

Ossetia Crisis – the “pipeline war”?

After the Extraordinary European Council meeting in Brussels on September 1 was over the TV stations worldwide gave appearance to the Russian envoy to the EU Mr. Chizhov, who with a smile on his face promised all the Europe that the gas and oil would not of course cease to be supplied to them and there was no reason to feel frustrated regarding the Russian reliability over this matter. Mr. Chizhov practically repeated what Mr. Putin, the Russian prime minister said just a day before.

Europe however still does not seem to be fully relaxed about this issue.

After the Georgia-Russian conflict over S. Ossetia many in the EU are alarmed by the problem of energy dependency on Russia. Moreover the EU is concerned because of the events that took place in Georgia. It has a good reason for this – it is worth remembering that Russia provides 40% of the vital gas supply to Europe.

Further it is interesting to examine what grounds does the EU and the West have to be concerned.

“How does Russia want to become a safe supplier to West if it bombs SCP and BTC. What do the two have to do with the conflict zone, why do they get attacked?”, asked M. Bryza on 11.08.08 right in the middle of the bombings in Georgia when the latter had already announced its cease fire status; on the same day when president Sarkozy paid a visit to Moscow.

It is astonishing to understand how precisely the Russian occupation aimed at strategic assets and energy infrastructure in particular, in parallel to devastating lives and livelihoods of the ordinary, peaceful Georgian citizens.

The main target of the Russian air raids was energy corridors/infrastructure. Apart from SCP and BTC there were attempts to bomb and destroy the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline. Past memories rise when touching this hot topic. Namely, back in the late 1990's the Baku-Supsa project was the very first alternative for the Azeri oil to be transported. On its very first stage Russia strived to portray it as a failure. The Russian means to the ends were indeed miscellaneous – one of them air bombardments of course. Fortunately, it was still possible to implement this, honestly speaking, economically inexpedient but politically weighty project.

Double standards and blackmail do not only characterize the Moscow leadership on military level but on diplomatic level as well.

It is well-known that the SCO member countries did not officially recognize the breakaway regions of Georgia and by this regretted the Russian stance on this issue. Now, the Kremlin plans to persuade them and others to follow suit on the CSTO gathering which takes place on September 5 in Moscow. The question of energy is central here too. Russia promises that it will build a new gas pipeline for Uzbekistan; Belarus received assurances for future preferences in gas tariff negotiations, etc.

Further, during the August Ossetia crisis the railway bridge near town of Kaspi (just 70 km. away from Tbilisi) exploded which served as a part of transit route for Azeri and Kazakh oil. Additionally, in result of Russian mine explosions fire was set to the railway wagons loaded with oil transported from Kazakhstan.

This was one of the reasons why Gordon Brown of Great Britain just a day before the extraordinary EU summit called on the EU member countries to start financing those projects that provide alternative supply routes from the Russian dominated ones. Energy security was a central topic of the summit as well as its current press-conferences. President of the European parliament noted that process of diversification, its financial support should begin very soon. Under the diversification is not meant only the geographical aspect but the diversification of the substance of energy products as well:

“9. Recent events illustrate the need for Europe to intensify its efforts with regard to the security of energy supplies. The European Council invites the Council, in cooperation with the Commission, to examine initiatives to be taken to this end, in particular as regards diversification of energy sources and supply routes”.
(EXTRAORDINARY EUROPEAN COUNCIL, BRUSSELS 1 SEPTEMBER 2008 meeting conclusions, paragraph 9).

At this stage comes a question, what will be the fate of transit routes as well as transit country (ies) in general? On the one hand, the EU should accelerate its aspirations towards, for example, successful implementation of NABUCCO, one of the main vein of which must pass through Georgia; additionally, the former Odessa-Brody project, corridor for transporting oil nowadays called Euro-Asian project gives hopes as well. EU expresses great support to the latter. Now the EU will align itself with the US and NATO to effectively provide political patronage as well as security guarantees. To back up the abovementioned, it is relevant to mention that prime minister Erdogan of Turkey confirmed the perspective that projects in the Caucasus will retain their importance. During the conflict days he visited Moscow, Tbilisi and Baku consequently. In Tbilisi he discussed the concept of energy security within the regional security context and added that it is necessary to establish the regional security organization. His words partially reflected the EXTRAORDINARY EUROPEAN COUNCIL, BRUSSELS 1 SEPTEMBER 2008 meeting conclusions, paragraph 7.

