
One should not start war that one is bound to lose

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Conflict threatens balance of power in Caucasus

What could stop Russia's campaign of aggression against Georgia? What kinds of results could the escalation of conflict produce? Who started the combat operations? Why is the West not offering us military support? How important is it to tell the truth now? Rezonansi discussed these questions with military analyst Giorgi Tavdgiridze who is also a member of the [opposition] New Right party.

[Rezonansi] What are Russia's goals? Does it want to seize territories?

[Tavdgiridze] The fact that strategic facilities like military airfields and other elements of the military infrastructure are being bombed is not sufficient grounds for us to say that Russia aims to occupy Georgia. Russia's military objectives seem to be limited at this point though they aim to gain as much as possible in political and geostrategic terms. Russia has strengthened its influence in the South Caucasus which is part of its southern flank. The United States has suffered a blow and its position has become weaker. Europe has also found it difficult to understand what is going on and to react appropriately so far. The situation has become quite dangerous and it is not about Georgia alone: The situation affects Armenia, Azerbaijan and the entire area that links [Europe] with the Central Asian economic region and its rich oil deposits. Moreover, there is Iraq and there is the problem of Iran, while Turkey is also part of this area to some extent.

The balance of power in this region is fragile and could change any time if one of the sides makes a mistake. There is a danger that Europe will face balkanization within the sphere of its interests.

[Rezonansi] It has been suggested that this war would have started regardless of how Saakashvili's government acted.

[Tavdgiridze] It does not look like the West was secretly encouraging Georgia [to start military operations]. Neither does it look like Russia wanted to trigger a large-scale war. They found themselves in a very difficult situation initially. Our actions could have been more successful if not for the Georgian side's mistakes and the delay in the military operations.

[Rezonansi] Are you trying to say that it was the Georgian government that started the combat?

[Tavdgiridze] The Georgian government decided to use the armed forces to avert an act of provocation.

[Rezonansi] Is this your observation or do you have some concrete information?

[Tavdgiridze] You do not need any [concrete] information to see this. It is obvious that it was the Georgian side that started the combat operations. Whether it was forced to do this, was provoked into doing this or there was some kind of an agreement that was violated by one of the parties is a different question. The time will come when we will have to find the culprit.

Conducting military operations is not the Defence Ministry's sole responsibility. One of its primary objectives is to identify military threats, analyze them and inform the country's political leadership about them. Had this been done, the stir that the current events have created in the West would have arisen much earlier and we would have avoided the casualties and the escalation of armed conflict.

It is a different matter if we started the combat operations in order to restore the constitutional order. Since the Russian and the Ossetian sides had violated certain agreements, the Georgian government had a legal right to start a military operation in the region in order to protect its citizens. However, while we may have had the right to do it, we should have thought of the consequences before starting a war. One should not start a war that one is bound to lose.

Government started military operation to meet public expectations

[Rezonansi] Why did Saakashvili start the war that he was "bound to lose"?

[Tavdgiridze] There could have been a lot of different reasons for this. It could have been an emotional decision. It could also have been the result of the military rhetoric which created an expectation among the Georgian people that territorial integrity was to be restored. In a democratic country, the future of any government depends on the opinion of the voters, the popularity of the government among the people and the demands of the people. Since there was this kind of expectation, things could not remain as they were for long. The Georgian people wanted the territorial integrity to be restored.

Either the government had to meet the people's expectations or it had to say that it could not meet those expectations (and step down). I believe that the ruling group became a hostage to its own rhetoric. It had to choose between saying that it could not reclaim this territory by military force and doing what it eventually did. However, it was probably also possible to postpone the military action until the time when Georgia would have been prepared for it.

In a democratic country, you make a political decision and you reap the benefits if you succeed (it also depends on the price of success of course). If you lose, you are naturally held responsible. This is normal. It does not mean that we are going to stab someone in the back. It is no secret that we proved to be unprepared for airborne combat. We knew that we did not have the kind of aircraft that would have made it possible to gain air superiority but we were constantly told that we had good air defence systems.

[Rezonansi] Why did we not use those systems?

[Tavdgiridze] I do not know. The government needs to explain why such a collapse has occurred and the air defence systems cannot operate. When you start a war, dominating the air space is one of the primary objectives. Whoever controls the sky has the tactical, the operational and the strategic advantage. Since we could not have gained the advantage in the air, our strategy should have been focused on preventing the enemy from dominating the sky.

[translated from Georgian]
