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Russian-Georgian August War: Causes, Results, Consequences^{*}

In August 2008 Georgia once again, for the fourth time since 1801,¹ became a victim of the Russian aggression. Unlike previous three occasions, this time the Russian attack on Georgia clearly became one of the most significant events of the political life. From the very beginning it drew attention of the whole world and overshadowed all other events, including the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. While the leaders of the democratic countries, NATO and European Union were expressing their condemnation of the Russian actions, the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, who was presiding the European Union at that time, volunteered to mediate the conflict and used the “shuttle diplomacy” to stop the hostilities. He succeeded in terminating the military actions, and the six-point agreement was reached, but as it is evident today, the French President failed in restoration of the pre-war status-quo, which is the main part of the above-mentioned agreement. This is not strange, since the so-called “Old Europe” is not eager to confront Russia because of the small country in Caucasus.

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¹ The previous occasions were the annexation of Georgian kingdoms and princedoms, which began in 1801 and continued till 1864, military aggression and occupation of Georgian Democratic Republic in 1921, and the undeclared war in Abkhazia in 1992-1993.

When we are talking about the Russian-Georgian war, the first question is what happened. Of course, Russian governing circles are denying even the fact of aggression. Formally, the Russian side called its actions “Operation for the Peace Enforcement”, which allegedly “stopped the genocide of the Ossetians” and “defended the Russian citizens living in South Ossetia”, but practically no one, except the Kremlin Tops themselves, believes to these statements. It is clear for everyone that the Russian aggression against Georgia had nothing in common with the “saving of the Ossetians” from the “genocide”, which never threatened to them from the Georgians. I would like also to comment the statements made by the leaders of democratic countries regarding “Russia’s disproportionate use of force”. Those statements, though supporting Georgia, were not correct in their sense. Russia had no right to use any kind of force in Georgia, regardless of fact would it be proportionate or disproportionate. Therefore, the open aggression and invasion of Russian troops into Georgia had to be called its name. Despite this, till today we hear from politicians that Russia’s usage of forces was just “disproportionate”. This reminds us 1930’s and the attitude, which was shown by the League of Nations regarding Italian attack on Ethiopia or Soviet aggression against Finland. Although, there is a difference. At least, in those cases the League of Nations considered them as Italian-Ethiopian and Russian-Finnish wars.

The second question which usually rises, is who started the war. To my surprise, there still are people who blame Georgia for “starting the war”. I would just ask them: against whom started Georgia the war? Since we have the Russian-Georgian war, definitely, the answer in this case has to be that Georgia started the war against Russia. Of course, we have never heard such statement from the serious experts, because the stupidity of that is clear for everyone. Despite this, some of them still consider it possible that it was Georgia, who started the hostilities against the so-called South Ossetia, which is *de jure* part of Georgia. This statement is also not true, since even on August 7, when the warfare started, it

were the Ossetian separatists, who opened the fire first and shelled Georgian villages, Vanati and Prisi. At the same time, the more time goes, the more Russian sources confirm that the Russian troops had already entered Georgian territory before August 7, the day of the beginning of hostilities. But the war did not begin on August 7. The Russian government was making the preparations for the military operation against Georgia since April, the railway was repaired in Abkhazia and tens of thousands Russian troops sent there. Looked like, it would be Abkhazia, where the conflict would start, but the Georgian government was able to parry that threat with the help from international community. There can also be considered that maybe the Abkhazs themselves did not want to start a warfare against Georgia. Then the Russian government began to explore the plan “B” (or even “E”, considering all their efforts before starting the hostilities). The so-called South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity, which is called “bandit” even by his former associates, agreed to play his part in the provocations against the Georgian government. Those provocations, which began with the new strength in July 2008 (there always were provocations in Tskhinvali Region since 1989), reached its zenith at the beginning of August. The conditions in the Georgian villages in Tskhinvali Region became simply unbearable, but even on August 7 the Georgian government was trying to find the peaceful solution. Despite this, Kokoity and the Russians sabotaged the negotiations (The Russian emissary Popov left Tbilisi to Tskhinvali for the negotiations on August 6, but never made it, because of the “flat tires”), and when the Georgian government declared one-sided moratorium in the evening of August 7, began a full-scale shelling of the Georgian villages. Only after it, and upon receiving the information about the Russian armoured units crossing the Russian-Georgian border, the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered to return fire and launch offensive on Tskhinvali. Therefore, it can be stated freely that it was Russia who began the war and the Ossetian separatists, with the help from the Russian troops, who started the hostilities.