7. The European Council notes with concern the impact which the current crisis is having on the whole of the region. The European Union considers that it is more necessary than ever to support regional cooperation and step up its relations with its eastern neighbours, in particular through its neighbourhood policy, the development of the "Black Sea Synergy" initiative and an "Eastern Partnership" which the European Council wishes to adopt in March 2009; to this end it invites the Commission to submit proposals in December 2008. In this context the European Council stresses the importance of the forthcoming summit between the European Union and Ukraine on 9 September.

However Erdogan's visit to Azerbaijan in parallel to discussing the security issues raised another rather embarrassing debate. Some in Azerbaijan were concerned stemming from the historical background; namely the 1918-19 events when Azerbaijan felt betrayed by Turkey against communist Russia.

There is a difference of opinions regarding the future fate of non-Russian dominated energy routes however. Another version of Russia vs. energy diversification leans towards the Russian resolve. Thus, comes an argument that those security breaches that took place during and in result of conflict in Georgia will shy away investors from financing alternative routes apart Russia. Turbulences in Georgia will force Azerbaijan, in particular, to look for other oil/gas transit routes outside the Georgian territory; and any other goes through Russia. Notwithstanding that Washington has been lobbying hard to convince large energy producers on the Caspian Sea, like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, to link to the pipeline the sight of hundreds of Russian tanks rumbling unimpeded across Georgian territory, has done quite of damage to Western plans to expand this alternate energy corridor. Russia's show of force has strengthened Moscow's hand in the international scramble for access to oil and gas in the former Soviet republics.

Further, elaborating on the latter it is obvious that many EU member countries are very careful, to say the least, when it gets *real* with Russia. Even the president of Lithuania, staunch supporter of Georgia, complained on the extraordinary EU summit that: "If Russia decides to block the oil and gas supplies to us, we will loose everything that we struggled to build throughout 18 years". This is the reality and negotiations with Russia normally subordinate to these terms.

There still is a space for "optimism" though. As, the member of German bundestag Herr von Klaeden, noted the dependence of EU on Russia has a flip side too. It is mutual – it is EU-Russia interdependence. Key to future success – interdependence and not one sided reliance – is in the EU's unity by this avoiding the asymmetric approach from one party to the other. Following Klaeden's conclusions, the chances for the EU single position over this matter increases after what happened in Georgia. To further conclude with the unity matter, the harmony level of the EU delegates at the summit deserves admiration as well as a wish - this to be preserved and strengthened with insistency for future decision making in the regions where EU's own vital interests are at stake. As the European Union's envoy to the Caucasus, Peter Semneby, says the conflict has threatened Europe's energy supplies."What happens here affects the fundamental security interests of the EU, not least energy interests, energy security," Semneby says. Obviously there is a common sense in Nicolas Sarkozy's assessment that Russia is a dear partner for Europe. At the same time however Sarkozy questioned Russia's trustworthiness and added that it also needs Europe and not only visa versa.

Interview with expert – Mamuka Areshidze.

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Prepared by Kote Otkhmezuri

Q: What realistic opportunities are there for Georgia to receive MAP? Around what time? Which obstacles/encouragement are there to feel accordingly?

A: Everyone knows that the following NATO summit is in December, 2008. Notwithstanding all that happened lately it is still difficult for me to state what will happen there. Although some influential people within our government say we will have MAP.

Those factors that are going to accelerate the MAP for Georgia are, first of all the US position and its absolute support since it is in their own interests too; apart from this, most European states that are concerned with defending Georgia as a partner and ally of Europe as well as protecting those energy transport corridors that are of vital importance for them, especially when the rehabilitation of the NABUCCO project is taken to the fore lately. Additionally, the West clearly confronted the danger stemming from Russia. There are few things to consider here though. On the one hand, the West is aiming at creating the “sanitary cordon” around Russia; on the other hand however nobody wants to confront Russia openly especially when it is obvious that Russia is to going to back up.

Those hindrances that exist on the way of Georgia to the MAP is, first and foremost, that Russia does not categorically want NATO close to its borders. Also, the positions of some European countries that shay away from imposing problems on Russia and/or are trapped into the energy projects by Russia; good example is Netherlands that has a 9% share in the Baltic gas project. Therefore Netherlands is way more concerned by the successful implementation of the latter than creating a safe atmosphere for the NATO eastward expansion. There are some other countries worth mentioning under this context, Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey that is keen on preserving cooperative with Russia.

