
Two Ways Out For Georgia

Kommersant, Russia - 28/4/2008

You can consider the possibility of using force addressing the Georgian-Abkhazian and the Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts only when you compare two variants of the developments.

According to the first scenario, President Saakashvili won't dare use military force against the unrecognized republics, understanding what consequences this might have for his relations with Russia. Acting this way, Mikhail Saakashvili would give Moscow every reason to believe that the policy it has conducted towards Tbilisi can be justified. The policy suggests that the relations between Russia and Georgia must be improved, with the pressure in trade, post communications and visas decreased; and at the same time Moscow should make no concessions regarding the frozen conflicts and Georgia's admission to NATO. Besides Moscow and the unrecognized republics, Georgia's neighbors disputing Nagorno-Karabakh will be among those benefiting from this scenario. "Georgia didn't dare use force in Abkhazia, and neither will Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh," they'll think in Yerevan. In case the use of force can be avoided, Europe will feel the sense of relief because it simply doesn't want the situation to escalate. Only Washington can feel disappointed, considering another opportunity to demonstrate its hard line on Moscow to be lost.

But it's Mikhail Saakashvili who will hardly benefit from the scenario. From the viewpoint of the Georgian nation, he will lose another sufficient element of his charisma, which was initially based on his image of "the gatherer of the Georgian lands." As a result, he will lose to the Georgian opposition, whose line on the unrecognized republics is even tougher. You can have no doubt that the opposition will use its chance to accuse the president, with his reputation already spoiled, of conceding to the Kremlin.

The second possible variant suggests military escalation. We'll proceed from the assumption that Georgia will be defeated in this case. Paradoxically, this military defeat will turn out a political victory for President Saakashvili. First, he will retain his charisma, appearing a hero in the view of his nation, and uniting society. Second, the military conflict will worsen the prospects of the Georgian opposition, exploiting the theme of patriotism. Third, a clear message will be sent to Moscow: Putin's plan concerning Georgia doesn't work. Such a scenario will imply that it's impossible to develop normal relations with Tbilisi without resolving the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts. For Europe - Germany, France and Italy - the military scenario will appear a real headache. In Washington they'll probably say, "You see, Georgia is weak, it needs to be placed under the NATO umbrella as soon as possible."

Conclusion: Mikhail Saakashvili can risk it, convincing himself that "nothing ventured, nothing gained." His career as the leader of the nation is at stake today. And it's his last chance to stay afloat.
