

Common realities and prospects for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic membership



Those conclusions that were put on the table just recently by the Independent International Fact Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (Mission) opened the way to the divergent interpretations of its content.

In this regard, first of all it should be made clear as of what mandate did the Mission have; additionally, what definition stands for the 'International Fact Finding Mission' and last but not least, those parameters that create framework within which the activities as well as results produced by the 'Mission' fit in.

The final document produced by the Mission does not make the parties under focus legally responsible, in other words this is not a legally binding document. Moreover, the parties enjoy the right to interpret those episodes described in the document according to their preferences. This tendency is exacerbated when one of the parties or all of them identifies shortcomings in and/or even absence of those vital episodes of the narrative.

Further, it is common that the Mission make a relatively soft conclusion in order to give to the possible future rapprochement for the parties.

What I would like to touch upon here specifically is that according to the paper the actual warfare that occurred on 08.08.08 is examined through the lenses of historical roots as well as the dynamics that developed right before the five day war.

My opinion is that the document fails to concentrate on the three key episodes. First, is the case that occurred on the August 7, 19:30, when Saakashvili declared the unilateral cease fire. Later on, 11:30, the same day Saakashvili explained that despite the good will and intensions shown by the Georgian side, fire coming from the opposite positions still hits the Georgian village situated in the conflict zone. Therefore, he sees no other way than to protect the later by force.

The OSCE observers, English nationals, who were present on August 7 and 8 in Tskhinvali claim not having seen any assault against the Georgian villages. Eventually, these observers and their arguments were blamed by the Georgian officials to have to do with Gazprom.

Second scene that I see necessary to mention begins with the commander in chief of the peacekeepers of the Russian Federation that were located in the conflict zone, Marat Kulakhmetov, making the TV announcement not long before the conflict escalated and grew into the full scale war. According to Kulakhmetov, the Russian peacekeepers were not able to control the 'S. Ossetian side'.

Three – although, there was a peak, a point when the conflict started to escalate, it is not accordingly reflected upon. Namely, the document does not examine the 3rd of July Sanakoev assassination attempt as well as the seizure of the Sarabuki strategic height.

Further, I see relevant to mention another important episode. One of the parts of the document admits that the Russian peacekeepers were not attacked by the Georgian military; then, however we can read that although “there is no evidence that the peacekeepers underwent fire... it is likely that two peacekeepers perished and five of them were wounded... the Russian side did not produce any evidence however” (not exact citation).

The lack of preciseness of this kind gives grounds for not impartial interpretations.

There is another episode worth emphasizing: Georgian authorities are accused of being the ones who first violated the international law when having opened the artillery assault on Tskhinvali. This has given the S. Ossetian side privilege to employ the 'legitimate defense' clause under the international

legislature. Following this line of thinking, there was no material substance for launching the artillery assault. This claim is further substantiated by the Sochi Agreement of 1992 and the Memorandum of 1996. According to the latter, the main provision among others is inadmissibility of military confrontation. The same legally binding treaties, determine ceilings for the each of the parties' peacekeepers, in particular, allowed to be present in the conflict zone – no more than 500 men; there exist strict regulations on the military technical equipment or the presence of mercenaries that in turn is a grave violation. nonetheless, the 'Mission' confirms that the mercenaries were brought into the conflict zone by the S. Ossetian de facto authorities and the Russian negligent stance regarding that. When having acknowledged the above mentioned means already that the terms of the Sochi agreement were violated prior to the transgression of it by the Georgian side.

Naturally, the positive prospects given in the document are not to be underestimated. To be exact, the de-occupation of the annexed territories by the Russian Federation; the return of IDP's; acknowledgement of the groundlessness of secession and further recognition of the S. Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Another thing that is worth noting is that some think of this paper as of a basis for further investigation of the case by the prosecutor I the European Court of human Rights. Never say never... however the Council of Europe high officials who have an insight in the issues mentioned above, exclude the possibility of further investigation. At this stage the EU is interested to calm the situation down. Therefore, I do not think it is realistic to expect the investigation to be initiated any further that, in turn, would have caused sanctions based on legal premises.