So, there are encouragements as well as obstacles indeed however there are more obstacles as I see it. On the top of everything, now there exists a reason for those interested in blocking Georgia’s entrance in NATO to complain on misconduct and the aggressive politics of Georgia that was carried out in S. Ossetia - that is how it seems on the surface although it was planned and operated by the Russian side.

Q: Regarding the EU extraordinary summit on September 1 and David Milliband’s “coalition” to hinder the Russian aggression in case it recognizes Abkhazia and S. Ossetia. What do you expect from the entire dynamic to result in and from the summit in particular?

A: I do not expect anything substantial for Georgia to happen. Because of the reason that there will be a serious confrontation between the countries representing so called “new” and “old” Europe. Attitudes of the Baltic countries and Poland are especially antagonistic. I do not expect the coalition to be formed since the Russian diplomacy has its ways to exert influence on few Western countries. So I think there will be rhetoric more. The West needs a time to implement sanctions against Russia. I do not perceive them to be happening on this summit though.

It is absolutely true that president Sarkozy’s prestige is an important factor here however within the EU there works a collective decision making principle.

Regarding the Milliband initiative, Britain along with the US are going to try to establish the coalition however it will be very difficult for them to achieve it.

To continue on this subject, it seems like the ‘Cold War’ dynamics and it is very likely that a serious confrontation is coming down. This is why Russia tries to get hold over the matters within the other parallel structures like SCO, CSTO, etc. It is also worth mentioning that the member countries of the latter have their own issues regarding the separatism. That is why there is no considerable anti Western coalition existing yet; however Russia is still going to have success in that endeavor.

Q: How do You see the role of UN with regards to this conflict:

A: The UN is a “dead” organization. Russia has a veto power within the Security Council.

Q: What is Your opinion regarding the Putin and Medvedev claims that there was a strong US lobby involved in organizing the S. Ossetia conflict; moreover, there were accusations that the US citizens took part in the actual warfare.

A: It is not true. I do not reject a version that Pentagon had to do something with this however nobody orchestrated it from the White House. There are cases when the White House is involved ‘post factum’ after the special operation is ended, if we call it a special operation. There is the military doctrine, certain tendencies that the White House follows and it is better for it not to know rather than know and bear responsibility.

I know for sure that the White House insisted that the government of Georgia not to be trapped into provocation. However there turned out to be certain individuals within authorities in Georgia that were willing to risk exacerbating the situation in order to force the West face the reality.

Going back to the Pentagon involvement, there might have been assistance by providing the satellite intelligence data. Otherwise, such claims as the US instructors’ direct combat involvement is nonsense. Putin here is trying to act upon PR platform, when a politician of such a level makes statement of this kind certain part of population believes him. By this, Putin increases the US image of enemy icon among the Russian society since nobody knows what happens between him and the US.

Q: What practical steps did the US make with respect of advancing its interest around the globe in the short period during which the S. Ossetia crisis lasted?

A: Logic according to which the events developed tells us that the US gained some things during this period of time. Some politologists argue that actions of Saakashvili saved Iran however I do not believe this to be true. With this respect the US gained advantages and three of those five air carriers that are there now in the Ormuz bay entered it during the crisis in Georgia. This means that the US is still preparing to carry out its plans – if not military then very serious measures for ensuring the blockade of Iran.

In the big picture the US won, at least on the first stage of the outcomes of the conflict. Bush personally lost since it was personal insult for him to damage his project, Georgia, from the Russian side. I still believe that the US is a country that practices on the long term revanches. The US response will not necessarily be instant, it is well known for delivering its economic sanctions packages that will become more and more sizeable when time passes.

The last American doctrine saw China not Russia as its major rival. After the recent Russian actions it will no doubt gain the place back in the doctrine in return however Russia will get what it deserves.

Q: How about Israel and its role within this scenario?

A: Israel is a so called major air base. Israel should implement the parallel air strikes and get ready to accept air strikes at the same time.

Q: What chances are there for the cordon sanitaire across the borders of E. Europe to exist against Russia? What is your opinion regarding the Anti Missile Shield on the Georgian territory?

