

# CAUCASUS CRISIS AND PERCEPTION OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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## **Introduction**

After the last round of EU and NATO enlargement, borders of both organizations moved further eastward and as a result, they have found themselves in the Black sea - Caucasian region. The territory with huge political and strategic importance came into their neighborhood. Along with Ukraine and Georgia, Russian federation is part of the region as well and considers the region to be a sphere of its vital interests. Contradictory political, security and economic interests caused an armed conflict in South Ossetia in august 2008. Hence, EU and NATO member countries faced the very first local war in 21<sup>st</sup> century taking place in their eastern neighborhood.

The chronically unsolved problem of Georgian separatist regions was a direct cause of the break out of the conflict. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had refused to become a part of Georgia and had set their face against the central government in Tbilisi, which had abolished their status of autonomy. These disputes escalated to armed conflicts and as a result, the Georgian government lost control over both regions. Russian federation joined the problem solving and mediated a making of peace between regimes in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali from one side and the central government in Tbilisi from the other. Based on the CIS mandate and bilateral Russian - Georgian treaties, Russian peace forces started to operate on the borders between Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia.

After 1994 the security situation in both crisis regions stabilized and the solution of the separatist problem shifted to the political sphere. However, there was no progress in this sphere for the next 14 years and the Georgian - Abkhazian as well as the Georgian - Ossetian conflict obtained the nature of „frozen“ conflicts. Such status quo was favorable for all participating actors. As the Georgian administration of E. Shevardnadze was facing serious internal political and economic problems, it was not capable of an effective solution of the separatist regions issue. Likewise, the Russian federation was at war with Chechnya separatists and paid attention to its own problems in the Northern Caucasus. For the representatives of regimes in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, the existing status-quo was favorable, because the central government in Tbilisi did not threaten them and they could freely profit from the local shadow market and the unofficial Russian financial aid. Though Abkhazia and South Ossetia formally declared independence, it was not recognized internationally. Therefore, the territorial integrity of Georgia and its borders was not contested by anyone.

### **Rose with thorns**

Relative peace in the region lasted for exactly one decade. The balance of triangle Tbilisi – Moscow – separatists (Sukhumi and Tskhinvali) was disrupted as a consequence of domestic political changes in Georgia. After the falsified elections in November 2003, public protests broke out, which later became known as the „Revolution of roses“. In the lead of the opposition movement was M. Saakashvili, who was elected as Georgian president in January 2004. New presidential administrative set three key objectives – implementation of structural political and economic reforms, restoration of state territorial integrity and approaching the Euro-Atlantic integration structures (with the further prospect of joining NATO and EU). Realization of this program changed existing the status-quo and led to the „defrosation“ of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Within the period of the years 2004 – 2007, the presidential administration of M. Saakashvili achieved its biggest success in the sphere of economy. The transformation of Georgian economy began and radical reforms created desirable conditions for foreign investments. In political sphere there were changes as well: democratization, institutional reforms and consolidation of domestic conditions. Afterwards, this trend was disrupted by the deepening contradictions between governmental coalition and opposition. In November 2007, public protests broke out in

Tbilisi, but were suppressed by police forces committed to presidential administration. Consequently, M. Saakashvili called early elections and was reelected as a president in January 2008.

Georgian government efforts to restore territorial integrity of state were considerably less successful. M. Saakashvili's administration chose a piecemeal strategy for solution of separatist problems and focused on the weakest enemy at first – leader of autonomous region of Adjara A. Abashidze, who in May 2004 immigrated to the Russian federation after political confrontation with the central government. Thereafter, the administration of M. Saakashvili made an attempt to gain a control over separatist South Ossetia. Political confrontation with the regime in Tskhinvali, headed by E. Kokojty, in August 2004 led to an armed skirmish. It turned out that E. Kokojty would have squared up to political and power pressure from Tbilisi and Georgian military and police forces proved themselves to be ineffective. After this failure presidential administration, M. Saakashvili did not even try to apply such strategy against the most powerful separatist regime in Abkhazia. Political and power pressure from Tbilisi would not have borne fruit without international support and effective military units.