Regarding the political consequences of the conclusions provided by the 'Mission' there are different points of view within the international community.

Lincoln Mitchell who is professor at the Columbia University and an expert in the post-soviet area thinks that when Saakshvili appears with the construction background on TV and argues that everything is ok, he either misleads his own people or else the EU accuses him undeservedly. In case if the latter version is correct that would not have a positive impetus on the further EU-Georgian relations. On the other hand, Ron Asmus, the director of German Marshal Fund in Brussels, stresses that the causes of war waged by Russia against Georgia have directly to do with the latter's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

We should not also forget that the president of US, Barack Obama, labeled the Russia's attack on Georgia as intervention. R. Asmus evaluates the passive state of involvement of international organizations in the passage of the time when it was still possible to prevent the war. In the final document produced by the 'Mission' there is delicately pointed out that the international organization present on the ground were not adequate enough to the processes developed there.

When concerning the rather controversial matter of whether to share Asmus' stance or not, in other words, whether it seems eligible that the Euro-Atlantic course chosen by Georgia could provoke war unconditionally – it is worth remembering what dynamics did we observe right before the start of the war: there were troubling messages coming from the Russian side, the main among those the insistence from the president and prime minister, saying they would resist by any means possible that Ukraine and Georgia be included in the list of future NATO member countries. These statements, threats, etc. would have been there since we deal with the current Russian leadership. Did the Georgian authorities however conduct the adequate politics? When solely concentrating on the statements made and attitudes expressed by the Russian top politicians does that solely mean that whatever clever/balanced course would have been implemented by the Georgian authorities the war would still have been imminent?

Common sense refuses that kind of way of thinking.

Just recently, the Swedish presidency has proposed within the ENP Eastern Partnership program that Georgia be regarded within the regional context along with Armenia and Azerbaijan and not as a leading country of the region in tandem with Ukraine as this was once analyzed one-sidedly. The main reasons for such a pessimistic stance is explained through what happened to Georgia on the 7th of November, 2007 and 8th of August, 2008 – dispersion of the peaceful rally and war respectively. Further, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan has outlined in the strategic documents the commitment to the eventual membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures. Georgia has this priority emphasized. For the sake of better understanding of the process Western partners of Georgia were giving it encouragement and advices with respect of mainly three directions: necessity of having good neighborly relations with the countries of the region (special impetus was made on Russia); peaceful settlement of territorial conflicts; development of democratic institutions. Another very important factor in relation with NATO in particular was willingness and capability to participate in the NATO led military operations. This however can by no means compensate the shortfall in the rest of the three mentioned above.

The result that we have currently is far from being even satisfactory.

Regarding, whether the war was inevitable or not, there were different peace plans offered by the government of Georgia however counter productive measures took place as well. the 2004 seizure of Sarabuki strategic height is one of the examples.

When discussing the Georgia-Russia relations the negative picture also captures the fact that the Russia department within the MFA of Georgia was reduced to two persons in 2005 and then dismissed. Later, in 2007 the MFA of Russia in its analytical paper identified Georgia as a sole enemy country.

I see as central the role that once the representatives of government of Georgia, I. Alasania and G. Khaindrava had played while negotiating with the de facto authorities in the conflict zones. However, the abovementioned was underestimated (alasia case could serve as a good example) and as an outcome the place at this particular table of negotiations was left vacant. This kind of politics creates good grounds for the third parties that are interested in managing destructive activities on the territory of Georgia this way creating impediment to its Euro-Atlantic integration. In this regard, I would like to also add that everyone should bear in mind how important the international arena is for carrying out politics effectively for the sake of defending country's interests; this however should not happen as a compensation for neglecting them on the local level. What I mean here is that there is practically no alternative to direct negotiations between/among parties in dispute.

