Government of Georgia needs to take more cautious steps towards the process of occupation. On the background of existing problems, more coordinated steps should be taken. The process of occupation is one of the main aims of Russia, which aims to infringe the sovereignty of Georgia and weaken the trust in Euro Atlantic institutions, and the most important goal is to prevent further enlargement of NATO. The August war, as well as the annexation of the territories of Ukraine, is the priority part of Russian strategy. This implies a certain level of war against the West.

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