Following these experiences, the Georgian government sought EU and NATO member states support for its separatist issues. It was in Georgian interest to internationalize problems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to involve the USA and European countries in its solving. At the same time, Georgia was strengthening its strategic orientation on the USA and declared an ambition to gain a membership in the Euro-Atlantic integration structures. Administration of President M. Saakashvili also proceeded to reforms of security sector for purpose of creating effective army and police. In order to the reform, military expenditures rose significantly. While in 2002 they constituted 1 % of GDP (49 million USD), in 2007 it was already 7 % of GDP (592 million USD).

The most visible outcome of these efforts was the achievement of strategic partnership with the USA, manifesting itself in the establishment of economic and military cooperation. In 2006 Georgia became the transit country for oil and natural gas transport from the Caspian Sea region (oil pipeline Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan and gas pipeline Baku – Tbilisi - Erzurum). M. Saakashvili's administration supported the USA in Iraq and sent 2000 troops there, since 2007 the third biggest allied contingent. Georgia became a US military financial support recipient and Georgian armed forces were trained and organized with the aid of American instructors.

The change of Georgian strategic orientation naturally affected relations between Tbilisi and Moscow. In 2005, the presidential administration of M. Saakashvili managed to carry an agreement on the dissolution of Russian military bases in Akhalkalaki and Batumi. On the ground of the agreement, all the Russian forces and their equipment withdrew before the end of November 2007. (The agreement did not concern Russian peace forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia deployed in the crisis region following intergovernmental treaties and CIS mandate).

While in foreign policy Georgia focused on alliance and cooperation with the USA in the Black sea – the Caucasus region and was a prospective candidate for NATO membership, in domestic policy Georgia applied risky tactics of „defrostation“ of separatist problems. Administration of M. Saakashvili began to combine peaceful political activities with demonstrations of military power with a view to not only to press separatist regions in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, but Russian federation as their political and economic sponsor as well. Part of the tactics was also a security operation in July 2006, when Georgian police task forces penetrated Kodori valley and gained control over the territory situated beyond the administrative border of internationally not recognized Abkhazia. In respond to this representatives of Abkhazia and South Ossetia broke off a political dialog with central government in Tbilisi, which was under way in trilateral format under the mediation of Russian federation since 1994.

Since 2006, the tension in both crisis regions began increasing accompanied with occasional violent incidents. Georgian side blamed Abkhazian and Ossetian separatists for armed provocations and argued that Russian peacekeeping contingent was not able to perform its tasks. Russian side blamed Georgian secret service and security troops for the provocation reasoning that central government in Tbilisi threatened a peace in the region. Situation came to the cul-de-sac as participating actors found themselves in vicious circle of mutual blames, manipulations and provocations.

### **The Big Neighbor is wakening up**

The involvement of the Russian federation in Georgian events results from Russian foreign policy and security strategy, which perceive CIS area as a sphere of its vital interests. There is consensus of political elites and public concerning this issue and efforts to maintain Russian influence in the Black sea – Caucasus region has continually persisted from B. Yeltsin's administration, through the presidential administration of V. Putin to the present administration

of D. Medvedev. In 1994 – 2003 the Russian federation was maintaining sufficient influence on Georgia through contacts with E. Shevardnadze and through unofficial support of regimes in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. In this period Moscow was fully occupied by armed conflicts in Chechnya and was facing separatist problems in the Northern Caucasus. Therefore, the Russian federation did not recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and respected formally territorial integrity and borders of Georgia.

Since 2004, the existing status quo has been changed by new Georgian leadership of M. Saakashvili, who focused the strategic orientation on the USA and declared an interest to join NATO and EU. The Russian federation perceived these steps in the light of the traditional „realpolitik“ concept as a threat to its interests in the Black sea – Caucasus region and reacted with intensifying of its support for separatist regimes in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. Abkhazia and South Ossetia depended materially on the political and financial support from Russian federation and their security was guaranteed by the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces. Mutual interconnectedness was considerably strengthened by the practice of granting Russian citizenship for Abkhazia and South Ossetia residents. Whilst Sukhumi regime kept a certain level of autonomy in the decision making, regime in Tskhinvali was fully controlled by Moscow. Besides President E. Kokojty, Ossetian by origin, all the others key ministers and army representatives were sent to Ossetia from Russian federation.

