
How Many Eggs Will Europe Put In Russia's Basket?

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The recent visit of the US vice-president Dick Cheney to Georgia, followed by the U.S. 6th Fleet flagship with humanitarian cargo anchoring off the country's port of Poti, has made the Kremlin nervous. Russian troops, who still remain in town in circumvention of the Sarkozy-brokered six-point agreement, have further consolidated their military presence. Yet, Georgians, including ordinary citizens of Poti and adjacent Russian-occupied areas lining up at shoreline to greet the US vessel, have read it as a crucial sign of continued Western support to Georgia's sovereignty.

In a similar peaceful fashion, more than 1.5 million people chained up live against Russian aggression on the streets of Georgian cities and villages on September 1st. The message was flagged to international attention including that of the EU leaders who were sitting in Brussels deciding on the future of "relations between the EU and Russia [that] have reached crossroads", as formulated by the Summit decision.

The EU called Moscow to make a "fundamental choice in favor of mutual interests, understanding and cooperation" - in other words, to behave like a civilized state. In turn the Kremlin bounces "the choice" to the West and urges it to accept its newly designed rules, delivered in the shape of five guiding principles which Moscow would want to see the world revolve around.

The New Cold War Order?

As Russia's international duello with the West advances, its real aims and ambitions get stripped off rhetoric. Russia in fact never got over the Soviet collapse and Cold War time thinking, despite the reminders that this "is no longer 1968" (Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia).

It was in 2005 when Mr. Putin expressed in clearest terms possible that demise of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." A restored Soviet anthem symbolized wishful thinking for the "good old times." And Moscow obviously decided that now the "long-cherished moment of truth" has come, as Mr. Lavrov commented in relation to the war in Georgia

With its statements and moves the Kremlin leaves little room for doubt about the true origins of the August 2008 crisis in Georgia.

Moscow's desperate NATO-phobia is perhaps one of the most vivid expressions of its Cold War bound logic. It was to a large extent Georgia's explicit NATO bid and pro-western orientation that made Georgia "proper" the target for Russian aggression. And along the same logic, Ukraine, with its Crimea peninsula, might be next.

The first articulate signals in favor of NATO still during Shevardnadze's times, motivated Russia to intensify backing to Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's separatist regimes, obstruct peaceful initiatives, massively and illegally convert their residents into Russian citizens. Relating recent Georgian experience to the Kremlin's newly revealed guiding principle to "protect Russian citizens everywhere," many fear if Russia goes along with this self-tailored "legitimate basis" for intervention now, other countries with Russian speakers fall under the alert zone.

A number of "punitive measures" exercised throughout these years, were aimed to deter the Rose Revolutionary government's pro-Western aspirations. In

April 2008 then-President Putin, perhaps encouraged by the Bucharest NATO Summit decision to waive Georgia and Ukraine MAP bids until repeated discussions in December, ordered the establishment of "formal links" with Georgia's breakaway regions and withdrawal unilaterally from the 1996 CIS summit restrictions. This was the start of the recent series of provocations that culminated with the August events.

Russia unilaterally recognized the independence of Georgia's two conflict-ridden enclaves on 26 September and claimed them "special cases" in an attempt to "retaliate" against the West for Kosovo. With that "irresponsible decision," as labeled by President Bush, Moscow slammed the whole international community, which was warning against attempts to "draw new lines in Europe."

Russia decided to open a "Pandora's box" that may serve as a continuous source of instability in the Caucasus and threaten peace from Central Asia to the Middle East to Europe as Cheney warned on 7 September. The leaders of many post-Socialist states feel increasingly alarmed.

Russian Costs and Benefits

Russia's aggression against Georgia carries many risks, including for Russia herself. Moscow is already at odds with the rest of the world. Clear confrontation with the US is the name of the game, as Putin directly blames Washington to have master-minded the crisis in Georgia. Moscow is also trying to crack the western alliance through Europe's energy consumer rationale. If the plan goes wrong and the West consolidates its position against Russian challenge, Mr. Putin warns the "world does not end here." However, he must have felt disappointed by Moscow's failed attempts to yield the approval of China and the Central Asian Republics, likewise the decisions of Belarus and Armenia about Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia's international image and credibility is heavily shaken and may ultimately translate into diplomatic isolation and even a number of sanctions.

Moscow's has already suffered substantial financial loses in terms of the rapidly backsliding RTS benchmark indexes and out-flux of foreign investment (estimated at around \$21 billion).

And finally, the decision on Abkhazia and South Ossetia may have boomerang effects and spark Russia's own buoyant 'powder keg' in the Northern Caucasus and beyond.

So what are the gains Russia is betting on?

Russia hopes to bring the countries in the region under its own sway as a result of the show of power it has carried out. It is also intent on not compromising its position vis a vis energy, thus feels the need to curb the development of alternative energy corridors straddling the South Caucasus.

However, European's are naturally ever more concerned about their energy security. They are now hardly motivated to put all eggs into the Russian basket. To the contrary the EU Summit document of 1 September demonstrates that recent events have triggered a sense of urgency to diversify and secure energy sources and supply routes. A firm security framework is essential not only to ensure safety and stability of alternative energy conduits and strategic transport hubs but also the democratic and economic development of the region. The NATO promise, reaffirmed by the US recently, provides hope. Now much depends on how the transatlantic partners, particularly those with vested interests in the region position themselves. In line with Europe and the US, the position of Turkey, as an important power in the region with which Georgia enjoys strong neighborly relations is of a crucial importance.

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