What were the causes of the Russian aggression? As it was mentioned above, the Russian government justified its actions by the “genocide of the Ossetians” and the need “to defend the Russian citizens”, although it was just a pretext. The Russian aggression had completely different causes: 1. Georgian intentions to join NATO and European Union; 2. Economic factor, since Georgia is considered as the main transit route for oil or gas pipelines; 3. The desire to restore the Soviet Empire; 4. The desire to punish country and its leadership, which dared to object to the Russian interests in Caucasia; 5. The inefficiency of all other means used to change the government in Georgia; 6. Personal distaste of Georgians and Georgian leadership (the last but not the least in this case). All these political, economic and personal factors, which are closely connected to each other, caused the Russian aggression against Georgia and made Georgia a perfect target for the military aggression.

Beginning from the “Revolution of Roses”, after the new Georgian government declared the membership in NATO and European Union as its top priority, the Russian ruling circles began to understand that they actually had lost control over the Caucasus. It was a great blow for the Kremlin elite both for the political and economic reasons. The prospect of Georgia’s entry into NATO became the greatest menace for the Russian ruling circles because it means, from their point of view, the end of their desire to restore the Soviet empire. I just want to remind you that Vladimir Putin, the Prime Minister and former President of Russia, called the break-up of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”. With Georgia in NATO there would be no chance of using the military forces in South Caucasus. The two other South Caucasian states – Armenia and Azerbaijan – would also be lost. Moreover, for the Russian government Georgia’s membership in NATO means the beginning of the new phase of the national liberation movement in Ciscaucasia, which can even result in Russia’s break-up. At the same time it will be meaning the loss of the commanding control on the energy supply sources for the Russian elite, since the oil or gas pipelines, which are al-

ready operating or will be built on the Georgian territory will be out of their range. The latter will result in the loss of the Russian influence not only in the Caucasus, but in the Central Asia too. At the same time, the building of the new type of state in Georgia conducted by the new Georgian leadership was considered as a great menace by the Russian governing circles, because it would show that even in the post-Soviet space there can be built a state without the so-called “thieves-in-law”; the state, where the police and bureaucracy stopped being corrupted. Therefore, the Russian government needed to change the Georgian government. Taking the control over Georgia would mean the end of NATO expansion, since neither Azerbaijan, nor Armenia would ever after question the Russian legacy in Caucasia. It would solve all the economic issues, since the control of the territory would mean the control of new pipelines, if anyone decided to build them here. It would show all other post-Soviet states that it was still Russia, which controlled everything in the post-Soviet space. The punishment of Saakashvili would be also a great lesson for those leaders, who did not obey the orders from Moscow. At first, the Russians tried to use economic blockade of Georgia, but this step eventually led to the diversification of Georgian economy and the improvement of quality of Georgian products. The expulsion of several thousands of Georgian citizens from Russia following the so-called “spy scandal” also did not help much. Then it was decided to finance the anti-government movement in Georgia. This time the Russian governing circles came close to the fulfilment of their plans. Along with all their successes, the Georgian government had made several mistakes, which caused irritation in the certain circles of the Georgian society and resulted in big manifestations in Tbilisi. Although most people never knew that Badri Patarkatsishvili, the main conductor of the events, was playing the Russian game, it still caused the political crisis and Russia nearly got its objective. Despite this, the snap presidential and parliamentary elections ended with victory of Mikheil Saakashvili and National Movement. After it, the only way to overthrow government was the military involvement. The timing was

also appropriate. At Bucharest summit (April 2008), the NATO leadership, following the demand of France and Germany, refused to give Georgia MAP (Military Accession Plan), which means an eventual membership in NATO. After it, the Russian military aggression against Georgia was just a matter of time.