In 2004 – 2006, regular political consultations between separatist regimes representatives and central government in Tbilisi with mediation of Moscow continued. However, these negotiations were in vain, as interests of actors were deeply contradictory. Georgian government was striving to reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and offered „unlimited autonomy“. But at the same time, Georgia refused to sign a declaration on non-violent solution of separatist problems. Russian federation, in turn, intensified its support of regimes in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali in response to the deepening cooperation between Georgia and the USA and Georgian declarations on Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions. After the Georgian security operation in Kodori valley in July 2006 and after the arrest and banishment of four Russian secret service officers in September 2006, a relations crisis came about. In the following period, not only was the tension between Tbilisi and Moscow growing, but it emerged directly in zones dividing Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia.

The administration of M. Saakashvili kept the initiative in 2007 too and made efforts to internationalize both separatist problems solving. Its goal was to prove that Moscow is biased and prejudiced, so the Russian federation lost a status of neutral peacekeeping observer. Russian federation had to forcedly respond to the Georgian pressure on the UN ground and to defend the legitimacy of its peacekeeping contingents deployed in the crisis areas on the basis of CIS mandate and the Russian - Georgian intergovernmental agreements. The issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was a substitute problem, while the key problem was the pro-American orientation of Georgia and the Georgian prospective membership in NATO. Such a security threat feeling determined the next political steps of Moscow. These focused on challenging Georgian capability of NATO integration in the light of the unsolved separatist problems and proving the political immaturity and unpredictability of M. Saakashvili's administration.

### **Tbilisi playing “Va banque”**

In the beginning of 2008 the Russian - Georgian relations were in cul-de-sac and there was a latent tension in separatist regions. The accelerator of the next turn of events were two affairs, which gave an international dimension to Georgian problems. But these affairs were far from the internationalization sought by M. Saakashvili's administration. The international recognition of the Kosovo state in February 2008 and the non-invitation of Georgia to the NATO Membership Action Plan in April 2008 had fatal implications for Tbilisi and *de facto* ushered in a failure of the Georgian strategy.

The Russian federation as permanent member of UN Security Council had been over a long period speaking out against the separation of Kosovo from Serbia and against the recognition of its independence. Such step, according to Moscow, would have represented flagrant violation of international law and creation of serious security precedent, casting doubt on the principle of unchangeability of borders in Europe. However, the USA and vast majority of EU member states did not take into account Russian reservations and unilaterally recognized Kosovo's independence in February 2008. Moscow gave a response to this in Georgia.

In March 2008, the Russian federation re-signed an Agreement on economic, financial and transport sanctions against Abkhazia. (The document was signed within the CIS in 1996). Subsequently, the Russian government was ordered in April 2008 by President V. Putin to establish an official economic and humanitarian cooperation with the internationally

unrecognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Before that, the Russian economic and financial support of regimes in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali was unofficial and this decision signified a cardinal turn in Russian policy towards Georgia. In connection with that, M. Saakashvili's administration blamed Moscow for initiating an annexation of Georgian territory and called upon the international community to send peacekeeping troops to both separatist regions.

However, NATO member states did not respond to this appeal and prepared another unpleasant surprise - at the Alliance summit in Bucharest in April 2008, they did not agree on the invitation of Georgia to the Membership Action Plan. A group of states around France and Germany reasoned by the unpreparedness of Georgia and by the existence of unsolved separatist problems on its territory. This Georgian foreign policy failure was immediately capitalized upon by Moscow, which reinforced its peacekeeping contingent in Abkhazia to the maximum level allowed by agreements without any consultation with Tbilisi. The administration of president M. Saakashvili termed these units „aggressive external power“ and in the end of April 2008 blocked negotiations on Russian entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

During the spring of 2008 political confrontation spiral began opening up and it was harder and harder to control it. The consequences of the Kosovo precedent and the Bucharest NATO summit failure confronted the Georgian government with a fatal dilemma. It turned out that the Georgian strategy of simultaneous solving of separatist problems and Euro-Atlantic structures integration was failing. The presidential administration of M. Saakashvili realized that after the international recognition of Kosovo there are no more prospects for the restoration of Georgian sovereignty over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Even in the case of internationalization of the problem, gaining control over the separatist regions would be impossible, as the Russian federation would not climb down under the political pressure of the USA and European countries which recognized Kosovo.