We should not forget that Russia has many friends in the West. The latter assert that the sovereignty of Georgia as well as ensuring its freedom in making political choices is a matter of principle for them. On the other hand however, they see Russia as a principle actor in solving problems of global matters. US-Russia relations are noteworthy within this context especially when analyzing the global issues: non-proliferation, terrorism, European security, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, N. Korea, global economic crisis, energy. These issues are highly interconnected.

When examining the conclusions of recommendatory type that bear high reputation for the both of the sides ("The Right directions for US Policy Toward Russia" produced by the Nixon Center and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, a research center within Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government in the March of 2009; as well as "Reconfiguration, Not Just a Reset: Russia's Interests in Relations with the United States of America", Report for the meeting of the Russian-US section of the Valdai international discussion club published in June of 2009) it turns out that Russia understands itself as one of the polar in the multi-polar world. Further, Russia sees expedient exchange of the one group of interests for the other, in other words trading. According to the

analytical papers mentioned above, Russia and the US have interests of vital importance that come into compliance with each other. The vital interests of Russia have to do with its neighborhood and the post soviet space in the first place; when dealing with the US interests one of the clear examples is Afghanistan. In order to have harmonizing effect of the interests mentioned above compromises are necessary, especially when both sides need it. Therefore there is no alternative to cooperation. When we touch upon the Russia-US relations we need to be aware of the bilateral agreement that was signed during the Obama visit to Moscow on July 7 2009. Namely, the agreement on cooperation between the US-Russia intelligence services. “Additionally”, Russia provides its air space as well as ground facilities for the US flights – *military cargo*, 4500 a year, to Afghanistan.

The US foreign policy paper of recommendatory kind points out for the “necessity of making difficult decisions” if required. It does not exclude admitting that neither Ukraine nor Georgia are ready for NATO membership. Further, there are ways to search for, other than NATO membership, to ensure their sovereignty and Western orientation. The paper mentions the necessity of taking Russian interests into consideration as Russians themselves view them.

According to the NATO Sec. Gen A.F. Rasmussen, the Russian recognition of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia has gravely deteriorated the NATO-Russia relations however he also stresses that the latter (deterioration) occurrence was unavoidable because its foundations were not strong enough in the first place; further as a Sec. Gen. he is determined to fix that. It is also worth mentioning here that during his visit in Vilnius when discussing the security of the members of the Alliance in relation to Russia Rasmussen did not even hesitate to mention the Article five of the Atlantic charter.

Here I would add that in the ‘Security Strategy of the RF to 2020’ it is clearly stated that Russia views the NATO “expansion” and movement of its military infrastructure near to its borders as a threat. It also is highly unhappy with the current European security architecture. Just recently, Russia legalized its right for military operations on the territories of other countries; additionally, according to the statements made by officials in Moscow, the new military doctrine is in the process of formation which allows Russia for preventive nuclear attacks. This is not only the threat posed to Georgia.

The state minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration recently once again noted the possibility for Georgia becoming the NATO member without going through the MAP.

In this regard I would like to insist that the MAP is an obligatory procedure based on realities as well as experiences that currently prevail.

There is a lot that still is in our hands. There are clear messages that US, NATO are not going to abandon its partner country. However, I see relevant to note that already in 2006 the Georgian officials made announcements of illusory kind, insisting on the rosy prospects of Georgia receiving the MAP in the same year and becoming the member in 2008. The parliamentary assembly of the Alliance that gave recommendations warned against “creating false expectations’ that would lead to disappointment within the public in Georgia.

It is therefore worth taking into consideration that the final report of the NATO PA, 2008 views the parliamentary election of 2008 in Georgia with great interest. The latter was being observed by the ODIHR, OSCE which, in turn did not produce opinion that could make anyone in Georgia be proud of. Consequently, the reactions to all of the above mentioned from the NATO PA are going to be adequate.