A: It is central for the cordon sanitaire to operate successfully that seriously determined people be in the leadership of governments that are taking part in the undertaking. There is a clear lack of this even in the Baltic countries not to mention Ukraine and Georgia.

Regarding the AMS, the pace of developments around country as well as type of the Russian conduct do not exclude that we might find these systems on our territories without becoming NATO members.

Q: What is Your evaluation of the Northern Caucasus for Russia under the current state of affairs?

A: The factor of Northern Caucasus is very important and interesting as well as critical for Russia. I do not say that N. Caucasus is going to be instantly overwhelmed by uprisings to be liberated from the Russian terror. There are however range of factors that need to be considered when discussing it. There is a

very specific style of rule imposed in the N. Caucasus; all the seven republics are maintained on dotations; this is of course artificially arranged for them to be maximally dependent on centre, Moscow. The budget of Dagestan for example is 89 per cent in deficit, meaning that the rest of allowance is delivered by Moscow. Another feature of the specifics is that the rule is totally authoritarian, namely different clans are in charge to establish the rule of law, there is a very high level of corruption, people in governments of the republics in the region have no other way of survival beyond Kremlin, as soon as they are dismissed from their positions in the government there is a threat posed to their physical existence and some cases survival of their families too, etc.

However, the clans even being in charge do not feel that much secured in several republics of N. Caucasus. For example Chechnya where there is a very high tendency of Wahabbism which is anti centrist movement. Additionally, the Chechen leader R. Kadirov himself is not famous through his loyalty to Moscow, "I gave an oath to the president Putin and not to Russia" is one of his remarks.

Regarding Ingushetia and Dagestan there are fighting, shoot outs, cases of terror between the federal troops and anti centrist rebels on a daily basis. There are many young people going to woods to join rebels lately.

All the above mentioned makes this region generally highly volatile and particularly insecure for Russia.

Moreover, in the past loyal to the Russian center – the Congress of Cherkess people made a statement around a month ago, there along with accusing Georgia of various crimes committed against Abkhazs, was a very unusual announcement made that they will not let anyone hold Olympic games in Sochi because there are the graves of their brother ethnos – Chapsugs and Jiks that were subject to the Russian genocide and were entirely annihilated in result.

In short, the Northern Caucasus is a "weak link" within the Russian federation, a spot where the 'crack' might take place.

Q: Russian influence on C. Asian states

A: On of the states in the region, namely Tajikistan is totally dependent on Russia through the systems of defence and economy – therefore the conversation is over here.

Regarding Karimov (Kyrgyzstan), he is a master of double standards. At this stage he is on the side of Russia.

Most complicated issue here is of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has problems with the regions that have separatist aspirations. That is why the capital Astana was moved from the Kazakh Alma-Ata to the Russian Tselinograd. The main pressure that Russia has at the moment is the prices on the Kazakh oil namely their re-export with the prices doubled. However, lately Kazakhstan along with Turkmenistan have clearly indicated that they are not going to put up with this kind of development of affairs. Russia can have a military pressure on Kazakhstan. Although it Kazakhstan's military equipment is way poorer than that of Georgia but

Kazakhstan has a way higher population than Georgia. Russia however possesses a fifth column within Kazakhstan in the face of the Russian population there.

Q: What do you think about the echo of the recognition of the Georgian breakaway republics on the relations in the neighboring territories, namely Moldova and Azerbaijan-Armenia?

A: Moldova declared neutrality, more correctly the Voronin government did this to save itself and secure its leadership. Moldova after such a decision however found itself locked between the two anti Russian states – Romania and Ukraine. It is not evident now, however Moldova is going to suffer the consequences resulting from this very decision. Romania is not going to forgive any Moldovan administration that took such a decision. Ukraine in turn will put an obstacle to the Moldovan economic development under such circumstances. Therefore Russia has to invest big time in both Moldova and Transnistria to ensure the economic growth of the former. It is not likely that this is going to happen, Voronin knows that very well too, however he had no other choice.

Nagorno Karabakh is a very special case. It is the only place so far on the post soviet territory where there are no Russian or NATO troops or any observers whatsoever. They by their own means preserve the cease fire agreement. It is worth mentioning here also that there are five disputed districts along with Karabakh. Azerbaijan is waiting for the right moment to solve the issue. I think this moment will come pretty soon.