Pressurized by these conditions, the Georgian government decided to sacrifice now just the imaginary chance to the reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and tried to succeed at least in its second priority – NATO membership. Political calculation of president M. Saakashvili were based on the assumption that tension escalation in separatist regions will attract international attention and that confrontation of a „small democratic“ Tbilisi with „big authoritarian“ Moscow will serve as proof of Russian threat and as an argument for Georgian

membership in NATO. These calculations directed the Georgian government to adopt a fatal decision to carry out military action against Ossetian separatists.

Domestic factors played important role in adopting the decision – a weakened position of president M.Saakashvili after the suppression of demonstrations in November 2007 and permanent dissatisfaction of Georgian public with the situation of about 200 000 refugees expelled from Abkhazia in 1992 – 1993. Last but not least, very high military expenditures intended for Georgian armed forces modernization also played a role as these costs were provided at the expense of other budget sections.

In August 2008, the administration of president M. Saakashvili was clear that Georgia does not have even a theoretical prospect to gain control over South Ossetia by military offensive. The presence of Russian peacekeeping contingent gives Russian federation a legitimate reason for immediate military counteraction in case its troops are threatened. The fact that a greater part of South Ossetia population had Russian citizenship created another reason for Russian counteraction. Moreover, Russian political and military representatives repeatedly emphasized during the summer of 2008 that Moscow will respond to any Georgian attempt to a military solution of separatist problems.

President M. Saakashvili's decision to send armed forces to South Ossetia did not pursue any military aim because such aim was *a priori* unattainable for Georgia. On the contrary, the political aim of the Georgian government was not only attainable, but realistic as well – the demonstration of Russian threat to the political sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia. The Georgian government assumed that such a serious and urgent threat will claim an accelerated establishment of NATO – Georgia relations and will improve the chances of getting security guarantees related to Alliance membership. However this „political gambit“ of M. Saakashvili did not come off.

The international media campaign and declarative political support lasted shorter than Tbilisi had expected and they did not exert a sufficient pressure for the acceleration of Georgian integration into NATO. Immediately after the end of conflict in South Ossetia M. Saakashvili's administration gained the political support of the USA and European countries, but the support was weakening with time. A more realistic evaluation of the situation and pragmatic diplomacy replaced war psychosis and stereotypes about „Moscow imperial threat“ and „occupational liberators“. This showed during the NATO foreign ministers meeting in Budapest in December

2008, where a decision not to invite Georgia to program for Alliance membership preparation was adopted.

### **International security perception – discourse differences**

The contemporary nature of global security environment is shaped by a combination of traditional and modern trends influencing international stability and determining relations among individual actors. The state remains to be a key security actor and its international importance still depends on the power it possesses. Because of its political and economic potential, the Russian federation is a significant regional power and owing to its unconventional nuclear military potential, Russia maintains a position of a global great power.

The foreign, security and defense policy of all states is formed not just by objective factors, like power potential, human resources and geographical location and area, but by subjective factors as well. These contain strategic thinking, security culture, power orientation and historical traditions of the political elite and society. Objective and subjective factors exercise an influence on how the state perceives international security, what political aims the state chooses and how these aims are realized. The Russian federation is not an exception and its behavior as security actor is determined exactly by them. While objective factors are possible to analyze, subjective factors evaluation is more difficult.

