

Democratic peace is not to come to Georgia

Laurynas Jonavičius, Vytis Jurkonis
Eastern Europe Studies Centre

On the night of August 8 news agencies announced that Georgia had launched an offensive in South Ossetia: eight villages had been occupied and Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, had been besieged. As early as in the evening of August 7 Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili addressed the people and the international community stating that he had ordered Georgian military forces not to react to shooting from the Ossetian side even in the case of bombing. He also announced his intentions to seek peaceful conciliation by all possible means and stated that he would not like the international community to see Georgia supporting any violent methods¹. However, the following morning Tbilisi forces entered the breakaway territories motivating it by the fact that the Ossetian side had violated a cease-fire. The information received by Tbilisi that a big supply of arms was being sent by Russia to South Ossetia is cited by some sources as one of the reasons which forced Georgia to resort to active military actions. In addition, on the morning of August 8, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia announced that three Russian warplanes entered Georgian airspace and bombarded village Kareli.

At present it is not yet possible to answer the question who initiated military actions on the day of opening of Olympic Games. Most probably it is pointless to look for an answer since one will end up in the fruitless argument „the hen or the chicken“. Only facts are obvious: South Ossetia was assaulted by Georgia, general mobilization was announced in the country, volunteers in Russia were enlisted to head for South Ossetia, while Russian warplanes started to bombard Georgia. To put it simply, the „frozen conflict“ flared up.

How are these events to be assessed from different viewpoints?

From the Georgian viewpoint, Tbilisi's patience had been exhausted. Mikheil Saakashvili repeatedly proposed diverse conciliation plans; however, Tskhinvali as well as Sukhumi were constantly rejecting them. Yesterday Saakashvili made another attempt at conciliation, but, according to Georgia, the Ossetians responded with a still more violent gunfire. At this moment Tbilisi's patience reached its breaking point. From the viewpoint of Georgian national interests, such behaviour is at least partly justified. In a legal sense South Ossetia is part of Georgia and Tbilisi has the right to take all necessary measures to ensure the integrity of its territory. It is noteworthy that of the two conflicts - one with Abkhazia and one with South Ossetia – Georgia's position has been much stronger in the latter case. On the other hand, such conduct largely diminishes Georgia's opportunities in pursuit of membership in either NATO or the EU. The

¹ The special address of the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili. – 2008 m. rugpjūčio 7 d. - <http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&id=2686>

events on August 8 seem to have demonstrated that, selecting between membership prospects in NATO and reconstruction of the territorial integrity of the country, Tbilisi gives priority to the latter choice and is ready to achieve its implementation by all possible means. Finally, being aware of the fact that Russia will not leave Ossetians alone, Georgia's military victory does not look very convincing either. However, it is also possible that by escalating the conflict Georgia seeks to attract the attention of the international community, the United Nations in particular, with the subsequent introduction of the UN peacemakers into the region. This would be no mean achievement for Georgia. Based on private conversations with some of Georgia's officials one might even think that Georgia has decided to stake everything. For the past twelve years there has been no progress toward the resolution of the conflict, and all the initiatives seem to have been hitting the wall. Since the situation and further protraction no longer seemed reasonable to Georgia, use of force in order to ensure „the Constitutional Order“ may look like the only alternative. Whether it is a successful one is not clear.

The Ossetians have nothing to lose either. Being a quasi-state phenomenon, the regime of Eduard Kokoity functions in the environment of permanent instability, unsafety, and uncertainty. The determination to separate from Georgia blocks any dialogue with Tbilisi. The support of Russia is the only source of the physical survival of the regime, while historical and ethnic circumstances are a strong encouragement to seek integration with North Ossetia, i.e., integration into the Russian Federation. At this point it should be mentioned that Moscow's position is the decisive factor that prevents South Ossetia from reaching any agreement with Georgia. Besides, the Kosovo precedent may have also encouraged the hopes of Ossetian separatists and become the stimulus for even more acerbated struggle in pursuit of separation from Georgia.