Although, the Russians were preparing for the attack on Georgia for several months, and had conducted military manoeuvres in Ciscaucasia in July, still, for the first two days the Russian army was not able to achieve its goals. The main reason was that the Russian troops were caught during the redeployment, and they suffered serious losses because of that. For the first two days the initiative was in the Georgian hands and only the overwhelming Russian air superiority did not allow them to destroy completely the invasion force and close the Rocki tunnel. On August 9, understanding that the Georgian positions in Tskhinvali Region were impenetrable for the Russian troops, they began to use their aviation all over the country and bomb all the main cities of Georgia. Facing the devastating bombardments and possible invasion from Abkhazia, the Georgian government ordered the retreat from Tskhinvali Region. Despite this, the Russian troops did not stop and continued offensive on Tbilisi. The second part of their troops crossed the r. Enguri and invaded the Western Georgia. Only the involvement of Nicolas Sarkozy allowed to reach the agreement on cease-fire, according which the Russian troops had to return to the pre-war status-quo. The French President became a hero of the day, but soon everyone found out that he was simply fooled by his Russian counterparts. The Russian troops still remain in Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia, and they are now even strengthening the so-called “border with Georgia”.

The results of the Russian-Georgian war are disastrous for Georgia: temporarily are lost dozens of villages in Tskhinvali and Znauri regions, the entire Akhalkgori region, and Upper Abkhazia; the war created the new wave of IDP's; several regions in Eastern and Western Georgia suffered from the hostilities; Russia “recognized ‘South Ossetia’ and Ab-

khazia” and “signed the agreement” on the military bases with them. Despite this, the military victory, which was primarily achieved thanks to the great superiority in the air, did not give political dividends to Russia. The “recognition” of the so-called “South Ossetia” and Abkhazia was not a main objective for the Russian ruling circles. They intended, and still intend, to establish control over entire Georgia, and in order to achieve this goal the puppet government in Tbilisi is needed. The war, as well the new gas scandal with Ukraine at the beginning of 2009 clearly showed to the European States the need of the diversification of its energy supplies, which resulted in declaring “Nabucco” the priority project. So far, it can be said that the war ended in “Pyrrhic victory” for the Kremlin Tops. Russia has lost the status of “peace-keeper” in Georgia and it became the member of conflict. It became clear to the whole world that there exists only the Russian-Georgian conflict, not the Georgian-Abkhazian or Georgian-Ossetian ones. Moreover, the European countries now completely understand the menace, which comes from the Russian control over the energy supply routes. The change of administration in the USA did not result in the change of its attitude towards Georgia yet, as it was supposedly hoped in Moscow. The European states can demand the fulfilment of Sarkozy-Medvedev peace plan in any moment. Looks like only the establishment of the puppet government in Tbilisi can save Russia from the political defeat in Caucasus today.

What will be the consequences of the conflict? There are several possible ways of the future development of situation: 1. the continuation of the current situation when Russia is doing whatever it wants and the Western countries are just making verbal condemnations of the Russian moves. Of course, this cannot continue forever, but at least, the European leaders consider it safe to preserve the situation, since Russia is not a menace to them yet, and they prefer to deal with the problem in the future. This is not the least possible scenario, but it may cause a dangerous situation when no one is satisfied with the results, which eventually would lead to the new war. 2. Since the Russian government was not able

to achieve its objectives, it is possible, that it will begin another gamble and start a new war against Georgia while the world community is paying its attention to the global economic crisis. One of the possible triggers for the such development of the events is the worsening economic situation in Russia. This will result either in the establishment of pro-Russian government in Tbilisi with the future instability in region for decades (It will definitely start the resistance movement in Georgia), or in the catastrophic consequences for the Russian government, and maybe Russia itself, if the European countries and the USA will decide to stand up the aggressor at last. 3. Since the situation in North Caucasus is becoming tenser and tenser, it is quite possible that one or several North Caucasian Republics start a rebellion against the Russian Federal government. It would result in the great war in Caucasus, since this time Georgia would not stand aside the situation in the North Caucasus and will help the rebels. The consequences in this case are unclear and depend on the position of European Union the USA. 4. The least possible, but from my point of view, the most effective scenario is that the European Union and the USA will demand from Russia the fulfilment of the August 12 agreement and declare the organization of the police forces to establish peace in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region. Facing the sanctions from the EU and the USA, Russia will have to retreat and agree on the international police forces, which can establish the effective control and a real peace in the region. The IDP's will return to their homes. Today we can just talk theoretically about it, but as it was shown above, only the effective involvement of European Union and the USA will change the situation to the better. In all other cases the region is doomed to the serious instability, and, perhaps to the new war. It is time to make serious decisions, otherwise, like it already happened once, it will be late, and new Hitler or Stalin will rise from Russia.