It is caused by Russian specifics in history interpretation, in international relations and security threats perception and last but not least in its view of democracy. As a result, the Russian federation perceives international security in a way that is different from other security actors. Security perception differences are caused by the so-called „structured anarchy“, which represents genuine framework for international relations functioning according to the neorealist paradigm. These differences exists among all the states to a less or more considerable extent, they influence not only Russian – American relations and relations between the Russian federation and Europe, but Russian – Chinese or Russian – Indian relations as well.

In the context of the Euro-Atlantic area, the Russia federation is a significant regional power, neighboring on NATO and EU member states in Northern and Eastern Europe and in the Black sea region. On the opposite side of the Northern hemisphere, the Russian federation borders on NATO members on the boundary between the Asian and the American continent. In term of geostrategy, the Russian federation and NATO and EU member states also share the Arctic

Ocean area. These factors, along with Russian power potential, imply that the Russian federation among Euro - Atlantic structures non-members has the biggest influence on that area. In the next 10 years this influence will be maintained and the Russian federation and NATO and EU member states will remain being one „security complex“. „Security complex“ is a theoretical concept defined as group of states with mutually interconnected and influencing security. Security problems of one of them cannot be analyzed separately from problems of other states composing a complex.

In this regard, it is necessary to analyze the objective and subjective factors forming foreign, security and defense policy of the Russian federation, as this policy has an influence on the Euro-Atlantic area. Considering subjective factors, the ones causing differences between Russian, European and American perception of international security are of the biggest importance. This includes different interpretation of Cold War results, distinct perception of power distribution within the system of international relations and a different viewing of power and ideological determinants within the policies of individual states. (In European countries, the USA and the Russian federation there exists a versatile spectrum of opinions, therefore the following represents the majority approach under the condition of a certain level of generalization).

Events of 1989 – 1991, related to dissolution of bipolar Europe, downfall of Warsaw Pact and disintegration of the Soviet Union are perceived in NATO and EU member states as the victory of the democratic West over a totalitarian great power. The victory was achieved after four decades of Cold War and led to the unification of Germany and the integration of new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe into the Euro-Atlantic structures. Thanks to that, the former soviet satellites regained a political independence and the idea of „Europe whole and free“ was carried through.

The same events in 1989 – 1991 are viewed by the majority of the Russian political elite and public as a contribution of reforming and democratizing Soviet Union to ending the power confrontation and disposal of political tension in Europe. The Russian federation as the legal successor of the Soviet Union continued in its transformation and enabled the establishment of a stable European security architecture, which has replaced the dividing lines of Cold War. But NATO member states abused this goodwill and extend its sphere of influence at the expense of the Russian federation, and they built military infrastructure around the Russian borders. These differences in discourse interpretation of modern history stand behind the majority of present

ideological chasms between the USA and European NATO and EU member states on one side and the Russian federation on the other.

In perception of power distribution within the system of international security there exist equally big differences. The USA and part of European countries view the development of last two decades as a natural shift from bipolarity to a unipolar system, with the domination of the USA and its allies. According to this conception, the vast majority of global political, economic and military power attributes is concentrated in the hands of Western countries and this power is utilized not only for stabilization of global security environment, but also for stabilization of local ones. These processes are realized in cooperation as well as in competition with wide spectrum of regional actors.

France and some other European countries perceive the current system of international security as multipolar. According to their conception, the USA has maintained a position of the only global superpower, but they are not capable of fully providing its own security and of pushing through its interests without taking account of interests of other actors and real situation in particular parts of world. Regional powers as EU, the Russian federation, China and India represent other power centers of the multipolar system according to this view.

The Russian federation perceives the present system of international security as hybrid, where traditional power struggle among individual states and coalitions is in motion. The struggle is determined by US interest to keep its dominance and the unipolar system. According to the Russian view, such a system does not take account of legitimate demands of other actors. The USA acts as the only power and decision-making center pushing through its interests at the expense of other actors. This provokes conflicts, crises and destabilizes global security. For that reason, the Russian federation seeks to contribute to a creation of a multipolar system of international security. The Russian federation is ready for cooperation with the USA on issues on which they have the same opinion and for competition in issues on which American and Russian opinions differ.