For Russia the fact that the conflict has thawed is both useful and harmful. From a very pragmatic viewpoint, it is a chance to take over part of Georgia's territory and fortify its position in South Caucasus. In Moscow's view it would be very important in the region where the US growing influence is constantly becoming more and more feasible. Georgia is apparently the most significant instrument in the increase of such influence. In addition, by helping Ossetians to withstand Georgia's military pressure, Russia as if carries out its mission of, as it claims, “peacekeeping“ guarantor. However, on the other hand, the war in South Caucasus and eventual integration of South Ossetia with Russia might become a painful splinter to Moscow. First of all, Russia's political image in the eyes of the international community, far from the best already, would get even more tarnished. Both Washington and the European Union have repeatedly claimed that the Kosovo precedent cannot be transposed to Georgia's separatists. This means that Russia's relations with the West will only go worse. The military conflict also means opening of the unhealed wound of all ethnic problems of the North Caucasus. Chechnya is just one of possible

examples. Finally, one should not forget that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are situated close to Sochi, the city in which Russia will host the 2014 Olympic Games. In this sense a military conflict in the territories situated in immediate proximity with the place of preparation for the Olympics would be a painful blow to the endeavour by which Russia seeks to prove to the world that it is a civilized, developed, and economically viable state.

What conclusions can be made now?

Although it is believed that there will be unexpected turning points in the conflict, a few conclusions are clear. First of all, the conflict is unprofitable for Georgia. Tbilisi regarded South Ossetia as a much easier regainable unit than Abkhazia. Huge amounts of money, intended primarily for Georgian villages and Tbilisi-supported Sanakoyev's government, have been placed in attempts to return South Ossetia. After today's conflicts one can essentially maintain that they have been squandered. Secondly, Georgia shatters all its achievements on the way to NATO and EU integration. There can also be no doubt that, in the eyes of the international community, Russia will do its best to present Georgia as an aggressor. In the information battle Tbilisi is not going to lag behind either; thus it can be safely stated that, alongside military actions, a very tense battle is looming in the mass media, Internet and other mass communication means.



What will other actors do?

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon has already expressed his regret at the events. This organization will most likely begin a lengthy negotiations process among members of the Security Council on how to proceed in the future. There is no doubt that regret will also be expressed by both the USA and the EU. Will they take any action? It is very hard to tell. Americans will most likely avoid direct engagement with the conflict. In view of the approaching presidential elections and notorious problems in Iraq, involvement in another military conflict would be very hazardous. Moreover, one should bear in mind that such involvement would virtually mean direct military conflict with Russia. Therefore, at least at official level Americans will limit themselves to diplomatic actions. The EU will follow a similar line. It will probably be decided to send mediators and negotiators who will seek to conciliate the sides. Whether it will bring results is not known.

What should Lithuania do?

On the one hand, Vilnius declares that it is Tbilisi's main advocate and partner in Europe. From this perspective something just has to be done. Undoubtedly, raising the question at the EU level is inevitable. Remembering Adamkus' visit to Ukraine at the time when the Orange Revolution swung into full gear, it is also believed that President (or, possibly, Prime-Minister or Minister of Foreign Affairs) will offer mediation to Tskhinvali and Tbilisi. Otherwise Vilnius does not have

much to offer. Active diplomacy and bringing up the issue in all possible forums – this is about all Vilnius has at its disposal. It can hardly be expected that Lithuania will send its soldiers to assist Georgia.

There remains one more point to be made. In the field of political science there is a so-called democratic peace theory. The theory holds that democratic states never go to war with one another.

This is also supported by statistical investigations. The democratic system ensures a peaceful regulation of any internal political issues and problems, which later is transposed onto international relations. However, if at least one of the sides does not follow the consensus-seeking principle in its internal politics, the problem of conflicting interests is virtually unavoidable. Georgia's actions last night seem to have considerably enfeebled its image as a democratic state. This is so notwithstanding the fact that Tbilisi may have many reasons to justify its military actions.