Even though all the three conceptions describe the USA as a key global security actor, they diverge in the evaluation of power distribution within present system of international security. Different perception of polarity is another discourse distinction not only between the Russian federation and NATO and EU members, but between states within both organizations as well.

Another such a difference is a distinct perception of power and ideological determinants in the policies of particular states.

The foreign, security and defense policy of the USA and of European NATO and EU members is based on a combination of idealistic values and power interests. This policy based on the vision founded on values of freedom, democracy, law and order and free market, which are according to their opinion indisputable or all human beings and universal for all the types of societies. The security of these countries depends on the political and economic stability in the world and this stability can be preserved the most effectively by defense and spread of these universal values. Hence, it is in the common interest of the USA and European countries to keep global stability and security in particular regions. But there are differences among states concerning the ways and methods of preservation and spread of the values (active method consisting of political and economic pressure and eventually of military action, and passive method consisting of providing a positive example, diplomacy, political and economic benefits and compromises).

The Russian federation, unlike the USA and European NATO and EU members, puts a clear emphasis on a realistic imperative only. It is caused by the fact that 17 years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union the Russian federation has not still come about its past and is still in the process of formulation of new political values and conceiving long-time strategies. Its identity as a security actor has been forming in this period as a negative determination towards external forces and not as a positive identification with a coherent set of values and ideas. This is a consequence of Soviet ideological legacy influencing the Russian political elite and public, which not just exclude a creation of such a coherent set, but even raise a suspicion of value determinism of American and European politics. Due to these reasons, the Russian foreign, security and defense policy is determined just by power parameters alone and oriented to putting through state interests within the traditional frame of interstate struggle for spheres of interest.

In the context of the neorealist paradigm the Russian interest in affecting the development in regions it considers as its vital spheres of security and progress is fully legitimate. From this point of view, the American and European criticism of geopolitical determinism of Russian policy is irrelevant because the traditional power dimension of politics is still as justifiable as as the value dimension of politics. For the same reason, the Russian criticism of value determinism of American and European politics is irrelevant, as the interest of the USA and European NATO and EU members in supporting global democratization and reform processes is also justifiable.

Discourse differences in international security perception represent the most important subjective factor influencing foreign, security and defense policy of the Russian federation towards the USA and European NATO and EU member states. These differences affect not only particular political decisions, but impact mutual communication. The most characteristic example is the appearance of R. Cheney in Vilnius in May 2006 and the appearance of V. Putin in Munich in February 2007. The American vice-president commented on the internal situation in the Russian federation and criticized especially the existing democracy deficit. The Russian president in turn commented on the US activity in the world and criticized mainly the actual realization of American policy. These two appearances met with big media response, however they can hardly be termed a turning point of American - Russian relations. D. Cheney's and V. Putin's declarations just summarized reservations which USA and Russian federation had had and had been continuously declaring in last years on different levels and with different emphasis. (Voice of European countries was far less well-marked in this debate, because a common position towards Russian federation does not exist in fact and individual European NATO and EU members can agree on at least basic principles of its „eastern“ policy to a very limited extent).

In 2000 – 2006, a gradual transformation of Russian strategic thought was going on, but was retarded by political stereotypes originated from the period of Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. V. Putin's administration managed to enforce at the managing level of state institutions and military structures a more realistic perception of Russian security interests. It shows particularly on pluralistic reception of interstate relations and multi vectors' character of Russian policy. On that basis, the Russian federation cultivates cooperation with the USA, the European NATO and EU members, China, India and other countries in the regions where common interests exist. However, in regions where interests are contradictory and where rivalry exists, the Russian federation defends and furthers its political, economic and military priorities. The strategic thinking transformation has not been finished yet, schematic and conservative view of security is persisting among lower levels of the civil service and army, as well as among a significant part of the political elite and public. This view is influenced by the permanent feeling of an external threat originating in the specific Russian interpretation of the past and recent history. As a result, the public opinion is still dominated by a view, according to which the Russian federation exists in a not very friendly environment, is surrounded by latent enemies and

its foreign policy is a struggle for maintenance of Russian spheres of interest constantly attacked by foreign countries.

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